Following Mateo

Tom Molanphy

The University of Montana

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FOLLOWING MATEO

by
Tom Molanphy
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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INTRODUCTION
“Are you in a cubicle if it doesn’t have six sides?”

Jeff’s question hung in the air between us, both of us technical writers at Educational Logistics in Missoula, Montana. As technical writers, crafters of computer manuals, we sat squarely at the bottom of the totem pole, underneath programming, marketing, support and training. I once asked a programmer some questions, and he replied, trying to be friendly with a human.

“Clients just want some book with the program. It makes them feel better if they have a book in their hands. They’ll call our 1-800 line if they have any real problems.” The first language I understood out of a programmer, his words made an appalling amount of sense.

“Because a cube would indicate six sides, and you only have three sides where you’re sitting,” Jeff continued.

I knew I wasn’t a very good technical writer, but no one seemed to have caught on. I believed I could hold onto my job indefinitely, but that confidence did not comfort me. The job was easy, and I did love the hiking and beauty of Missoula, but I knew I wouldn’t last. Instructing readers to “PRESS RETURN” or “DELETE” was not the writing I wanted. I needed a change.

“I think you’re in a triangacle.”

In 1993-94, I worked at the House of Charity, a homeless shelter in Spokane, as an Assistant Manager through a program called Jesuit Volunteers. Not a practicing Catholic, I hesitated joining, but found that most of the volunteers in the group struggled with the Catholic beliefs they grew up on. For one year, I washed laundry, broke up fights, heard incredible stories, confiscated booze, mopped floors, laughed, yelled, broke up fights. Besides catching tuberculosis (quickly routed in six months with massive antibiotics), my volunteer year was one of the most exciting and fulfilling years of my life.

“Unless you’re trapped in a conicle.”
25 years old with no personal commitments and a proven disdain for computer manuals, I had known I wanted a change for some time. Between manuals and Hearts games on the computer, I had researched Jesuit Volunteers International on the Internet. I wanted to go abroad, but not too far, and I began studying one of their placements in particular: Belize. If placed there, I could tell my Mom that, although Belize sits in unstable Central America, I would actually be geographically closer to her in Texas than I was in Montana. With a PH.D. in government, though, I knew she wouldn’t buy it. But once I researched more, and found out about the Mayans living there, I knew I wanted to go to Belize.

“What do you think?” Jeff asked. I tried to really absorb my surroundings, maybe for the first time. The smell of toner and coffee. The rickety-rat-a-tat of keyboards clicking, interrupted by the shrill drill of phones ringing. A man I had never met during my two years working rushed passed me, anxiously scanning papers.

“I think you’re right, Jeff. I’m trapped in a conicle.”

Adopting the name from the Mayan word for muddy (“beliz”), Belize, a tiny Central American country, remained a British colony until 1981. About the size of Massachusetts, Belize’s entire population hovers around 230,000 people. Britain encouraged her subjects from around the world to populate Belize, resulting in a fascinating cultural mix. Half the population claims mestizo ancestry, some of whom immigrated from the Yucatan during the 19th century, while only 10% of the population is Mayan. The rest of the population is mostly Creole, descendants of African slaves and British pirates who logged the rich hard-wood interior, although significant populations of East Indians, Lebanese and Asians also reside in Belize.

The Maya of the Toledo district are divided into the Mopan and Kekchi Maya. The Mopan speak a dialect similar to the Maya of the Yucatan and are
thought to have migrated from that region. The Kekchi claim their ancestry from the Alta Vera Paz district of Guatemala. (Thompson, 76)

Almost all Belizeans speak English or Creole, an exciting language that reflects both the country’s simmerring temperatures as well as the smooth, easy-going Caribbean attitude. When spoken, Creole allows for the high and low pitches of human emotion much better than flat, standard English. Creole is spoken with the whole body, not just the mouth.

Belize is a fascinating country not only for her perfect off-shore cayes and intriguing mixture of ethnicities, but because of her history. While conquering most of Central America and Mexico for the glory of God and gold, the Spanish found Belize to be mostly a marshy, malaria-infested wasteland good only for logwoods used in dye. Not only that, but the coral reef protecting the shore of Belize tended to eat Spanish keels.

Without an organized government, Belizean waters attracted British and Scottish pirates during the 1600’s. After plundering passing ships, many of them Spanish, the swashbucklers slipped back into one of their hundreds of small cayes for hide-outs. Over the years, this pirating became a sore spot for Spain, who, along with Britain, claimed to rule Belize. Who did rule Belize was finally settled on September 10, 1798, when a British force defeated the Spanish Armada off St. George’s Caye. Britain won the rights to Belize, but did not make a formal claim until many years later.

The U.S. became interested in the happenings of Central America with the Monroe Doctrine, but in 1862, embroiled in its own Civil War, American hands were tied and unable to prevent Great Britain from declaring the area as British Honduras, new jewel in the crown. Offering incentives of cheap land, Great Britain encouraged subjects from all of her colonies to move to Belize.
On September 21, 1981, Belize peacefully gained independence from Great Britain. Guatemala, which for many years still claimed Belize as part of her territory because of unsettled Spanish claims, threatened to invade the new country. British warships patrolled the Bay of Honduras for many years to keep peace, and, in 1992, a new Guatemalan government recognized Belize’s independence.

Through all of this change, the Mayans of southern Belize remained mostly undisturbed.

I left Missoula in August of 1996 and served as a Jesuit Volunteer in the Toledo District of southern Belize for two years. I worked as assistant to the assistant manager of the school district, which comprised 32 Roman Catholic schools. St. Peter Claver, the largest school, sat outside my door in the town of Punta Gorda; Hicatee Creek, one of the smallest schools, sat at the end of a two-hour motorcycle ride on dirt roads followed by a five hour hike through the jungle. Ben Juarez, the assistant manager, and I traveled to these schools as often as possible, bringing supplies, news from town, checking attendance, recording any need for repairs on the school or teacher’s quarters, and observing classroom management and teaching.

When I wasn’t busy assisting Ben, my other duties as Director of Religious Education kept me busy. I helped teachers prepare students for some of the sacraments of the Catholic Church, namely First Confession, First Holy Communion, and Confirmation. Confirmation, the sacrament bestowed through the Bishop onto Standard V (8th grade) students, took up most of my time. Children completed service projects, chose Confirmation names, studied questions that the Bishop would ask, and helped prepare their Confirmation mass. I assisted
students, teachers, and parents in the villages during this process as much as possible.

As a “fallen” ("fallen" being a term a priest used to describe my faith) Roman Catholic in the United States, my liberal attitude towards Church policy sometimes differed with that of Belizeans. I struggled with my Catholic faith in the States, at best, and most of the time lived comfortably unaware of it. I found teaching religion very challenging, and I streamlined my teaching to include one message.

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

I concentrated on teaching the Golden Rule, which for many years had been my favorite philosophy of Christianity and the remaining pillar of my Catholic faith. In Belize, this pillar would be seriously challenged. My uncertainty about whether I should teach religion in Belize made me question why I came to Belize. But observing and learning about Mayan culture firsthand made me stay in Belize.

During my two years in Belize, I learned about the challenges many of the Maya of southern Belize face as the world outside their jungle villages rapidly changes. The way of life for the Maya in southern Belize has not changed in the most basic ways for centuries. They still live in the palm thatch huts of their ancestors, still raise corn and beans in their milpas, and still travel mostly by foot. Even some of the ancient religious traditions have survived to the present day, though somewhat adjusted by Christian beliefs.

But many issues loom on the horizon of the 21st century and drastically threaten to change the Mayan way of life. Logging of the interior, the building of the Southern highway, and the possibility that slash and burn farming is no longer a viable method are all challenges that may permanently change Mayan life in the Toledo District.
On one of my first travels with Ben, we stayed over night with Mateo Ack in his home in Jalacte, a village close to the Guatemalan border. Tired of sticking out in a foreign country, I enjoyed the warm, friendly reception of Mateo and his family. They invited me to return, which I did many times over the next two years.

Once Mateo and I became comfortable with each other, I asked if I could write down some of our conversations. He agreed. In hindsight, I'm not sure I followed all the rules about writing about "the other." All I know is that I met someone who fascinated me, who I felt could teach me something about living in a different way.

I began writing this book to examine the challenges that face the Mayans of Southern toledo in the next century. I quickly discovered I'm not an anthropologist, archaeologist, or historian. Many books, especially Eric Thompson’s Maya Archaeologist and Charles Gallencamp’s MAYA (two books that I read before, during and after my stay in Belize that provided invaluable information on Mayans), will better inform readers on the history of the Mayans than I ever could. Assad Shoman’s 13 Chapters offers a fascinating and detailed history of the entire country of Belize, and The Maya Atlas describes the life of the Mayans of Belize in their own words.

I discovered the only thing I could comment on with any authority was how I felt about Mateo Ack. I will carry my fascination of and friendship with Mateo Ack for the rest of my life. The following is simply an account of that fascination and friendship.
MEETING MATÉO

I.
I rip the kickstarter down and rev the bike, a Yamaha 175, the roar of the bike crushing the silence between Mateo and me. I feel relief. I met Mateo just last night and haven’t been able to make much conversation with him. When I do talk to him, I feel like pulling a tooth out of his mouth would be less painful for him than a response. He never immediately responds to any question, but usually makes some gesture instead. Maybe his heavy, worn hand will run through his thick, dark hair. Maybe he’ll rest both hands on the muscular hips that pump his stocky legs. If he’s sitting, he might place his chin in his cupped hands and pretend he didn’t hear the question, his bright eyes glowing from his tan face. And if a sound does immediately come from his lips, it’s not words, but a long sigh that’s almost a whistle.

“Are you ready to head to town, Mateo?”

A low whistle. Mateo has never ridden a motorcycle before, and seems unsure about the prospect. I realize I’m in for a wait.

I know I could ask Mateo to take the bus, saying such a long ride for two people on a bike is dangerous, but I’m eager to do this man a favor. I’m hoping he might take me to the bush, the deep jungle where only Mayans go. A safe, enjoyable ride to town might be the first step to Mateo agreeing to take me into the bush.

My boss, Ben Juarez, introduced me to Mateo last night when we spent the night at Mateo’s house. Ben and I could have reached Punta Gorda by nightfall, but he wanted me to meet Mateo.

“He’s a very respected man in this village,” Ben explained. “And he likes gringos,” he added with a wink.

We spent the night in Mateos’ house, swinging sleepily in hammocks as the jungle crept and clicked outside. Candle light danced on the faces of Ben and Mateo, and I listened to them talk about the old days of Belize. They spoke mostly
in English, some in Ketchi, and a little Spanish. I listened attentively to what I could understand, and I watched - just as closely - their faces when I couldn't understand. I can still clearly picture that night with Ben Juarez and Mateo Ack in the candle-light, two grown men becoming more eager and child-like as they unspun shared memories.


I reminisce about the night before as Mateo stands completely still about ten feet from the bike. I wonder how I appear to him. My big, blue helmet, the smoke rising out of the exhaust, the trembling machine growling between us.

"Just hop on, Mateo!" I yell. "I'm a careful driver! Just be sure to hold on to me and don't get too close to the end or we'll fishtail!"

"Yes, Mr. Tom." Mateo, like all other Mayans, insists on calling me, "Mr. Tom." I decide I want Mateo to call me just "Tom."

"Mateo," I yell again, "You can call me 'Tom!'"

"Yes, Mr. Tom." Watching Mateo's large Mayan eyes grow even bigger, I decide this isn't the time to change his address of me.

I wait. The Belizean sun cooks my head in my helmet, and I'm sweating noticeably at eight in the morning. The rising sun torches the edges of the hills, and her first rays slip over to squint my eyes. Cahune trees, small palm-like trees that
Mayans use to thatch their houses, sit on the hill’s sky-border like Nature’s sentinels. The denseness of life in the jungle that glows in the sun’s waking rays amazes me. Hot and wet, the jungle reminds me, in the exact opposite way, of my home that I left just a few short months ago: the cold, dry mountains of Missoula, Montana.

In the jungle, life grows up with soft green thrusts in cahunes and palms and in sturdy brown flexes with royal mahogany and copal trees, which the Mayans scrape for the incense they use in almost every religious ceremony. Life shimmies down with thick ivy and hanging vines, some of which can be slashed open with a machete to release water like some hundred-foot long straw. And, underneath all this cover, life grows sideways with the slither of snakes, the prowl of jaguar, the swoop of parrots on their way home to nest, and the crawl of the iguana, whose fat Mayans have used as medicine for centuries. Pink clouds like the earth’s last hot breath steams above the jungle. The jungle seems thick with life, life toppling over life.

Mateo hops on the back of the bike, but so far away he’s nearly sitting on my carrying rack. He’s not a fat man at fifty-five, and he’s only about five foot five. But Mayan bodies are incredibly efficient. Mateo’s ancestors, probably Mayan workers, spent six months of the year planting and harvesting crops and most of the remainder of the year hauling limestone boulders to construct huge temples for the ruling elite. Mateo still farms six months of the year like his ancestors, and, judging by the sharp definition of his arms and legs, could hoist a few boulders himself.

Mostly muscle, Mateo’s weight teeters the bicycle. The ground turns to marbles, and I have to slam my feet on the ground before we tip over. The loss of control frustrates me, and I feel a sheen of sweat on my arms and face.

“Mateo, you have to sit closer or we’ll fishtail.”
Mateo hops off the motorcycle and gives me a look like I just told him to walk the forty miles to town. I explain that I only wanted him to move up a few inches. He nods in understanding, then starts to inspect the bike like he’s a mechanic. I wonder if he’s looking for the perfect place to sit. He tugs on the ends of his moustache, another of his maneuvers in lieu of talking. I’ll always remember Mateo’s moustache, the first Mayan moustache I saw. Mayans have very little body hair. School children often touched my hairy arms with fascination, sometimes whispering “uus-chabil,” meaning “pretty.” The attraction to hairy arms is funny to me, since, in the States, hairy arms possibly indicated a hairy back. And that never seemed to attract anybody.

Mateo hops up on the bike a few more inches.

“Closer, Mateo.”

“O.K., Mr. Tom.”

A few more inches, and we’re pretty balanced. This is the closest Mateo has been to me; I can feel him breathing down my neck. He sits quietly, but his breathing is fast. I tell him he can hold onto me for balance, but he declines. I feel the tension between us and decide I just better go.

I squeeze the clutch and drop the gear from neutral to first with my foot. But as soon as we move, Mateo shimmies back to where he was. The bike wobbles, and I stop. Maybe I didn’t explain myself clearly.

I stop the bike, and we both hop off. I point to where I need Mateo to sit, and that he could place his hands on my hips if he needs to balance himself. I tell him it’s very dangerous if we don’t sit that way, that we could tip over and fall. I feel smug talking to a man I already admire as if he’s six, but we did have something of a language barrier. I speak slowly and repeat myself. I am certain I am crystal clear.
He slides up on the bike, we roll ten more feet, and he slides back to the edge of the bike. I repeat myself again, he agrees, then slides back and the bike wobbles. I take a deep breath and wonder if this is a cultural issue. Maybe men too close to one another is unacceptable in the Mayan world. Maybe this is one of those times they warned me about in Jesuit Volunteer orientation. I think they passed out a yellow sheet with proper responses. I think the paper said to stay calm.

“Mateo! Are you listening?” Calm doesn’t come easy in a country where cool is 83. Without the breeze of movement, my head sweltered inside my helmet. The sheen of sweat had grown to trickles down my forehead, slipping underneath my glasses and stinging my eyes. The growling engine simmers and the sun beats down, heat baking me from above and below. I need to get this bike moving.

“Yes, Mr. Tom.”

“This motorcycle is dangerous. Sit close to me, or we’ll fall. Is there anything wrong with sitting close to me?”

“No, Mr. Tom.”

I sit on the bike with Mateo behind me, unable to see his face. I want to lock eyes with him, to gain some hint of understanding. But locking eyes with Mateo was as probably as catching sight of a jaguar in broad daylight.

“I won’t bite, Mateo. Please stay close and don’t slide back. This is serious. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Tom.” He sounds very much as if he understands. I’m curious if he really does.

Most of my curiosity about the Maya centered around where they found their food, medicine, building materials, and cultural identity: the bush. Not the well-worn jungle paths that Ben and I would take to schools, but the thick jungle that I heard would almost grow back behind you as you slashed through with a
machette. I wanted to go into the real jungle, the place where Mayans found wild clover honey to mix with water during droughts and herbal medicine to stave off malaria. The bush fascinated me.

I knew I could probably hire almost anyone—but Mateo’s kind manners, his reputation as an honest man, and his knowledge of the bush made him an excellent choice for a guide.

I knew I would have to take my time, though. As many questions as I had about Mateo, I’m sure he had just as many about the gringo who appeared one night in his house. We were mysteries to each other. I recognized barriers; Mateo’s English, though good, stood at about 5th grade level, and I couldn’t speak a lick of Ketchi. I felt certain I could learn from him. He represented a culture that saw the Spanish Conquest and British colonization and kept much of her culture intact. I could only hope he was somewhat interested in me. I wasn’t sure what I could offer Mateo.

Mateo and I have travelled about fifty feet in ten foot intervals. Villagers begin to poke their heads out of their huts to watch. I’m usually a sight in most villages, but Mateo and I put on a show today. A gringo and Mr. Ack riding to town ten feet at a time. By the time Mateo and I prepare for another go, Mayans scatter the hillsides, covering their mouths, which usually means they’re laughing.

Ten more feet and Mateo slides back again. This time, the bike nearly tumbles over on a rock. I steady it, turn off the motor, and slam down the kickstand. I can’t contain myself any longer. I hop off the bike and blow up.

“Goddammit, Mateo! Right here! Right here! Right here!” I yell, slapping the part of the seat where I want him. “What part don’t you understand?”

Mateo understands. His deep-tanned face actually fades a little pale. His heavy black eyebrows furrow in sorrow. His large head bows a little in shame. His
strong hands clasp each other. I still don't know where the misunderstanding lay, but I guess anger cleared it out. Anger is sometimes my quickest way of clearing out my cultural differences with the Maya, but doubtfully the best. Sometimes, though, it's all I can muster. I know I must anger them with my own ignorance, but not one of them ever raised their voice against me. They seem to prefer to laugh.

The motorcycle incident was the only time I ever got mad at Mateo. I hop back on the bike, start the engine, and he crushes the wind out of me with a bear hug. I have to stop the bike he holds on so hard. The villagers laugh around us. Some even drop their hands. I slowly join them once I get my wind back.
2. POITE
Ben Juarez leads me on my first jungle-hike, to the small Mayan village of San Benito Poite. Poite (POY-TAY), the most remote village in the Toledo District, lies a mile from the Mojo River and surrounded by jungle at the end of a ten mile road from Santa Teresa, the nearest neighbor. Tractors recently graded the first five miles of this road, accommodating motorcycles, but the final five remains a thin footpath through deep jungle.

We pack and leave town by eight o'clock, two hours later than expected. Poite is a two-hour motorcycle ride from Punta Gorda, then a three-hour hike one-way. With a minimum of an hour stay at the school, we face an eleven-hour round trip that has us driving back in the late evening, if things go as scheduled. With Ben's flexibility and my complete lack of knowledge and experience, things usually do not.

To my surprise, as we shoulder our packs and ready our motorcycles, Ben pulls out a worn, cinnamon red helmet. He never wears a helmet. He notices my stare and says, laughing, "Poite can be rough, boy!"

We roar through town, and I enjoy the anticipation of my first hike into the jungle. I know we won't walk through the real bush; we'll hike on a well-traveled footpath cutting through the jungle. But because of Poite's distance and isolation, Ben explains we'll see the high bush and should even hear the cries of howler monkeys. I wonder what I'll see, and what I'll tell Mateo about my trip. Maybe if Mateo knows I reached Poite safely - in one day, no less - taking me bushwhacking would seem like a sensible prospect. I feel like I need to build up a resume of sorts before asking Mateo to take me to the bush, and I think Poite is the first step.

The weather does not encourage us. On the damp edge of the rainy season, we attempt to force a day hike into what should be an overnight hike. My blood already thinned by the hot climate, the 60 degree wind-chill on the motorcycle
actually gives me shivers. The wind whips through my rainjacket as Ben and I speed past Cattle Landing School, the first school just outside of town. Populated mainly by people of East Indian descent, Cattle Landing reflects an interesting chapter of post-Civil War America. A group of Southerners hated the prospect of Reconstruction so much that they moved to Belize to start sugar plantations. But the farms failed, partly because of the Southerners attitude of prohibition. According to Thompson, “The Toledo settlement was bone dry, and that was the chief cause of its later decay, for when the price of sugar slumped, the settlers refused to make rum, in which large profits lay.” (76)

The Southerners and their plantations didn’t last, but their East Indian servants did. Their descendants, slim children in blue uniforms, scream and run in the schoolyard for recess. When they hear the roar of our motorcycles, several of the youngest ones, probably Standard 1 (3rd grade), race barefoot on the gravel side of the road waving frantically. Despite the damp shower, their bright smiles warm me. Ben and I honk our horns and wave back.

The road curves away from the Bay of Honduras, a cold metal plate covered with stern clouds. The thick cover muffles the usual throbbing of sunrays on the back of my neck, and a thin shower of rain begins before Ben and I get ten miles from town. Anticipating the soon-to-be-slick road, Ben and I both shift down to lower gears.

I thought the plan was to head straight to Poite, but Ben has to stop at San Pedro Colombia, then Blue Creek, and then again at Santa Helena, putting us even farther behind schedule. The rain continues to fall steadily, and I begin to have my doubts about the trip. Would we really have time to reach Poite and return? How much would the rain slow us down? The dirt trails we would travel on certainly had degenerated to mud swamps by now. But Ben has hiked these villages for thirty years, and I trust his judgment. I also didn’t want a change of plans because
of me. That probably sounds ridiculous, but I often found myself trying not to cause a stir in an environment that I naturally stuck out like a white thumb.

A few weeks ago, we tried the same Poite trip, but stopped before Santa Helena at the swollen Mojo River, which swallowed the bridge. Nothing quite as humbling as coming around a bend in a road, expecting a well-made concrete bridge, and finding a heavy, rolling brown river stretched out before you. Options narrow quickly. The river ran about three feet deep over the bridge, and Ben acted as if he had never seen such a thing before. He asked if I thought we could walk our bikes across, and we even dipped our wheels in the fast-moving river before I said we should turn back. He smiled, then agreed. I don’t think Ben would have gone farther, either. I think he wanted to test my common sense, to get a feel of how I would do when I eventually struck out on my own.

Today, the bridge is high and dry over the Mojo, but, after our Santa Helena stop, I ask Ben if he thinks we are "doing well on time."

"We may have to hurry a bit on the hike. It's all right. We don't want to hike back in the night, though. Snakes like to come out." The fact that my easy-going boss has considered our tardiness and has some sort of plan comforts me. The snake part doesn’t. I already heard about the dangers of the TommyGoff snake from Mateo on our motorcycle ride home a few weeks ago. He told me that gringos call the venomous creature “Two-Step Jack.” When I asked why, he said, in his best white man impersonation, “You take two steps, Jack, and then you’re dead.”

The strength of Tommygoff poison doesn’t make them so deadly - their insistence on multiple strikes, their aggression and their tendency to stake out a territory and defend that territory to death make them one of the most feared snakes in the world. A Mennonite farmer stepped on a Tommygoff in an orange orchard a few months after I arrived in Belize. He believed in the Mayan method of
snakebite medicine, which, besides herbs, includes bleeding. Weakened by the bleeding, his body could not resist the venom. He died a day after the attack.

We reach the end of the five mile driving stretch to Poite at about noon. The road becomes undrivable because of a large, steep hill, but Ben always resists giving up his motorcycle. He decides we should walk our bikes, with the engines on and clenching the throttles, up the pebbled hill to see if we can drive further. We guide our wheel spinning, pebble spitting bikes up the hill to find a trail muddy and crossed with fallen logs.

I see the high bush Ben promised. A wall of trees, sometimes arching over forty feet high and an indeterminable deepness, flanks us on either side. Damp from the light rain, the green of the jungle throbs and swells around us. Birds chirp and tweet and warble. I take a deep smell, and agree with the estimation of Thompson, who, almost seventy years ago, described the scent of the rain forest.

"It (the smell of rain forest) seems to be a potpourri of the fragrant scent of the wild pepper tree, the acrid odor of higuera (wild fig) leaves, the faint but not unpleasant smell of decaying tree trunks, the steamy hothouse atmosphere of damp plants unable to dry in the sun's rays, and a dozen other scents that defy explanation." (104)

I want to quiz Ben on the names of the trees and plants and flowers, but we're rushing and I have to focus on my footsteps. Rain fills up the cylindrical gouges left by horses, mining the road with slippery pockets.

Ben hikes quickly. I didn't think I'd have difficulty keeping up with a forty-eight year old man, but I do. A trick knee from an old soccer injury in high school doesn't speed me up any, but mainly Ben's ability to hike through mud efficiently begins to increase the distance between us.

Ben waits for me at the top of a steep hill. Half-drenched and cobbled with mud-boots, I struggle to the top of the hill to find even Ben out of breath and
needing a pause. I can’t tell how much of my wetness is water and how much sweat; even in the cool rain, the jungle humidity is stifling, stacking up on my back like a load of bricks.

After waiting for me to catch my breath, Ben points out some irregular bumps on a hill in the distance. The canopy of the rain forest covers everything like a green carpet, but the hill he points out has an irregular formation - almost a Seusian quality to it.

“Probably a Mayan ruin under there,” Ben explains.

The thought captivates me. I had traveled to one of the largest Mayan ruins, Tikal in Guatemala, earlier that year, and heard there that some archaeologists believe the biggest Mayan cities have yet to be excavated. Could the mysterious formation that Ben points out really be a ruin of one of the greatest civilizations of all time? I wondered what lay underneath that tangle of trees and overgrowth. Maybe some cryptic Mayan hieroglyphics, some of which still confound translators to this day. Or some relics of Mayan astronomers, crude instruments used to chart the stars and planets with uncanny precision. Mayan civilization surged forward in mathematics, astronomy, trade and architecture during the Mayan Classic period which began around 250 A.D., a thousand years before the European Dark Ages. Archaeologists have discovered skillfully made pottery in Belize dating as early as 2000 B.C.

Maybe the remains of a ballcourt, where Mayans played *pok-a-tok*, a ballgame similar to basketball, except players could only strike the ball with their hips, lay under the jungle. Mayans excelled in architecture: aqueducts, sweat baths, artificial reservoirs to store rainwater could all be part of a ruin. Without the help of draft animals, metal tools or wheeled vehicles, elaborate temples soaring up sixty feet high and made of huge limestone bricks were constructed through peasant labor.
I realize the small mystery of whether or not a Mayan ruin lay underneath the jungle in the distance only shadows the larger mystery of the Maya, possibly the greatest archaeological mystery of all-time: why, during the height of their Classic period, did Mayans abandon their major cities around the 9th century A.D.? I stare at the impenetrable jungle. Ben says we should move on.

The sun struggles through the gauze overhead, a blurry bump trying to press through. After about an hour of walking, Ben stops for a break on the side of a creek. We sit on two old stumps, his traditional mid-way resting spot on his hikes to Poite. I can’t even tell if Ben’s fatigued, but I’m exhausted. He refuses to drink water during our break.

"I drink once I reach Poite," he explains with a smile. "Once I start drinking, I can’t stop!"

I hear a scream. Not a human scream, but close enough to raise the hair on the back of my neck even in the rain. Ben laughs at my startled look.

"Howlers come to get us, my boy!"

Howler monkeys! Eager to get a glimpse, I’m certain they holler only fifty or sixty yards away. But Ben assures me that they could be up to a mile off. Their cry is an impressive mix between a scratchy high-pitched scream and a low throaty roar. Some Mayans believe the howlers scream so much because their bodies are riddled with beefworms, the larvae of the beefworm fly that is laid and grows in flesh. I also think just one howler screams, but Ben says six to eight are yelling back and forth to one another.

Ancient Mayans believed monkeys are the direct descendants of the younger brother of the sun god. As the fable goes, the younger brother once climbed a tree to reach some fruit. As he climbed, he slowly changed into a monkey, his clothes becoming the monkey’s hair, his loincloth the tail. His brother called to him if he had reached the top, and he chattered back like a monkey.
"Sometime I think maybe I call back," Ben jokes. We exchange a quick look, then Ben bellows as loud as he can and laughs almost as loud.

About an hour before we reach Poite, the trail splits for about a half-mile, one half meandering through short bushes along the river before joining back up with the other half. Ben and I take the half by the river. I scarcely notice this split, but the fork proved crucial on our return.

We find a ten-year old boy and his dory at the edge of the flooded river. Poite lies a half-mile farther on the other side, so Ben asks the boy if we can get a ride. Wearing only ragged Nike shorts and a toothy grin, the boy agrees happily.

“You’ll like Poite!” he informs me cheerily.

I wonder if he’s the Poite Tourist Bureau, charged with lying by the river day after day, waiting for that first tourist who will bring all the others. Half the size of his ten foot pole and almost as skinny, I’m curious how in the world he’ll pole a fat gringo like me across. I climb awkwardly onto the shaky, shallow craft, and he shoots the dory up the rapids as hard as he can, nosing the dug-out through the raging foam as far as possible. Poling us one at a time, his strength and skill are impressive. He masters the dory like a steed, the boat quickly responding to his well-timed pushes and pulls. With my wet clothes and pack, I estimate I’m well-over 200 pounds against his 80 something. Arms as thin as the pole but wired with muscle, he pushes directly against the force of the river until the strength of the rapids flings the boat safely to the other side. I clutch desperately to the sides of the shallow boat in order not to fall in, while he balances himself standing. He returns for Ben, then bids us a nice visit with enthusiastic handshakes.

“Enjoy your stay in Poite!”

We reach Poite by three o'clock. Comprised of a dozen thatch huts in a minor abcess of a valley, Poite seems like something to be stumbled upon accidentally. Most Mayan villages I visit sit on the side of a road or by a river, but
Poite is curbed on all sides by jungle. Every house we pass by, villagers poke their faces out. I imagine they are pleased with the Tourist Bureau’s work.

The school is an old wood-frame structure raised on concrete legs. We have time to quickly meet with all three of the Mayan teachers at Poite: Juan Carlos, Gonzalo, and Edwardo. Juan Carlos, the principal, retains a smile the entire time we meet, even when he points to the rusted hole in the tin roof that drips water directly onto his bed.

“It would be nice to get this fixed, Mr. Juarez,” he asks happily.

Mr. Juarez nods and smiles back, and I wonder if they’re sharing a joke. Carrying just one sheet of tin back to Poite to fix the roof would probably have to wait until the dry season, at least four months away. The three of us stand in the principal’s house, watching the rain plunk the teacher’s bed. I realize the chance of this roof getting fixed before the end of the rainy season is as likely as the rainy season ending four months early. Ben and I share a smile that says, “We’re really not much help here.” Juan Carlos smiles, too, all of us sharing a moment of happy madness.

Ben and I observe Juan Carlos teaching the multiplication tables to Standard II (3rd grade). Of the fifteen children, six speak only Ketchi, three only Spanish, while the rest speak Ketchi, Creole and Spanish. It’s quite a collaboration in education. The tri-lingual children, as well as Ben, help Juan explain multiplication to the children who speak only Spanish or Ketchi. Unable to speak Ketchi or much Spanish, I watch Ben and Juan and their platoon of barefoot child-teachers scamper around the classroom with scraps of paper and stubs of pencils, eager to share their knowledge with friends.

I remember my own fourth grade, learning my own multiplication tables with Sr. Dorothy of the Sisters of Mercy at Holy Trinity High School in Dallas, Texas. I remember being the only Caucasian in class, surrounded by mostly
Mexican-American kids. (Being the only gringo back then had two sides for me: I didn’t like Mexican food then, and often resorted to stuffing my enchilada in my milk carton when the sisters weren’t looking. But pinatas, the idea of smashing something to pieces and not getting in trouble but getting CANDY instead, was more than enough reason for my fourth grade mind and heart to embrace the Mexican culture and forget the enchiladas.)

We always sat in silence in Sister Dorothy’s math class as she strolled slowly up and down the aisles. Then, she’d call a name. “Thomas! What are the multiples of nine?” Sister would re-affirm each correct answer with a slap of the ruler to her own hand. Upon hearing an incorrect answer, Sister would administer a slap in the student’s hand. It seemed multiplication, completed right or wrong, forced Sister to slap somebody. Watching the Belizean children giggle and scamper about, I wondered what Sr. Dorothy would think and how many slaps she would think were needed.

After math class, Ben and I have to leave. I feel bad our trip is so short. The teachers of Poite, who usually only come out at the end of the month for payday, starve for company and news of town. But we need to reach the trailhead before dark; or in my mind, before the snakes come out. We leave Poite by about four, hoping to reach our bikes before sunset.

On the outskirts of Poite, we hear a friendly, “Hullo, Ben!” through the bush. A couple of Raleigh Venturers, a British outfit that builds schools, hail Ben. A man and a woman, they’re pale and lanky and in their mid to late twenties. Roger, the leader of this group planning to build a school in Poite, has some “bloody unknown” bubbly rash on his neck, but he’s quite friendly and invites us to their camp for tea. Roger, so cheery and energetic and British, makes me think of young Eric Thompson tramping through the bush sixty years ago.
I know Ben hates turning down invitations, but I’m hoping that he’ll say no this once because of our schedule. He tells Roger we’re in a hurry to head back before nightfall, but Roger says the camp is “just off the trail. You can pop in for tea and be on your way.” Ben agrees.

When Roger said “tea,” I assumed he meant in the Belizean sense of a light lunch or snack. But he meant tea in a very British way. When we reach the camp, the nucleus of their tents is a smoldering fire over which a large iron kettle steams. Around the fire, in the middle of the tropical, burning jungle, sit eight volunteers eagerly waiting their hot tea. I’ll never forget the sight of eight pale British faces surrounded by the steamy-green jungle, all waiting for their kettle to boil with tin cups in their hands. Standing ten feet away, I can feel the waves of heat from the fire. I stifle a laugh. Roger notices my grin, then chuckles himself.

“What can I say? We brought a little bit ‘a home with us, mate.”

Unable to drink hot tea in 80 degrees, Ben and I enjoy some purified water from our hosts. An exchange of “Good Luck!” and we return on our way. We reach the river, and our ride sleeps under a palm tree. Startled by our request to cross, he’s not nearly as happy as on our first trip. When we reach the other side, we thank him.

“Next time, you should stay longer in Poite,” he replies glumly. I wonder if he receives some sort of commission for keeping visitors in his village, or, more simply, if his civic pride is injured.

Almost 4:30, and we strike out. Ben says we’ll have to shave off at least a half-hour to reach the bikes before dark. He starts to shave immediately, and I follow behind as close as possible. The rain has not paused for an instant all day, and the road has grown worse. The mud slicks our footing and makes going both up and down hill treacherous. Ben handles the mud better, and the distance
between us grows. I don't feel the need to ask him to wait since there's only one road. I'm sure it's impossible for me to get lost.

When I reach the fork in the road, Ben is out of sight. I assume he took the same path we took on our way to Poite, namely the path that runs along the river, so I follow this route for the half-mile until the paths rejoin. The path is overgrown and windy, and I can only see about ten yards ahead. When the two paths come back together, I'm surprised Ben is not standing there waiting for me. I stop, alone in the jungle, to think.

Is he ahead of me still? I don't think he can be more than a half-mile ahead of me. He usually stays just out of sight, maybe a hundred yards at most. Wouldn't he wait for me? Did he take the other trail and fall behind me? Has he slipped and hurt himself on the other trail?

The rain drops steadily, not missing a beat. I wipe my glasses for the hundredth time that day and shift my boots uneasily in the mud. I'm not sure what to do. I don't have time to wait, though. The weak sun is quickly dropping down through the clouds, weary from a full day of fighting to show her face. The wall of trees around me start to cast shadows.

I decide to keep going. Ben must be serious about cutting off that half-hour. Maybe he'll be waiting at the half-way point, up by the two stumps. Maybe he wants to test his new volunteer to see if I can keep up. I slog on with new energy, determined to step lightly despite a half-pound of mud on each boot.

What gives me a real boost of energy is the thought of trying to out-do Joe, the previous volunteer. Ever since I came to Punta Gorda, I've heard how fabulous a volunteer Joe was. Joe went to church everyday. Joe played guitar. Joe taught Bible songs to the kids. Joe had the best hiking equipment. I feel in constant competition with his ghost. Ben talk of him often and fondly. I'm sure Joe's a nice
guy, but I’m just tired of being compared to him. Maybe Ben wants to see how I stack up against Joe on this hike. I decide I’ll really show him.

But the rain has washed out most of the road, and the return takes me longer than coming to reach the half-way point. My heart beat jumps a notch when I see the two soggy stumps next to the river that now roars a little louder. Can Ben really still be in front of me? Why doesn’t he wait then? Or, is he behind me somehow – did he take the other fork and I passed him? I can’t imagine passing Ben. Should I turn back? But it’s evening now. Whether I go forward or turn back, I would be hiking for at least a half-hour in darkness with no light. I think continuing on makes the most sense. I almost wish Joe were here to tell me what to do.

Darkness lowers on the jungle, bringing life. Somewhere in the distance the howlers growl, but closer grows every type of squawk and squeak I can imagine. The noise grows thicker than the humid air, and the shadows of trees bend over me like dark giants, a darkness so deep I feel I can fall into it.

I can’t spot the horse-holes in the growing darkness, so sometimes I catch the side of one and slide down into a thick mud soup up to my ankles. I slide more than walk down most of the hills.

The jungle becomes a shadow around me. The only constant is the rain tapping on my back. The darkness and the murmurs don’t frighten me as much as two other thoughts: where is Ben, and where are the snakes. I hope Ben is ahead with the motorcycles, and that the snakes remain very far away. I’m not sure what to do to keep snakes away. I remember a story Ben told me about hiking from Poite one evening. He hurried back late and intended to step over one of the many logs that cover the road. Something told him to check before stepping over this particular log, and there he saw a Tommygoff, curled up like a garden hose and ready to strike. He went around the log.
I’m not able to check behind each log, because by now pitch blackness surrounds me. A crescent moon chisels through the cloud wall that the sun left, with less success. I estimate I have about forty minutes of hiking before I reach the bikes. I brace myself as the shadows grow across my path. I take some deep breaths and try not to panic into a rush. But I keep remembering the last time I was alone and lost.

Four years before in the Idaho panhandle, a Jesuit scholastic invited me for a hike to a peak. Fresh from twenty-two years of growing up on the hot, flat pan of Texas and the swampy marshes of New Orleans, I had some trouble keeping up with Miguel, a thirty-something Spanish hiker/mountain climber/tri-athlete. I developed some blisters and wanted to turn around, but Miguel said he wanted to go on. He had to reach the top. He told me to turn back and that he’d meet me at the car in a few hours. We hiked in October, and following my footsteps in the snow five miles back to the car seemed logical. But we had wandered off trail for awhile and clambered over some huge boulders, and I lost my way back.

Suddenly lost in Idaho, I skidded and slid down to a creek, yelling for help. Looking back now, I know I looked ridiculous. But I had never felt so lost. It seemed like I had blinked, and in that instant the world was spun around me. When I opened my eyes, nothing sat where I remembered. I had never felt such panic. I had such an urge to keep moving, as if that’s the way to find your way back. Constant movement. But the movement only surrounded me more and more with strange things and places, which panicked me more, which made me move faster. I don’t remember blinking, my breathing heaved fast and furious, and my legs and arms gripped me with their own intentions.

After a few hours of panic, I did find my way back to the car and Miguel. But I don’t want to repeat that panic in Belize. I can only barely make out the looming trees, warped and mangled in the weak moonlight. My steps sometimes
ooze into the mud, or sometimes I catch a tree branch. I concentrate on breathing
and say a prayer, my first prayer in a long time. I remember something Mateo said
about hiking in the dark, during his younger days when he hunted jaguars by
moonlight. "I never let the bush know I'm scared, Mr. Tom."

I reach the steep hill where Ben pointed out the ruins. I clamber to the top
and have to stop to catch my breath. I peer where the possible ruins lay - too dark
to even make out the white of limestone. Because of the darkness of the jungle or
my growing fright, I'm not sure which, I remember some of the more terrifying
aspects of Mayan culture. I wonder if any Mayan tombs lay in the dark distance.
Mayans built elaborate tombs for their royalty, especially for the halach uinic, the
leader of the city, who was so esteemed while living that he wore a cloth over his
face at all times so no one could see him. Nacoms, Mayan priests charged with
cutting the living heart out of sacrificial victims, would also be honored with their
own tomb. Hundreds of possible deities could be inscribed on tomb walls,
including the fearful fanged rain god Chac, often portrayed while urinating rain, or
Ah Puch, whose fleshless nose and lower jaw, exposed spine and spotted body
represented death. Anyone buried in a tomb would receive a single jade bead in his
mouth - money for food in the afterlife.

Thompson describes the knighting of Mayan soldiers into "jaguars" and
"eagles," one of the most terrifying aspects of Mayan culture to me. Begun in the
Yucatan and probably brought to Belize through migration, this practice
designated certain soldiers to engage in combat, not to kill the enemy, but to
capture him alive for human sacrifice. Decorated in elaborate costumes, these
"knights" could be picked out in the field of battle. Standing in the darkness, I
imagined the fear of a soldier who spotted an eagle swooping down on him,
knowing full well his ghastly intentions.

I catch my breath and keep moving.
I reach the bikes but can't find Ben. I start mine up and flash the headlight down the road. At first, I think my lights reflect off the rain in some strange way, making some of the drops red, when I realize the dozens of tiny red lights in the jungle are eyes. They disappear and reappear in different spots, like haunted Christmas lights. I flash the headlight in an awkward arc around me. Red lights everywhere. I'm not alone anymore, but I wish for different company.

I honk my horn furiously and scream Ben's name. Thinking back, I wonder how I appeared to the howlers and the jaguars and the owners of the red lights: a muddy, screaming boy in the rain, holding up a growling machine with one bright eye that beeped and beeped. I wonder what Mateo would have thought of me.

Ben arrives about twenty minutes later, though it seems much longer. He did take the other fork of the road, the one that did not follow the river. Half-way down the fork, he realized his mistake and turned back to where the road forked, hoping to find me. When he didn't find me, he wasn't sure if I hiked ahead or behind, so he waited. By this time I was over a half-mile ahead of him and trying to catch him, believing he hiked in front of me. After Ben waited awhile, he continued on, hoping to find me at the end. We are both weary and do not laugh about the incident until the following week.

We hop on our bikes and speed home. After we drive about a hundred yards, I suddenly find myself lying on the ground looking up at the dim sky. My motorcycle sputters on its side about ten feet in front of me. I had hit a tire and the road filled with water. The rut bodyslammed me before I knew what happened. I can make out fuzzy pin pricks of stars above me.

My helmet protected my head, but the fall bent the clutch on my motorcycle badly. I can't use the clutch, so I have to grind my gear back into and rev the engine enough so the gears would slip in without the use of the clutch. A tedious, miserable ride home.
We reach Punta Gorda by eleven o'clock, where I'm greeted by a phone call. The Jesuit Volunteer from the year before, Joe himself, decided to call and ask how the job's going. I tell him everything. I never mention the trip to Mateo.
3.

AT MATEO’S
Even after several motorcycle trips to visit Mateo over the last few months, the road to Jalacte still punishes my body. The larger rocks blast through the shocks and rattle my neck. I stop for a break at San Antonio, the largest Mopan-Mayan village in Belize, and recall a humorous story told by Thompson about the village.

In 1883, a group of Mayans from San Luis, Guatemala, tired of the heavy taxation of their government, moved into British Honduras and settled in the area of present day San Antonio. But the fledgling community did not prosper, the reason being, a council decided, that statues of the patron saints had stayed with the remaining inhabitants of San Luis in Guatemala. Dire straits require dire efforts, so a force of men from San Antonio, armed with a barrel of gun powder to blow the door off the San Luis church if necessary, crossed over into Guatemala to retrieve their saints. Striking at night, the mob broke down the church doors (without the gun powder), stole the statues (and the church bells for good measure) and scurried back to San Antonio before the people of San Luis knew what hit them.

Realizing the San Luisers would certainly form a counterstrike, the alcalde of San Antonio wrote a letter to the governor of British Honduras. In the letter the alcalde explained that, for reasons they were completely unaware of, the people of San Luis felt a growing hostility towards San Antonio. The alcalde feared an invasion and requested guns and bullets to protect the land of British Honduras from Guatemala. The governor provided the arms, San Antonio protected her stolen saints, and the new community flourished.

After a quick snack in San Antonio, I stop again at Lost Falls, a midway point in the trip. Once I'm away from the roar and tremble of the bike, the jungle returns. It returns like a quiet companion beginning a conversation - hesitant, piece by piece. A shuffle of wind through palm branches here. The cry of a macaw there.
The drip of yesterday's rain above from a mahogany tree, the splash of today's rain underfoot, and the smell of tomorrow's rain everywhere.

Mateo knows this jungle. He's lived and farmed in Jalacte his entire life. His parents farmed near here, as did his grandparents. They've slashed and burned the hills of Jalacte for generations. Mateo knows the bush so well that he used to hunt jaguar at midnight when he was younger. Whenever the family lost a pig, during the next full moon he and his brother would trek out barefoot with one shotgun between them. By the light of the moon they would track the cat sometimes until dawn. He told me he's killed four jaguars in his life. I asked him if he was ever scared.

"Yes, Mr. Tom." Then adding, with his modest smile, "But don't tell the jaguar."

Lost Falls isn't really lost or much of a fall, just a wash of water covering an old bridge and dropping with little ruckus down the other side. I take my shoes off and walk across the thin water that covers the bridge. The water rushes below my ankle. I can see the small red scars above my feet, notched there by fireants two days ago. The concrete is cool and soft with algae. When I reach the middle of the river, about a twenty foot walk, I can see clearly both ways down the water. The river is wide but only ten feet deep at the center. The water runs a thick green from the algae on the stones. The only sound now is the water, a rushing feeling that my ankles can't catch. I lower to my haunches and peer down the water coming to me, a mass of moving green land, a behemoth twisting and turning and cutting through the bush. Cloud mountains reflect on the dark water that swallows the fire of the Belizean sun. I peer down in front of me at the edge of the bridge. Small perch float with a blue-green flash beneath the gills.

While excavating the Mayan ruin Chichen Itza in Mexico, Thompson described a sacrificial cenote, a huge natural well. At some ceremonies, high
priests chose a villager to be thrown into the well in the morning. If alive at mid-day, the villager would be drawn out to deliver the oracle of Chac, the rain god. Some Mayans, including Hunac Ceel Cauich, the conqueror of Chichen Itza, cast themselves into the well to gain the prophecy of Chac.

Staring into the four feet of water, I wonder if I should have enough Catholic faith to wade in and wait for some sign. I don’t know any Catholics today who would jump in a well to risk their life for a sign. We aren’t supposed to force God’s hand like that. God makes signs for us; we don’t call for God and expect God to come running. But ancient Mayans believed they could, so strongly they’d die trying. The people of San Antonio believed so much in the presence of statues they risked their lives to retrieve them. Offerings of blood and food would appease the gods and bring harvest and health. Seasons and sickness could be controlled through sacrifice.

I reason that kind of faith is archaic and basically unintelligent, because, if it’s not, I’m rather jealous of its streamlined beauty. I wonder how much of the old religion Mateo practices, how much he believes he can control the hand of God.

I also know I’m romanticizing a Mayan religion that, in many ways, was quite brutal (not that Catholicism hasn’t had its share of brutality). Thompson, through years of his own and others’ research, reconstructed an ancient Mayan ritual to bring rain:

“Behind the litter come four children who are destined to be sacrificed when the procession halts. As the children pass on their way to the temple and pyramid of the rain gods, the spectators eagerly crowd forward to scan their faces. They smile as they see tears in the children’s eyes, for these tears indicate that the rains required for the growing crops will be forthcoming. The priests may have beaten the children or rubbed their eyes with chile pepper before the procession
started, or the children may be crying from sheer fright. The spectators do not concern themselves about what caused the tears, for the weeping, however caused, is a guarantee to them of rains to produce good crops.” (Thompson 113)

"Mr. Tom!"

The shock of human company gives me a start. I look down the river where the call came from but see nothing. Another call, closer. Then I make him out, on the log, floating towards me. Elutario Choc from Santa Helena wrapped around a log with a fish spear in his mouth. Because of the spear, I know he’s not practicing one of the ancient Maya methods of catching fish: dropping poisonous roots into the water and waiting for the fish to bubble to the surface. Mateo told me some of his neighbors still fish that way.

Without the whiteness of his smile, I might never have seen Elutario. His log moves rapidly towards the falls behind me, but he seems unconcerned. I look back at the rushing water, only a four foot drop, but onto rocks and not something you'd want to ride a log over.

When I look back at him, his smile is bigger. He's amused by my concern. He rocks the log back and forth, pretending he's stuck to it. I smile nervously. He keeps rocking, giving me a wild look of helplessness as he floats closer to the falls. Five feet before the falls he pushes off the log and dives deep, swimming along the edge of the bridge and scattering my glistening perch like shattered glass. The log rolls over the concrete bridge and trips like a drunkard over the falls, head over heels. Elutario pops out on the bank, flops onto a rock and laughs at me. His laugh mixes with the water, and I feel they are both laughing at me. Cohorts enjoying the prank they pulled past me. Maya humor.

Elutario is seventeen and wants to go to the States. Many Belizeans that I meet talk about going there, but they're mostly the Creole and Garifuna of town
who already have family there. Elutario is one of the few Maya I've spoken to who wants to leave his village for the States. He has an uncle who lives in town whom he visits often. His uncle owns a T.V., so Elutario knows all about the States. He talks about the latest Nike shoes, his favorite T.V. show (Baywatch) and Michael Jordan.

When Elutario stays in town and not at his uncle's, he often gets drunk and fights. Some early mornings I find him bloodied and sleeping on my porch. He'll clean himself up in my bathroom, and then we'll drink tea and watch the sun rise. We won't talk much, although sometimes he'll ask for money, and sometimes I'll give it. Soon enough he'll fidget and act restless.

"Latah, Mistah Tom."

He seems bored with his life here. He's a very different generation than Mateo.

"Mistah Tom, when pon you take me to States?"

Elly speaks the Creole of town. He asks me this question quite often, with the same smile. The scar across his right cheek glistens like new. The efficiency of his body, of Mayan bodies, always amazes me. He wears only faded red soccer shorts and I can't see an ounce of fat on him. His brown skin stretches tight over his wiry frame.

When speaking with Elutario, I usually rely on Mateo's most popular response to questions, merely a smile. But I decide to dig a bit out of curiosity.

"Why do you want to go to the States, Elutario?"

"I wan tek one lee walk an see da new tings." Mayans spend leisure time walking and visiting, sometimes to villages up to ten miles away.

"What would you do for money?"

"Get job. I hear dere lotta job in da States."

"Do you hear there are many people looking for these many jobs?"
"Yeah."

"Oh."

"Where pon you goin, Mistah Tom?"

"To visit Mateo Ack."

"Dat ol man? Why you go der?"

I'm not sure what to tell him, so I copy him. "I wan take one lee walk and see da new tings."

He laughs at me. "But Mistah Tom, why go sleep in dat hammock when you got nice bed eena da town?"

"I don't know, Elly. Maybe because I know the bed is always there, but I won't always have the hammock of Mateo. Maybe I just like the change."

Elutario thinks for a moment, then skims a rock across the water. "I tink dat we all like change, Mistah Tom."

I reach Jalacte an hour later. I park my bike next to the school and walk to Mateo's house. With my pack on, I slip and slide uphill, giving plenty of warning to Matilda, Mateo's wife. She stands outside the house, collecting laundry on a line that flaps in the wind like flags of an embassy. Once she spots me, she dashes the laundry into a basket and disappears inside.

A fifteen by thirty foot hut with cahune palm leaves blackened by smoke and wood flats for walls, the house is divided into two rooms. The living area holds two wooden tables and two long benches made from a wood plank on concrete bricks. The kitchen has two wood tables and a large comal, an iron platter for cooking built on mud and brick with space for firewood underneath. Throughout both rooms hangs limp hammocks for the family and guests to sleep. Large bags of corn covers a few corners, and one of the tables in the living area has a statue of the Virgin Mary.
On a later visit to Mateo’s, I found corn strewn around their statue of Mary. I had read that during planting, Mayans offer corn to their ancient gods for a good harvest. When the Spanish came to convert the Maya of Central America, they brought statues of Mary standing on the crescent moon. Since Mayan religion already described the moon as “the mother,” Mary fit easily into Maya belief, as did many other aspects of Catholic ritual. Finding the corn around Mary proved that Mateo and his family still followed some of the old traditions.

Matilda, standing outside the kitchen, motions me to enter. Mateo swings in a hammock and smiles. I look at the floor of the house and smile remembering my first trip to the Ack’s house with Ben. When Ben and I entered Mateo’s house, I marveled at the floor.

"It must have been hard to carry the concrete up the hill," I mentioned to Ben. Ben smiled and said something to Matilda in Ketchi. She laughed loudly, louder than any Mayan woman I had ever heard.

"Touch the floor, Tom," Ben said. I leaned inside the house and touched the floor. Mud. Mixed with ash and swirled with a wet broom, the mud resembled concrete.

As I stare at the floor, remembering my embarrassment, Matilda says something in Ketchi to Mateo. Mateo translates for me quickly, which usually means it’s a joke on me.

“My wife says she cleaned the concrete for you, Mr. Tom.”

Mateo and I sit outside and watch the sunset. I slip my boots and socks off and feel the clay coolness of evening earth. Mayan huts dot all of the hills of Jalacte, the bush chopped and burned back for milpas. The dry, scorched earth contrasts sharply with the glossy cañune palms that wave in the evening breeze like aquatic life. Slashing and burning continues as a centuries old Mayan tradition. But the population swells in this area, much of that due to Mayans from Guatemala
escaping rich landowners to have their own milpas in Belize. As the population grows, more and more land is farmed and less is fallowed to allow nutrients to restock the soil to suppress weeds for future planting.

The future of milpa farming sizzles as a hot topic of debate in Punta Gorda. Many in town believe Mayans will have to stop slash and burn farming and discover another way to make a living, possibly weaving baskets and blankets for tourists like their counterparts in Guatemala and Mexico. But with Belize’s weak infrastructure and the remoteness of the Mayan Indians in the Toledo district, not nearly enough tourists visit Mayan areas in Belize to make a living. People in town still argue that slash and burn must slow down, while Mayans in the villages continue the farming practices handed down by their ancestors. I’m still learning both sides, but I know I’m prejudiced towards the Mayans. How could such a quiet people with such simple lives, their culture based on the reverence and worship of nature, be destroying the earth? I know it’s more complicated than this; it’s just hard for me to imagine Mateo destroying anything.

Evening dims the land, and parents send the children down to the pump for water. The colorful droplets trickle and splash out of each hut down the hill. Red, yellow, green and blue drops speed and slow down before bumps and then fly over them. I could move that fast only by failing, and they run barefoot. (Mayan feet are tougher than leather; I’ve watched a ten-year old race through a briar patch.) The drops all converge together at the bottom of the valley by the pump, chattering and rubbing and giggling about to get their water. Then they’re drawn back up the hill, one at a time and slower with their weight, splashing most of the water out in shimmerring crystals.

I recognize a few of the children, the ones I taught religion a few weeks ago. Seeing them laugh and play, so naturally happy and free, makes me question what my understanding of religion has to offer them. I’m unable to accept
commandments on contraception, abortion, and the role of women in the Church.
In my short time in Belize, I’ve clearly discovered that the rules of the Church and Pope are not questioned. I know, as a Jesuit Volunteer for St. Peter Claver Parrish, people assume I’m in complete agreement with the Church’s rules. Most people in town assume I’m a priest, even after I tell them I’m not. So, I bite my tongue and often feel like a hypocrite.

Over the years, I’ve whittled my religious belief down to revolve mostly around one Christian idea: the Golden Rule. Watching the children running up the hills of Jalacte, I remember my lesson on the Golden Rule the other day:

“Let’s say Pablo is mad at Katherina. Pablo might want to hit Katerina. But Pablo should think, ‘Would I want Katerina to hit me?’”

I wanted the children to try to imagine what it would be like in another person’s shoes (without, actually involving or mentioning shoes, which no one had), to try to understand how you might feel as that person, to understand that person’s needs as your own, and to allow that to dictate your actions. I remember the dusty desks, and the smiling faces of the children, and the feeling that they did understand me, that the Golden Rule connected us. I felt so certain that I could teach religion for two years by using only the Golden Rule.

Matilda calls us inside, and points to where she wants us to sit around the comal, the hot iron platter built on mud over coals to cook tortillas. Concepciona, their daughter, returns from a neighbor’s house, and she acts shy around the guests, keeping her distance behind us and refusing to sit. I turn and catch her playing nervously with her long dark hair that falls over her red Mayan dress. She anxiously looks away, but she’s not not quick enough to hide her beautiful, deep brown eyes. Matilda laughs at the shyness of her daughter, speaking to her quickly. In all the Ketchi, I can tell when Matilda mentions me because she smiles at me when she finishes her sentences.
Matilda sits on her haunches over the comal, rolling the corn “mensa” and then flattening them into tortillas. She does this without looking and while talking to Concepciona. Every tortilla pulled off the comal looks almost exactly the same, and she makes ten in less than two minutes. Her hands move quickly and precisely. Brown and cracked by fire, her hands are small and appear almost delicate in their graceful creation of the tortillas. But these same hands can wrench the kernels off a piece of raw corn with one twist, or carry a fifteen-pound bucket of water a half-mile up a muddy hill, the thin metal handle barely making an indentation on her hard skin.

I remember the first time I saw the strength in Matilda’s hands. During harvest, with too much corn to shuck by hand, the Acks would pile the corn in a hammock and beat the harvest with heavy mahogany sticks. I visited them during this time and helped. Matilda and I stood over the hammock, beating the pile and dropping the kernels on the floor. I hit, then she hit, back and forth. The piece of mahogany, smooth and thick, grew heavier in my hand as we continued to beat without a break. Sweat trickled down my brow and stung my eyes; I noticed Matilda seemed unchanged by our work.

Maybe the heat, maybe my growing exhaustion, maybe my tendency to lose concentration— for whatever reason, I fell out of time with Matilda and smacked her square on the wrist with my mahogany stick. I was certain, from the strength of the blow and the weight of the stick (basically the same weight and length as a baseball bat), that I broke her wrist. Matilda paused, smiled at me, shook her wrist, and continued working. I checked to see if my bat was all right.

Concepciona prepares the cahune cabbage in a pot on the comal. Cahune cabbage is the heart of a cahune palm tree, cut out and boiled. Cahune cabbage looks like saurkraut and tastes a little like artichokes, but not as tart. Rolled in a
tortilla with a touch of habenero pepper, it's a wonderful meal. We eat
cross-legged on the flour around the calabash (bowl) of warm tortillas.

I listen attentively to the conversation that I mostly can’t understand. I
understand very little Mayan, but I can usually pick up on the general emotion of
the conversation or if they're speaking about me. Once I was swinging in Mateo's
hammock and Matilda took her top off in front of me. Though certainly not an
uncommon event for Mayan women to go topless in the fierce heat, I think Mateo
worried that Matilda might offend me. He hissed some scorching Ketchi in
Matilda's direction. Matilda hissed something back, then smiled and shook her
breasts in front of me like a strip tease. She started laughing hysterically, then I
laughed, and then Mateo joined in.

We eat quietly, but, after dinner, I get my favorite lesson in Ketchi: pet
cursing. The scrawny dogs and nervous chickens and proud turkeys and snorting
pigs and one sleepy cat that surround the house seem to know the meal schedules.
When the dinner is over on some nights, each one makes a run at the leftovers,
namely the basket of tortillas on the floor. Each one has his or her own style. The
cat sneaks in slowly, hiding behind bags of com and pouncing when the moment is
right. The turkeys seem a bit confused and follow an invisible maze throughout the
house that does not include the basket and leads them gobbling like mad out the
back door. The idiotic chickens start on this maze but are too scared and scream
back from where they entered. The dogs slink in with their tails between their legs,
in full view and aware they have already done something bad by just entering. It
weighs on them heavily and impedes deft thievery. The pigs are generally brilliant.
They dash in a straight line to the basket, seize a tortilla, and quickly flee out the
back.

However the attempt is made, success or failure, the flurry of curses that
erupts each time from Matilda is inspiring. Ketchi is a guttural language
highlighted with clicks and hisses. I ask for translations from Concepciona, although she can't always give the exact equivalent in English. Some of Matilda's best lines, roughly translated in English:

"C'atoc c'anci ch'o!" ("Burn, snake-rat!")
"Tre chibl icana!" ("Blister your hide!")
"Huluban it te, cuiy!" (Beefworms for your stomach, pig!"

After dinner, I settle into my hammock, but Mateo has other ideas. Tonight is movie night.

The basics of Mayan life haven't changed in thousands of years. Modes of transport (only mules or walking, except for the bus to town market), diet (corn and beans) and housing (cahune thatched huts) are the same for Mateo as they were for his ancestors. Some changes in Jalacte can be seen, though, and one of the biggest is movie nights. A man who owns a concrete store on a hill has a generator, VCR and TV that provide movies on Friday nights for 2 Guatemalan quetsales (U.S. 30 cents).

Mateo and I head for the theatre. Amulfo, his son, wants desperately to join us, but Mateo does not allow him for some reason. I offer to pay, but that's not the reason, so I keep quiet. We reach the theatre, which is already packed with Mayan mothers nursing their babies. The six long benches are full, so Mateo and I sit on stools in the back with the rest of the men.

We watch "Braveheart." I have trouble understanding some of the Scottish, and, looking around, I wonder if anyone else does. A strange scene, to be sure: Mayans watching Scottish Highlanders defend their country, the electric reflection of Mel Gibson illuminating huge Mayan eyes.

The movie wasn't bad, either, at least what I saw of it. Almost three hours long, "Braveheart" runs on two tapes. After the first tape finishes, everyone stands up to leave because the screen screams white and grey pieces.
"Mateo," I ask hurriedly, "I think the movie is only half over. Isn't there a second tape?"

Mateo looks at me, then looks at the screen. He looks back at me and smiles faintly. "The movie is over, Mr. Tom," he says, pointing at the screen. I shrug and follow him back to his house in the growing dark, wondering how "Braveheart" ends.

I help Concepciona with her homework, but once it’s dark, everyone settles into their hammocks. Matilda carefully lights some candles. Concepciona treads softly across the room, carrying a candle just below her face. Her eyes find mine for a long moment, and we stare deeply. I believe eyes reflect what they have already seen, a sharing that can occur between strangers.

I push my hand on the floor padded rubbery by feet. The nylon hammock starts a slow rock. So quiet here I can swing with each thud of my heart. The chirping and buzzing and squeaking of the jungle seems like background breathing. Mateo and I swing next to each other quietly.

I haven’t asked Mateo about taking me to the bush yet. I’ve stayed at his house at least half a dozen times, but asking still doesn’t feel quite right. I still want to learn more about him and give him the opportunity to learn more about me. I don’t want to be rude to ask more of someone who has already given me so much. I also wanted to wait to see if he’d offer, but that hasn’t yet happened. I’ve shown a lot of curiosity about the bush, which, in response, Mateo generally smiles and nods.

He’s very quiet tonight, and I sense he wants to sleep. I’m surprised when he asks me to step outside.

A cool, wondrous night embraces us, the wonder caused simply by the fact that it’s cool. The black Belizean sky, pockmarked with white holes. The green
lawn, invisible except for the Christmas lights of fireflies strung over it, glowing the green in warm pats of light. Mateo points to the brightest star on the horizon.

"Why is that star so bright?"

"I don't think it's a star, Mateo. I think that's the planet Venus."

"Ah. Venus."

I am amazed that Mateo asks me about the planets, since his ancestors were some of the first astronomers in the world, often using Venus to chart the skies. The ancient Mayan calendar, constructed through the crudest of devices, was incredibly accurate. Many Mayan cultures worshipped Venus as the god Xulab, protector of hunters and farmers. Could Mateo never have heard the name "Venus" before? Has he heard of Xulab before? How much of the ancient religion did he really know? I want to ask, but respect his privacy. White men have interfered with Mayan faith enough.

We walk back inside and slide into our hammocks. I hear Mateo speak to each one of his children in Ketchi. He whispers softly, but I can understand one word in all the Ketchi that he speaks to each one. "Venus," he says to each child. The candle is blown out, shadows take over, and I rock myself to sleep to the sound of Mateo muttering, "Venus."
4.

MATEO AT MARKET
On Wednesday and Saturday mornings, Punta Gorda, a small, sleepy town of about 2,000, is at her busiest. Underneath the blue clock tower that hasn't worked in ten years, market dominates downtown. Belize is probably most famous for having the world's second largest coral reef, but a greater treasure can be found inland in a myriad of peoples. The market reflects this.

Mayan Indians sit cross-legged and placid on their brilliant hand-made blankets with their papayas, corn, breadfruit, and guava spread out before them. Their calmness and whispered Ketchi language are overcome in the company of Garifuna shoppers, descendants from Africa whose loud Creole conversations and contagious laughter ripple through the market. Brought over to Belize a century ago by British as indentured servants, Asian buyers are active in the crowd. A few British, whose rule over Belize ended in 1981 with the country's peaceful independence, mingle and shop. The most noticeable group is the German and American Menonites who literally stick out from everyone else with their pristine starched shirts and high erect posture, their fair skin somehow deflecting the broiling sun. Their rapid pace defies the elements. I've visited the market several times before, but I still can't help stopping and browsing through the culture before shopping. The deep jungle solitude of Mayan eyes alone is worth a moment's pause.

The market is its own world, and Belize seems a place distant from everything. I notice John, a huge American Vietnam vet, the classic ex-pat, thumbing through some oranges. A popular place for ex-pats to lose themselves, Belize, with her warm weather and friendly faces, can make you forget about the rest of the world. Indeed, a journal entry found by Thompson many years ago suggests that Belize herself has a history of forgetting about the rest of the world. In a logbook at the International Hotel in Belize City, Thompson found the following entries for 1914:
July 31: *Austria declared war on Serbia*

August 1: *Russia declared war on Germany*

August 2: *Germany invaded Belgium*

August 4: *Great Britain declared war on Germany*

August 10: *Belize dog pound opened*

I find Mateo sitting on his blanket, selling some beans, the first time I've met him outside of Jalacte. He seems very small in town. All the Mayans sit during market, waiting for a sale, while the Garifuna and Creole and East Indians hustle and bustle.

"Papaya one dollah - caan beat dat, papa!" a happy old woman wielding a large fruit hollers at me."

Fresh fish here, mistah!" a Garifuna lady calls to me.

I'm surprised to see Mateo because he usually sells his beans in Santa Cruz, Guatemala, a short hike from Jalacte. He gets a better price there at a quarter of the trip. But he says he came to visit a sick friend, and he thought he'd sell some on the side. I sit next to him to try and get his perspective. Shuffled feet and kicked dust.

"Do you have markets iike this in the states, Mr. Tom?" Mateo asks. A Menonite who looks eight-feet tall eyes Mateo's black beans, but Mateo doesn't seem to notice.

"There are some markets like this, Mateo. But most people shop in supermarkets. Big houses of food."

"Big houses of food," Mateo repeats, playing with his moustache. "I could sell my beans, there, Mr. Tom?"
The Menonite picks up a bean from Mateo’s bag and examines it between his thumb and forefinger. He smiles pleasantly at both of us, returns the bean, and leaves.

"Yes, Mateo," I answer, trying to hide a smile. I can't imagine Mateo in a supermarket, though. He'd be trampled staring at frozen foods.

A few tourists walk by and take a picture that includes Mateo and me. I wonder how I'll be explained to their friends.

I sat down with Mateo for more than just a visit. I’ve been to his house several times, and I feel we’re at ease around each other. I felt rude to ask about a trip to the bush in his home. I still feel awkward asking directly. He’s given so much to me already by his hospitality. Will I endanger our friendship by asking for more? But I don’t see the harm in just asking. I wonder if Joe would ask. I heard Joe bushwacked with someone, which really impressed Ben.

"Mateo, would you take me on a hike into the bush sometime?"

Mateo examines one of his own beans, maybe even the one the Menonite threw down. His expression doesn’t change. His eyes still seem a little sleepy to me. I begin to wonder if he heard me at all when he finally responds.

"The bush can be dangerous, Mr. Tom."

"I know, Mateo. But I’m very careful. I'd be all right, and I'd have you for a guide."

"Why do you want to go to the bush, Mr. Tom?"

A reasonable question. I know I want to go because it’s a place I imagine is like no place else. The animals, the trees, the flowers. But I also simply want Mateo to take me, and I don’t know how to tell him this. I want Mateo to trust me. I know I’m taking awhile to formulate my answer, and I wonder if he notices the time like I did waiting for his answer. But he seems content with his beans.

"It just sounds like an exciting place I’d like to see," I answer.
Mateo concentrates on the bean some more. I’m reminded that his ancestors used the cacao bean as currency. By the way Mateo marvels at his little black bean, it seems a fortune to him. I begin to wonder if he wishes I would take this bean for money, to stop my questions, when he has a question of his own.

"Mr. Tom, how would I do in a supermarket in the states?"

My repressed smile explodes over my lips, surging over into a chuckle.

"Supermarkets are huge, Mateo. There would be gringos running around everywhere. I think visiting a supermarket would be hard for you."

Mateo’s blank face creases into a smile, too. He flicks the bean back into the bag. "Maybe the bush would be like the supermarket for you, Mr. Tom."

I don’t respond. We sit quietly on the ground, watching the market rush.
5.

MR. WRIGHT
I went to talk to him because everyone told me I should. One morning, while I watched the sunrise on the Bay of Honduras, a Mayan girl padded her tiny tan feet up to my porch. I asked about Mr. Wright, and waited the customary amount of time for a Mayan child to overcome shyness and speak to a white man. But behind her anxious wringing of hands and nervous glances, she was all about business. After I bought one of her hand-woven baskets, she shot her vast brown eyes at me and answered that Mr. Wright was a well-known man. Then she ran away, as if ashamed to have interrupted a keen morning silence.

The next night, I sat listening to Garifuna drumming and watching the locals dance "the punta" at the Honeycomb bar. The Honeycomb was small enough to hold an unlimited amount of dancers, since lack of space when dancing the punta is a plus. The beat thumped the seasalted walls, and bare black feet beat, skinned and shook the aching planks. An occasional seabreeze would reinvigorate the dancers into a frenzy, as well as my favorite bandmember, a friendly man who played a turtle shell like he was born with it. I had not yet performed the punta without incurring the hysterics of locals, so I sat in a corner by a window sipping a Belikin, Belize's only beer. The punta is fantastic to watch, though; locals stand almost flat-footed and let their mid-sections gyrate and shake in unbelievable rhythms. The energy from the dancing flooded the room in waves. My table companion, a BDF (Belize Defense Force) officer drunk on bitters, roared over the noise that no white man knew the Maya better than Charles Wright.

Several others directed me towards Mr. Wright. While traveling through the bush on my dirtbike, I stopped at Blue Creek village to buy grapefruit at five for a shilling (U.S. 12 cents). The hut where I bought the fruit happened to be the home of the alcalde, the leader of the ten families there, and he nodded that Mr. Wright knew the ways of the Maya well. A Peace Corps volunteer in Punta Gorda, just finishing his tour and on his way to Yale to study marine biology, urged me to
speak to Mr. Wright because of his wealth of environmental knowledge. Three nuns at Nazareth convent in Jacinto village said he was a very kind man, "but he drank too much." Ben Juarez worked at Mr. Wright’s orange orchard as a child, and Ben’s face lit up at the mention of his name.

“He can tell you how a white man gets close to a Mayan, if anyone can,” Ben said with a smile.

So, one Saturday, after a quick brunch of cold tortillas and beans, I slip on my sandals and step onto Front Street to walk alongside the Caribbean Ocean. After bartering weakly for some limes at market, I stroll away from the crowd and back onto the quiet dirt roads that lace Punta Gorda together. Not wanting to arrive empty-handed, I pick up a bottle of One Barrel, a sweet sugarcane rum. I soon find the Belize Center for Environmental Studies (BCES) office where Charles Wright, British ex-patriot and soil conservation expert, has been spending his “last days” for the last three months.

“Hello?” I called through the doorway.

A harsh, three-beat clearing of the throat, then a cheerful, “Hello! Come in!”

Inside, I find a concrete foundation and walls to weather the 160" a year of rain that Punta Gorda gets, making the tiny town one of the wettest places on earth. The solid tin roof, though longer-lasting than the cahune thatch of the villages, would rattle like a banshee when the rainy season came. A mahogany table and chair, a low-lying bed and mattress, a napping labrador mutt with flies buzzing his ears, hundreds of tattered books on soil conservation, and Charles Wright occupies the room.

He invites me in warmly, as I’m told he does with all his guests since he moved to Belize some forty years ago. A tall man with a shock of white hair tarnished yellow in some streaks, he wears a cocky British grin and shaded glasses
that can't hide deep blue eyes. His steady gaze is just constant enough to reveal strong confidence and wavers nicely before being challenging. Because he wears white shorts, the paleness of his skin is evident. Both feet are swollen, which he explains comes from the medication "the Cuban doctor had given him." Physically, he appears unhealthy, but the levity of his spirit soars like that of a man half his eighty-two years.

I introduce myself as a Jesuit Volunteer interested in the Mayans. Mr. Wright eyes the rum in my bag. "Well, we better crack that open and have a talk then."

After he graduated from Leeds University in Yorkshire, England in 1936 with a Bachelor's of Science in Botany and Zoology, Mr. Wright traveled to New Zealand because it was "the one country in the world where I might escape the nepotic influences that had dogged my steps in England, Canada and Australia." After making acquaintances and connections on his own through the forest service, he struck out into the New Zealand bush and developed his remarkable theory that "plants might be able to condition the quality of soils to a degree that could determine the path of plant succession, and hence might become a significant factor for analyzing the composition of vegetation." This theory, along with his resourcefulness and indefatiguable work ethic, would eventually propel him into a leading theorist in soil conservation who would serve the United Nations and scores of countries in his lifetime.

He left New Zealand after twelve years of soil conservation work throughout the Dominion (North Auckland, Waikato, Hauraki, Coromandel, Solomon Islands), as well as a tour of duty with an artillery unit in the New Zealand Pacific Force in WW II.
"Quite an impersonal war, really," he recounts. "We'd walk around, and if we got the feeling some Japs were behind a rock or tree, we'd pour everything we had on top of it."

After the war, Mr. Wright asked for a leave of absence from the New Zealand government to survey the soil of British Honduras, as Belize was then known. Almost as soon as he reached British Honduras, he realized he had come across something special.

"I recognized that the Mayans knew more about soil than I did," he marvels, which he attributes mainly to the fact that they walk everywhere in their bare feet. He worked in British Honduras for two and a half years and published the results in his book "Land in British Honduras" in 1959.

I tell him all about my friend Mateo, how curious I am about the Mayans of Belize, how it's difficult to find information on them. Most of the books published on the Maya concern the Maya of Mexico and Guatemala, very few on the Maya of Belize. I'm hoping Mr. Wright can give me some insight on the forgotten Maya of the Toledo district. How much of their traditions have remained intact? Is it improper for a white man to go digging about Mayan business?

After some rum, I also tell him about my job, how I feel like a hypocrite teaching religion but not always willing to go to Mass myself. I tell him my interest in the Catholic Church's history in Belize.

Mr. Wright listens and sips his rum, occasionally picking a flea off his dog when she whines for help. He doesn't answer at first, just points to some books on a shelf that he thinks might be useful to me. I notice Eric Thompson's Maya Archaeologist.

"Why might Mateo not want to take me to the bush?" I'm not sure if Mr. Wright can answer this, but I decide to try.
He thinks there could be several reasons. Mateo simply could be concerned about my safety. Mr. Wright was hiking through the bush thirty years ago, when there were no trails, and he knows the dangers.

"We came across a TommyGoff once, a friend and I. Fierce creature. Luckily, my companion, a Mayan, wielded his machete well, and was able to strike the snake from behind, cutting it in two. But that head kept coming towards me, trying to seize onto anything. We had to chop the thing to bits."

Mr. Wright also explains that some Germans are looking to buy land in the Jalacte area. He knows that most Mayans don’t want their hunting and farming land sold to foreign investors, so maybe the natives in that area remain suspicious about gringos who want to explore the bush.

Also, a few years ago, a couple of graduate students asked for a tour of the bush around San Jose village and paid for a bush doctor to accompany them. The bush doctor pointed out and explained the variety of herbal remedies available in the jungle. The students took the information and sold it as a book, without, according to Mr. Wright, revealing that intention at any point to the village. The people were incensed, and the story spread throughout the villages, raising suspicion of strangers to new heights.

"Mateo probably just wonders why you want to go the bush," Mr. Wright says.

"I think it’s more that I want Mateo to trust me to take me to the bush," I admit.

Mr. Wright smiles. "I know that feeling. You can’t hold Mateo to that, though. If you want Mateo to sincerely want to take you, you have to just wait to see if he offers."

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Mr. Wright asks if I intend to write about my trip into the bush with Mateo, and if that's a reason I want to go. I'm not sure. I suppose it is. If Mateo asks me not to, though, I certainly won't.

Mr. Wright has a few visitors while we chat. First, a small Mayan boy who does errands for Mr. Wright. He's about twelve, shy but not painfully shy, as the girls are taught to be. He returns my smile with his own wide grin, instead of covering his face and giggling like I anticipate. Mr. Wright hands him a list of groceries and some money, and the boy returns within fifteen minutes with food and change. The next visitor is an older Mayan, in his early twenties. He's not barefoot and in old hand-me-downs like the first visitor, but wears new blue jeans, a T-shirt and a Nike hat and sneakers. He speaks excellent English and tells me he was taught at St. John's College in Belize City and now works for Mr. Wright. He brings a fax for Mr. Wright concerning BCES involvement in logging issues in the interior. After he leaves, Mr. Wright tells me our second visitor ran errands for him when he was young, too, and that Mr. Wright paid for the boy's college education.

I pour us each another glass of One Barrel. To my surprise, evening dims the view of the bay. I've sat and listened quite awhile and feel I should leave. I'm curious about one more thing from this man who knows so much about Belize.

"What's your favorite memory of the Mayans of Belize, Mr. Wright?"

There is only a slight hesitation. "Big Falls village needed some money, so we organized a fair. We took rum bottles, some with rum and some with cold tea that looked like rum, and buried them in the muddy bottom of the Mojo river for ten cents a dive. We also had a canoe race down the river, then the racers had to carry their canoes up the side of the falls, and then sprint to the end. We had a rice planting race - exactly 12 seeds in each hole, and a corn planting race as well with seven seeds - 3 for you, 3 for the animals, and one for the gods. We had a tree felling competition with logs that we strung up. Loads of caldo (Mayan stew),
corn, tortillas, plaintain, rum and juice were sold. We chose six men to walk through the crowd and write down the names of the prettiest girls. No one knew who the men were, so the ladies treated everyone nicely. The woman who got the most votes won. At 2 PM we set a greased pig through the crowd for children to chase. And —

A Belizean welcome of "Good Night" interrupts Mr. Wright's story. A stout Garifuna woman in her mid-forties enters. She wears a yellow-checkered apron and carries a worn straw bag. "You hungry tonight, Mr. Wright?" she asks.

"No, but my friend here may be, Miss Elizabeth."

Miss Elizabeth smiles at me, then smiles even larger when I nod. "Like conch fritters?" I nod again, lying, because I never had one. But I haven't eaten since brunch, and her bag smells delicious. My Belizean travel guide warns tourists never to eat from vendors because of "dubious cleanliness," but then, Mr. Wright isn't in their book as one of the "must see Belizean stops," which makes their knowledge of the region "dubious" to me. Not perfect logic on my part, but convincing enough for an empty stomach.

She pulls out some fried conch, small triangular flour pouches filled with conch, and, at a shilling a piece, I gobble down an even four. They taste greasy and spicy. Miss Elizabeth speaks a quick Creole, a laughing Garifuna, and some steady English to Mr. Wright, all of which he responds to in the Queen's English. I only catch the end of their conversation.

"Mistah Wright, you need lady tonight?" she asks. She has a gold tooth that flashes mischievously when she smiles.

"You know I'm too old for that!" Mr. Wright responds, slapping her on the backside as she leaves in howling glee. As I finish my last fritter, he finishes his last story exactly where he left off.
"The only mistake we had made with the Big Falls fair was the corn shucking race. The contestants paid to enter, then would sit and shuck corn and then run their basket to a judge who sat forty feet away. The old ladies were the fastest shuckers, but they kept being passed up by the young kids who could run. Mayans, especially old Mayan ladies, do not like the feeling they are being cheated. We had to give quite a lot of money back to mad old ladies. All in all, though, we made quite a bit, and we had the fair every year for several years, each year getting bigger with people from even further villages bussed in. I don't know why they don't have the fair anymore."

I thank Mr. Wright and leave him the rest of the rum bottle, which he finally agrees to take.

"I know how you Catholics like your rum!" he laughs.

I walk home with fritters and rum in my belly and Mr. Wright in my head. The Caribbean ripples in a wash of full moonlight. Massive and dark, textured clouds sit fixed in the sky, their edges pure silver in the moonlight. A gentle breeze, a favored companion in the Caribbean, supports me from behind. The waves gently lapping on the shore fill my head like the soft beginnings of a dream.
6.

MEDINA BANK COMMUNION
In 1549, Diego de Landa, a Franciscan friar from Spain, accepted the position as Bishop of the Yucatan in order to spread Catholicism among the Maya. Although some of his predecessors had used more gentle means of conversion, many had opted for extreme torture when met with resistance: beating, mutilation, scorching the flesh with wax tapers, and forcing water down a victim's throat until his stomach swelled, then standing him on his head until water mixed with blood ran from his mouth, nose and ears. These were all techniques of priests to help natives "see the light."

Although comfortable with employing such Inquisition tactics, Landa recognized what held the Mayan beliefs together: their very culture and traditions, much of that represented in their codices, or books. Landa struck at that, publicly burning thousands of books that certainly would have offered scholars today keys to decode the Mayan's undecipherable language.

I think of Landa's torture and destruction in the name of Catholicism as I ride to Medina Bank to instruct Mayan children in First Communion. I imagine Landa destroying the codices, handmade books of long strips of paper made from the bark of the wild fig tree and strengthened by natural gum and coated with white stucco. I imagine the torture, the forcing of beliefs, and the eradication of old ones.

I question why I'm in Belize and how I could teach religion, but comfort myself, strangely, by thinking I'm only trying to teach the Golden Rule. I feel like a hypocrite, teaching a faith I have little faith in myself. But my fascination with the Mayans, with Mateo in particular, keep me in Belize. I can't imagine that teaching the Golden Rule to children could hurt anybody. Most of the Mayans I meet seem devout Catholics, as were their parents and grandparents. I reason I'm not here to convert anyone, only to learn about a new culture and teach kids to play nice.
Medina Bank is a government school about two hours straight down the Southern Highway from Punta Gorda, half-way to Independence. Of the fifty or so schools in the Toledo District, thirty-two are Catholic. My job doesn’t require me to visit Medina Bank, but a chance meeting with its principal one day at market did. She explains that the village is mostly Catholic, that four boys and three girls need preparation for First Holy Communion. She’s a devout Catholic, and she asks if I can visit the school and help prepare the children. I agree, reluctant, though, to add another village when I feel I’m not adequately covering the ones I already have.

On my first trip to Medina Bank, I gather the seven children and we march down to the church. Dirt-floored and thatched, the hut resembles any Mayan house I’ve visited. Light cuts through the thatch in smokey shafts and reveals what makes the house a church: a row of rough wood benches and a crude cross on a table. I can smell the remnants of copal incense, sweet and woody, like a campfire of sugared logs.

The Christian cross became a meeting place for the ancient Mayan beliefs and Catholic beliefs. Mayans believed the rain gods, the Chacs, lived at the four corners of the earth. At each of these corners stood a tree, each one representing a crop and depicted in Mayan art as highly ornate crosses. When the Spanish came with their crucifixes, Mayans recognized the similarity, as well as the fact that the Catholic celebration of the cross occurred at the beginning of the rainy season, another association with Chac. Because of the strong connection of the cross between the two traditions, the cross became a living, breathing god for the Mayans, not simply a Christian symbol. Landa must have rejoiced over the Mayans acceptance of the crucifix but cursed the incorporation of their old, heathen ways. For me, the cross became one more striking example of how the Mayans adapt and endure.
The children, ranging from nine years old to fourteen, all fit on one bench facing me. I smile warmly, but the children return only nervous glances. For some of them, I may be the first gringo they’ve ever been alone with. It’s the first time that I feel Mayan children may not want to be around me.

I decide I should get an idea of how much knowledge of Catholicism the children have had already astonished me. The level of religious education of the school children in Belize. Seven year olds could recite the Ten Commandments when I could think of four out of order. Most kids remembered all seven sacraments, the four Gospels, their patron saint and his/her history, most of Jesus' miracles, where He was born and where He died. This knowledge is as much a product of schooling as the efforts of catechists like Mateo, who gather the community together to study the Bible and sing hymns when the priest doesn’t visit.

Of the seven children, only Ramiro, the oldest, speaks English. I quickly learn that he was raised Methodist, but his family had just converted to Catholicism. He has nervous hands and feet, unlike the others who sit like stone statues. His bright eyes sparkle under heavy brows. I speak through him and he relays to me what the others know.

I’m surprised by the calmness of the students, how attentive they are. I certainly don’t remember listening quietly to my fourth grade religion teacher. I wondered if Catholicism genuinely fascinated these children. During Holy Week processions in San Antonio, Thompson marveled at how Catholic mass engrossed Maya children, as well.

"Children were everywhere, but unlike European children under somewhat similar conditions, they stood immobile by their mothers, awed perhaps by the solemnity of a great occasion in the cycle of this once alien religion, which had
been rewoven into the warp of their old paganism to produce a new cloth which partook of both."

I watched the children, completely captivated, taking in my words. Were they weighing the benefits of Catholicism versus their ancestor’s religion which I knew very little about? Then I remembered who I was and realized I could have said anything to captivate them. If my fourth grade religion teacher were Mayan, I would have been captivated, too.

I'm surprised to find that the kids don't know any of my usual questions - Ten Commandments, Sacraments, etc. I move on to some easier ones, such as Christ’s birth, but I was still met with silence. I ask if anyone has been baptized Catholic, but no one knew that either. Ramiro suggests that he doesn’t think several of the children have been baptized. When I explain to him that children need to be baptized Catholic before they could receive Holy Communion, he relays this to the others. There’s a quick discussion in Ketchi among them, and the group seems to be prodding Ramiro in a direction he doesn’t want to go. Finally, Ramiro answers.

"We've all been baptized, Mr. Tom."

Insuring the orderly progression of the sacraments, one of my main charges, is difficult in the villages. Before children could receive First Communion, they need to produce a baptismal certificate. Some did, but those who came from Guatemala usually couldn't. In those instances, written or verbal verification from the parents is needed.

Once I was led to a house by a candidate for First Communion in order to ask his parents if he had been baptized. I stooped into the thatch hut and found a couple in their late thirties, the man lying on a hammock with his machete next to him, the woman kneeling and preparing corn tortillas. We exchanged smiles, and the child quickly explained, in Ketchi, why he brought a gringo home.
I'll never forget the growing look of horror on both of the parent’s faces. The child spoke a little English, and his parents none, so something must have been lost in the translation. The father slipped out of his hammock and retreated to his wife’s side, who had stopped making tortillas, paralyzed by her son’s news, holding a tortilla over the comal. The child still smiled at me.

“Felippe,” I asked quietly. “What did you tell them?”

“Maestro, I told them you are here to get our baptismal certificates and if we don’t have them we are no longer in the Church.”

After several more explanations and reassurances, we were all smiles again, though the father insisted I bless the house before I leave. I tried to explain I wasn’t a priest, that only the clergy can bless houses. But they insisted, the father almost dropping to his knees to beg. I figured I had done enough damage, and a blessing was the least I could do to make amends.

“Please, Lord, bless this house,” I said slowly, making the sign of the cross in the air, “and bless these good people in it. May they have much better luck with visitors.”

I left in hurry, certain Bishop Landa would have been proud of the Catholicism I re-instilled through fear into the lost natives. I wasn’t so sure the Bishop would have liked my blessing, though.

I ask the kids in Medina Bank to bring their birth certificates, a written note, or just to check with their parents (I stopped going to people's houses after I frightened those parents) on whether or not they had been baptized. I return the next week to find one certificate, Ramiro’s, and six affirmative nods. I thank them and continue with the first lesson.

Belizean Catholicism is different than the Catholicism I grew up with in the United States. I’m from an Irish-American family and went to Catholic school from 1st grade through college, and two of my great uncles were priests. In the
States, we were "lunch-tray" Catholics, to borrow a term from an old aunt: we picked and chose what we wanted to believe in and when we wanted to attend Church, still calling ourselves Catholic like the Pope wouldn’t mind. Not in Punta Gorda. You attended mass every Sunday because you were supposed to, no questions asked.

The three priests who ran the parish in Punta Gorda were some of the hardest working men I have ever met. Many different religions, Christian and non-Christian, constantly moved into southern Belize to convert the Maya, a process that had started hundreds of years ago. The three priests tried their best to keep the Catholic flock the same number or increase the fold if possible, but it was sometimes hard to ascertain just what religion the mysterious, malleable Maya practiced on any given day. Many still practiced their ancient religious beliefs, or simply incorporated teachings from whatever religion happened to be passing by.

Fr. Conroy, at 55 the youngest of the three priests, hiked to the villages and celebrated mass. Because of an intense rainy season a few years ago, he wasn’t able to reach Connejo Creek for several months. When he did reach the village, he discovered the whole population had converted to First Day Adventist.

“We thought you forgot about us, Father,” the alcalde explained.

My own job could be approached as a mission. In the past, it often was. Joe reportedly rode from village to village with a guitar and taught the children songs for mass. His guitar playing remained almost as legendary as his hiking. I don’t know how many people asked me if I played guitar “like Joe did.” Joe also seldomly missed Mass, a habit not forgotten by anyone in the parish, unfortunately.

I have four visits to prepare the kids for First Holy Communion. Because of the short time time and the language barrier, I scrap the usual lessons and concentrate on what I think is the essential teaching of Holy Communion: Jesus died for us because he loved us. Not to make us feel bad or guilty, but because he
loved us. I suppose I still have the “lunch-tray” approach, even in Belize, picking out only what I like best. With all my doubt about Catholicism, the Christian teaching of love is one that I did not doubt and did not see how it could harm.

_Do unto others as you would have them do unto you._

I try to keep this philosophy in mind when dealing with others, and the Golden Rule certainly affected how I approached my relationship with Mateo. Mateo is a catechist, really the back-bone of the Church in the villages since Fr. Conroy visits only once a month at most. I wonder if Mateo would approve of my lunch-tray approach to Catholicism, but I’m afraid to ask. I don’t want to offend him or hurt his opinion of me. Since I’m a Jesuit Volunteer, I’m certain he, along with everyone else, believes I’m a devout, Church-going Catholic.

I had discovered that trying to abide by the Golden Rule in Belize was different than following the rule in the States. The Golden Rule seemed to imply a knowledge of who you were dealing with, which I didn’t have. I often didn’t return my bowl when I ate in the States; to not do so in Mayan culture is very rude. I asked Mateo to take me to the bush—was this right or wrong according to the Golden Rule? I can’t step inside of Mateo’s skin to deem whether or not it is. If I was Mateo, would I want a gringo to ask me about the bush? But I can’t understand being Mateo, and I doubt he can understand being me.

On my last visit to Medina Bank, the children seem a bit anxious, an anxiety that increases as the lesson draws to a close. I’m edgy and nervous like the children, too. The heat and smoke of the church smother me. Sometimes a student asks Ramiro a question in Ketchi, and he answers in Ketchi. I wonder what the question is, but feel rude to ask, or just too nosey. I want to ask them about their own religion, if they practice Mayan customs at home, but feel that’s a question I
should ask their parents. Without terrifying them with the prospect of expulsion to Guatemala.

"Are there any questions?" I ask at the close of the lesson.

Every child looked at Ramiro, who squirms under their stares.

"Yes, Mr. Tom. They...we... would like to know... how it happens."

"How it happens?"

"Yes...and what we do."

In all my theorizing and postulating about God's love for them, I forgot to describe the actual process of Holy Communion. And Ramiro's wavering voice brings me back to my own First Holy Communion, and how terrified I was of the prospect.

I remember my Second Holy Communion better than my first. My Uncle Tom, a Jesuit priest and my namesake, gave me my First Communion in a private ceremony. My Second Communion did not go so smoothly. A different Church, a different priest, and I was now just a very young boy walking up without my parents standing behind me with a hand on my shoulders. We were at Christ the King Church in Dallas, which still had the practice of having the receiver of communion kneel, open his or her mouth, and wait for the wafer to be placed on the tongue as an altar boy held a shiny gold platter underneath the chin to insure no crumbs touched the ground.

I remember kneeling and holding my tongue out, waiting for my turn. The priest held the wafer before me, but paused before offering me communion. I can still see his large, bald head behind the round flat bread he held before me. "Have you received First Holy Communion, young man?"

"Guuh-huh," I answered, forgetting to pull in my tongue.

"What did he say?" the priest asked the altar boy.

"He said 'yes,' Father."
My memory is that he gave me another good looking over, sighed, and reluctantly put the wafer in my mouth after what felt like five minutes, but I'm sure it couldn't have been as bad as that. But remembering that feeling of uncomfort, of fidgeting on my knees, helped me understand what the children in Medina Bank really wanted to know.

Luckily, a friend from Nebraska had just sent me a Valentine's Day care package that included Smarties candies, which I brought with me to give to the kids as a reward for their attention and hard work. Much smaller than communion wafers, but they'd still do. Bishop Landa probably rolled over in his grave because of what happened next.

I tell Ramiro to explain to the kids that we would have a practice mass. I would act as the priest, and the Smarties would act as communion.

"But I'm not a real priest, the candies are not wafers, and we aren't really having a mass." I stress this point, and I think Ramiro stresses that in his explanation.

I instruct the children to gather in two lines outside the church before mass, where they'll enter in front of the priest. The girls would sit on the left and the boys on the right, since all the masses I had attended separated male and female on either side of the church. I explain two readings, a Gospel, a homily (mentioning the First Communion candidates, I hoped), the blessing of the sacrament, and then Communion would come, with much singing in between. The children would be the first to go to Communion, and I demonstrate how they should walk down the row, line up between the pews, and then receive Holy Communion in their outstretched hands.

"Father will say, ‘The Body of Christ’ and hold the wafer in front of you. You cup your hands, receive communion, place the wafer in your mouth, say ‘Amen,’ make the sign of the cross and return to your seat and pray."
Questions arose about this procedure, more questions from Mayan kids than I had ever had. What do we pray for when we return to our seats? What is the wafer made out of? What does it taste like? Why don't we get wine, too? Does Father ever run out of wafers - if so, what happens? I'm impressed by the children's practicality in this matter. Are these the type of questions Bishop Landa faced?

We run through a practice Holy Communion with myself as the priest handing out Smarties as communion. I don't know how the priests would react to my method if they saw what I'm doing. I'm certain Bishop Landa would pull out the hot tongs out on me. But I don't know a better way of demonstrating to the children what will happen.

I've never passed out communion before - even fake communion. Each child has a different reaction to accepting the "host." Some stare at the candy, forgetting to cup their hands, while others refuse to look up and just raise their hands in asking. Every one of them rush back to their seats, clasping their hands in prayer as they return. I asked each of them to clasp their hands because of my own experience with communion once.

In fourth grade, while returning back to my pew after receiving communion, I kept my hands in my pockets. Sr Mary waited for me, and I smiled at her, even though I couldn't see her face (My eye-sight had steadily deteriorated for that whole year, a fact I didn't reveal to my parents either because I didn't want glasses or I thought deteriorating eyesight happened to everyone, I forget which). Sr. Mary was the kindest sister I knew, and I thought it sweet she waited for me at the end of my row. I just beamed at her, and became frightened when her face did come into focus and she frowned at me in displeasure. She might as well have had fangs- the sight of her frown was so frightening to me. What's more, she asked me to step outside the Church, during Mass, instead of returning to kneel.

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and pray for forgiveness. This sister was upset. I could only imagine what horrible thing I had done.

She explained sternly, but somehow sweetly, that I should never return from communion with my hands in my pockets. Utterly disrespectful. I should hold my hands clasped in prayer. I can still see her black, wooden rosary beads swinging from her white habit and her veiny hands clasped in prayer. All of the other nuns I knew, in this circumstance, would enforce their edict with at least a slap of the hand with a ruler. Sister Mary knew this, too, but she never hit anyone. Feeling the gravity of the situation, though, she reluctantly asked me to extend my hand, upon which she gave a quick nervous slap with her own hand. The other nuns, I think, would have thought Sister Mary and I were exchanging “low-fives.” She turned quickly away, and I knew the slap hurt her more than me.

Twenty years later, I asked Mayan children to keep their hands clasped out of respect for Sister Mary.

The children all suck thoughtfully on their Smarties with heads bent and hands clasped, except for Ronaldo, the youngest and smallest of the group. Ronaldo pretends to put the candy in his mouth, but I catch the bright spot in his hand as he sits down. I keep an eye on him, and, when he thinks I’m not looking, he slides the candy into his pocket. I wonder if he saves the candy for later because it’s candy, or because he misunderstood my explanation and he wants to take the Body of Christ home with him.

I catch a ride with Fr. Ring and his driver, Geraldo, out to Medina Bank the day of First Holy Communion. I inform Fr. Ring of the seven First Holy Communion recipients and three baptisms, and he seems pleased. Whenever I have lunch with the priests, which is fairly often because of their hospitality, I notice
they enjoy comparing how many First Communions and Baptisms they each have
celebrated that day.

"Seven baptisms and three First Holy Communions in San Antonio," Fr.
Ring would announce between spoonfulls of tapioca pudding, his favorite.

"Nine baptisms in town," Fr. Weber would respond. A smile between the
two of them, and then we all continued eating.

I like riding in Father's truck because I sit in the back and catch the scenery
I missed when riding my bike. The road from Punta Gorda to Dangriga is slowly
being paved by a Costa Rican construction company. With the completion of the
road, the Pan American Highway, from Canada to Argentina and all points
between, would be complete. The road supposedly will be finished in about ten
years, but the Maya council headed by Julian Cho blocks a large tract of the road
construction. The Maya Council claims the Belizean government has not attempted
to gauge the social impact of a highway on the Mayans of southern Toledo. Will
the paved road mean more logging? Will it mean more tourists into the Mayan
villages? The roads to the villages would still remain unpaved, but the newly paved
Southern highway would certainly make the villages more accessible.

I felt almost guilty enjoying the smooth hum of concrete under the wheels.
I tried to imagine Jalacte twenty years from now, after the nearby highway road is
finished. Would Mateo and Matilda resemble the Mayans of Guatemala that I saw
in Antigua, surrounded by tourists and selling beads and pottery and jewelry? I
picture their home, and lines of tourists paying to stay there for the "Maya
Experience." I can’t picture the Acks happy surrounded by so many gringos.
Maybe I just want them for myself.

We have Mass in Big Falls, which runs long, so we reach Medina Bank
late. The small church in Medina Bank is packed. The smell of burning comal
stuffs the church like cotton. The sun burns through the thatch and glistens the
faces of mothers nursing their babies. A quiet flutttering of handwoven fans to cool
the congregation.

The principal of Medina Bank told me a few days before that the male
candidates would wear black pants and a white shirt and the girls white dresses.
But when I poke my head in the church, the whole crowd wears traditional Mayan
garb. I'm glad the parents spared the extra expense and that the children reflect
their own culture, but I have difficulty spotting the candidates themselves.

The candidates were supposed to gather outside the Church and proceed in
just ahead of Father, but I only find Ramiro outside. A flash of concern dizzies me.
How would Bishop Landa handle this insolence? I decide not to imagine his
reaction.

"Ramiro, where are the others?"

"They're inside with their families, Mr. Tom."

"Didn't we decide you all would meet outside and progress in together?"

"Yes, Maestro... but they don't like that now."

I told Fr. Ring the candidates would walk in before him, so he's waiting
patiently in the hot Belizean sun. I don't want to run inside and hunt down the
seven in the packed church and drag them out if they don't want to progress.
Maybe that's what Bishop Landa would do, but I decide Sister Mary wouldn't.

I tell Ramiro to take a seat inside, and I apologize to Fr. Ring, telling him
the kids are already inside. He smiles pleasantly and says, "No problem." I
sometimes forget he's lived in Belize for fifty years.

Once Mass starts, I have trouble spotting all seven candidates. I count five,
possibly, but locating them is hard sitting behind everyone and looking at only the
back of heads. I hope all the candidates attend mass.

Fr. Ring's sermon knock me back a bit. I think Bishop Landa would agree
with him, but I can't swallow the message. "If your children are not baptized, and
they die, they will go to hell." That's the one line I remember in the sermon. I know Fr. Ring is the oldest and most conservative of the priests, but I never heard him take the sacraments so literally. I try to remember if Catholics believe in purgatory, but I can't remember for some reason. I watch the audience for a reaction to Fr. Ring's proclamation, especially watching the women who nurse babies. But the wings don't miss a beat, just keep their steady mission of cooling down mothers and babies. Either they didn't understand Father, or they weren't listening in the first place. Or, if they did understand, maybe they just knew better.

The music is wonderful, five guitarists strumming and singing in Ketchi. When I traveled north to Belize City, the Medina Bank band often traveled from their home to play at other communities. I remember the bus from Punta Gorda stopping in Medina Bank and a whole horde of guitarists piling on. A rastafrian in the back of the bus borrowed a guitar and played Bob Marley for two hours.

The music swells right up to communion, and I keep an eye on the communion line. Ramiro goes and I count at least three others. The only one I spot who does not go was Ronaldo. He sits next to his parents the entire mass and doesn't move to receive communion.

After mass, I catch up with Ramiro and ask him to come with me. I want him to ask Ronaldo why he didn't go to communion. I don't want this to be my Bishop Landa interrogation. I'm just sincerely interested why he chose not to go.

I can tell Ronaldo is nervous when he sees me approach, so I smile in a friendly way to ward off his worries. Doesn't seem to help. Ramiro asks him my question, and Ronaldo, after hesitating, mumbles something to Ramiro. Ramiro shakes his head disapprovingly, and Ronaldo becomes more upset.

"What did he say, Ramiro?"

"He says he didn't go because you didn't go, Mr. Tom."
I don’t know what to say. It’s true. I did not go to communion. I was so busy watching for who went, I forgot to go myself. I feel embarassed. I’ve scared an innocent Mayan boy. Who was I to disapprove of another Catholic’s behavior, I who was often the biggest hypocrite of all? Was I following the Golden Rule?

I wiped the dust from my eyes and told Ronaldo to get communion the next time he wants to, and that I’ll do the same. I just wish I could tell him second communion will be easier than first.
7.

TEACHER’S DAY
Every year, Belize National Teacher's Union (B.N.T.U.), sets aside money for a BBQ, beer and music on One-Mile Beach for Teacher's Day. I can hear the punta music thumping a half-mile away, and recognize most of the smiling, laughing faces from a hundred yards away. The swishing and stomping of punta dancing, the happy chatter of Creole, the colorful Caribbean dress, and the sweet smell of coconut juice and rum all produce an exciting vortex that pulls me in. At first, I'm overwhelmed by the rush of sound and noise, then a friend hands me a Belikin and winks. I'm anchored safely.

The party runs her course until late afternoon, then several of us jog half-drunk to the soccer field for a game. I'm looped enough to play barefoot like everyone else. The ball, half-pumped and peeling in patches, feels like kicking an old purse. The field rolls in bumps, almost as uneven as the sea it sits by. I score a goal and feel pretty proud, or, in Creole, "big up myself."

After the game, most everyone goes home, except for a group of three bachelors with the last bottle of rum. Mr. Fuentes, president of the Toledo Teacher's Union and principal of Santa Cruz R.C. school; Mr. Gordon, vice-principal of Toledo Community College; and Mr. Gonzalez, district representative for the PUP government. The men are old friends and invite me to stay and help them with their run. I'm thrilled by the invitation - all three are well-known in the district, hard-workers and good men.

The rum drains steadily and the conversation sways towards politics. The three men are Garifuna and speak Creole with flashing eyes, emotional highs and lows and spectacular hand gestures. To end their point, each man slaps the ground as if setting down the eleventh commandment. I'm enthralled with watching and listening. They don't show the kind of emotion that I've seen in the states regarding politics; most of my friends, including myself, rarely even vote.
Most of the discussion focuses around the two opposing Belizean party platforms, the United Democratic Party (U.D.P.) and the People's United Party (P.U.P.). After a lot of round-about arguing, my interest wanes. I've heard most of the arguments before and sit half-interested, staring at the beach. A pile of conch shells, their inhabitants cleaned out and probably frying at that moment, sat on the beach, waves washing over them. I'm reminded that Mayans used conch shells as trumpets during war and dance, and an experienced conch shell blower could be heard for miles.

"Dat Malaysian logging is big problem, man," Mr. Fuentes says. Mr. Gonzalez and Mr. Gordon stop talking over each other and stare at Fuentes. I look away from the conch shells and sit up. Mr. Gordon pretends to roll up his sleeves to go to work, and Mr. Gonzalez spits in each hand and rubs them together gleefully.

"Les go, boy!" Mr. Gonzalez roars. Logging the rain forest is older than Belize, but the topic of Malaysian logging remains white-hot in Punta Gorda.

The information that I know about Malaysian logging comes from an article recently published by U.S. News and World Report ("Cutting and Dealing" U.S. News and World Report, March 10, 1997) The Belizean government, in an attempt to repay tremendous national debt, sold the rights to more than 500,000 acres of forest in Toledo to Malaysian logging companies. A very controversial deal. Proponents claimed logging will create jobs and revenue for Belizeans. Dissidents claimed that Malaysians have a horrible track record of moving into poor, undeveloped countries and logging without much regard for environmental regulations.

The Maya Council, headed by Julian Cho, argued that the Belizean government had no right to sell indigenous land and sued to bar the deal. The suit is pending in world court, but the logging continues. Some Mayans in the villages...
of San Pedro Colombia, Silver Creek and San Jose, areas close to the logging, already complained of clogged creeks and water too muddy to drink. Charles Wright, interviewed in the U.S. News and World Report article, noted that irresponsible cutting practices were already doing “irreparable harm.”

Mr. Fuentes, principal of a Mayan school, seems sympathetic to the Mayan plight.

"Dey eat from the bush, get medicine from de bush, what dey gonna do without da bush? Da bush go, da Maya go. And dey here first, after all."

Mr. Gordon looks to the sky and howls.

"Belize need money, man! Some dos Mayan you talk 'bout, dey de ones logging right now! You caan be serious!"

"I been out dere, man," Mr. Gonzalez agrees. "I seen what dos loggers do. Dey got all kind a people watch dem. Dey follow da rules. Dey only log where dey allowed, you know."

The men holler their opinions for awhile with much clapping and footstopping.

"What you think, maestro?" Mr. Fuentes asks me.

I remember that moment as the first time someone asked my opinion, an outsider, about Belize's business. I spent most of my time in Belize listening. Maybe I enjoy listening because of all the time I spend listening quietly at Mateo's.

I had been considering what effect logging might have on Mateo. The Malaysians, with support from the government, had recently bulldozed a road from Jalacte to San Vicente. The move made the Malaysians very popular. What could be almost a two hour hike in the rainy season was now cut in half by the wide road. Once workers placed a few culverts in creeks, vehicles could travel to San Vicente. I myself looked forward to riding my motorcycle and reaching San Vicente in twenty minutes.
But a road meant logging would eventually follow. I worried about the Ack's water, Mateo's hunting, and the Mayan remedies in the jungle. I worried about the bush, the magnificent seiba trees, the mysterious jaguar, the screams of the howlers. The life of the jungle, the sounds, smells and sights, was something I had never experienced before. I considered them, in my short experience, irreplaceable magic. And what would Mateo do without the bush?

The rum gives me courage to speak my mind plainly that day.

"I think the logging will do more harm than good. The Mayans use the bush for so many things, like Mr. Fuentes said. I think the government should respect the Mayan's right to their land, or the whole country will lose out."

The three men look at each other, each face waiting for a reaction. Mr. Gonzalez, sitting on my right, nudges me with the rum bottle and says, "Dat how Columbus handle it?"

His eyes disappear and his mouth opens up into a howl of laughter. The other men join, and Mr. Gonzalez falls off the bench from laughing so hard. A little shocked at first, I bury my embarrassment in my hands. The pats on my back eventually pop a smile out on my face, and the sudden gleam of the rum bottle in front of my eyes shows me I'm still "cool cool, man." They just needed to put the American visitor in his place.
8.

HOUSE BUILDING
They construct a wood frame. Meanwhile, men on the ground prepare the cahune palms, cutting and breaking the fronds apart. They hand them to the men who stand on the frame and weave and tie the palms into a roof. They build the roof before the walls. With the majority of the men working, they'll complete this house in four hours. The roof will hold out water and sun for up to eight years.

I watch the men of Jalacte construct a house on a sunny, dry-season day in April. Tradewinds have blown away the last clouds of the rainy season, and the sun bakes straight down from an endless blue sky. Mateo sits with the older men on the ground, methodically weaving. I already asked if I could help, but he declined. Once I watch for awhile, I understand why he says no. I'm not sure I'd have the agility to stand on a wood beam and hold a twenty-pound palm like the younger men. Eduardo, a twenty-something villager I know from San Vicente, walks a cross-beam with a palm in one hand and waves to me with the other. And I don't think I could prepare the palms on the ground with the dexterity of the older men, either. I watch Mateo's hands with such fascination, looping and weaving intricately to make the roof stronger and stronger, that I don't notice he's watching me. We exchange smiles. I realize I would get in the way of the work, like Arnulfo, who leans against me.

Arnulfo and I watch for awhile, then retreat to the river for a bath. The sun simmers just overhead; we have time for a swim, maybe a few Pepsi's, and then we're invited to return to the new house for caldo and tortillas.

I admire the community effort that goes into building a house. The men build the house, and the women prepare a huge meal for everyone. But I didn't help build the house or prepare the meal, so I feel bashful about eating. I don't think anyone thinks I'm a freeloader. I'm a teacher, and villagers always invite teachers to community meals. But I'd like to contribute in some way. Mayans center their communities around everyone pitching in.
Arnulfo and I bathe in the river. I heard Julian Cho, head of the Maya Council, explain once that the men and women use the river at set times, the women in the morning and the men in the evening. Children bathe at any time, so, again, I feel like a child. Not in a bad way, though. Arnulfo curls up into a ball, and I repeatedly shotput him into the deepest part of the river. His brown gleaming body flashes in the sun and then disappears into the green layers of the river. He emerges within seconds next to me, his large eyes and laughing mouth asking for another flight. Several other children notice our play, shyly patrolling the water around us. Soon, though, they join, and I'm bombing the deep green river repeatedly.

We eventually bathe and wash, then head up to the store for a cold Pepsi. The store sits on a hill, adjacent to the one where the men build the new house. They have at least another half-hour before completion. I spot Eduardo scaling the frame of the house, and Mateo weaving on the ground.

One of the teachers at the Catholic school, Mr. Gonzalez, joins us for a Pepsi. He is in his mid-twenties and of East Indian descent. We talk about his religion classes and the States, but mostly we watch the men work.

Still eager to contribute to the community project, I decide I want to buy a case of Pepsi for the workers. The Pepsi would be my contribution, my way of earning a meal. I ask Mr. Gonzalez if such a gift would be appropriate, and he smiles. "I tink dey like dat very much, Mr. Tom." I talk to the shopkeeper and find I can get a case of Pepsi for 24 Belize dollars. I have just enough.

By the time the case of Pepsi is ready, the men have almost finished the house. Mr. Gonzalez and I carry the case over. The men, probably about thirty in number, stop working and stare. The murmer of Ketchi begins, but I can't figure out if the tone sounds pleased or surprised. I hope I haven't "shamed" or upstaged
anyone, especially the women who prepare the meal. We drop the case in front of the house, and I find Mateo.

"Mateo, I thought I'd buy some cold drinks for the workers. Is that all right?"

Mateo rubs the back of his neck and grimaces. Whether from work or my request, I don't know.

"Yes, Mr. Tom, that's fine."

Seems fine, but I begin to wish I had asked him first.

The men finish their work and get their bowls of caldo. I wait until everyone has their bowl, then enter the house where the women are serving. Almost all the wives must be here, for the house is cramped with women. I smile, but no one looks directly at me, just mostly at my ankles. Why my ankles, I don't know. While dodging the low beams of the thatch house, I weave my way through Mayan ladies sitting. I often bump my head in Mayan houses, and once I knocked my head on a beam protruding from the kitchen in Mateo's house. The whole family rushed to see if I was all right, and I tried to assure them I felt fine. The next time I visited their house, Mateo had sawed the beam off.

When I return, no one has touched the Pepsi, but are all gathered around the case, staring at the bottles. I panic. Why don't they drink the Pepsi? Did I break some cultural rule of the Maya? Have I insulted the village? The men don't look upset, just a bit perplexed. I find Mateo.

"Mateo, what's wrong? Why isn't anyone drinking?"

Looking a bit anxious himself, Mateo finally looks into my anxious eyes. I'd give anything to know what he thought at that moment.

"No bottle opener, Mr. Tom."

In my rush to get the case and worry about offending anyone, I forgot the bottle opener! No cultural faux pas against Mayan culture here, just an
absent-minded, oversensitive American not properly representing his country's massive intellect concerning technological advances. Luckily, Mr. Gonzalez has an opener on his key-chain. He brandishes the opener, and the crowd of men smile approvingly. The case goes quickly. Shaking my head at my mistake, I sit and eat my caldo and Pepsi next to Mateo.
9.
SANTA CRUZ HIKE
“Tomorrow, Mr. Tom, I take you to the bush.”

Mateo says this one night while I swing in a hammock in his house. He looks me straight in the eye and makes no hesitant gestures before speaking. He has some corn to sell in Guatemala, and that he’d take a Mayan footpath trail through the bush and across the border. We can reach Santa Cruz, sell his corn, and get back all in one day.

“Really, Mateo?” I ask.

He smiles and nods. But I’m worried.

“I don’t have my passport with me, Mateo. No I.D. or papers.”

“I don’t have papers, either, Mr. Tom,” Mateo jokes. He explains I won’t need my passport, that people from Jalacte come and go across the border everyday. No one even worries about the occasional gringo, either.

He smiles at my excitement and tussles my hair like I’m a six-year old, which, in Belize, in many ways, I am.

Most of my knowledge about Guatemala I draw from a book I’m reading, I, Rigoberta Menchu. Fr. Phil saw me reading the book a few weeks ago and said, “Don’t bring that book into Guatemala.” A testimonial by a Guatemalan Mayan woman, I, Rigoberta Menchu describes the oppression and torture of the Mayans by the Guatemalan government. The graphic violence, especially the scene where Menchu’s little brother is slowly tortured to death before her eyes, is haunting in its power.

It’s not only a book makes me a little nervous about traveling into Guatemala. The U.S. Embassy just recently lifted a warning for all American citizens to avoid travel in Guatemala. A few months ago, some Jesuit Volunteers in Belize City were held up at gunpoint in broad daylight in Guatemala City. A while before that, in the Peten region of Guatemala, bandits stormed out of the bush and stopped a bus with some volunteers on board. The whole bus had to unload,
chickens and all, and my friends said they felt their whiteness keenly when everyone backed away from them and the bandits looted them first. The civil unrest that tortured Guatemala for years had subsided with the recent peace treaty between the government and rebels, but the country could still be a very dangerous place for tourists. But I couldn’t pass up a trip to the bush with Mateo.

Why did he suddenly decide to take me to the bush? Had I won his trust somehow? But I knew what really went on inside of Mateo would always remain a mystery to me, no matter how much time we spent together. I can describe how he moved and talked, but that’s the most I can say for sure about him. I know that was one reason he fascinated me.

The next morning, while we prepare to travel, Mateo explains to me that many Mayans fled into Belize because of the oppression described in Menchu’s book.

“Hard to get good land in Guatemala. Very hard to feed a family.”

Mateo explained that rich landowners control most of the farms in Guatemala, and Mayans have little choice but to work on small plots of land they could not own. Belize does not have this system and did not have the army to control their own borders, so Mayans can move into Belize and plant their own milpas. Guatemalan Mayans have moved into Belize for generations.

Mateo and I leave his house by eight o’clock, accompanied by his mule weighed down on both sides by bags of com. For Mateo to sell in Punta Gorda, he would have to pay for bus passage for himself and his corn. By selling in Guatemala, he saves bus passage and actually receives a better price for his corn, without having to pay any duty or tarriff along Belize’s unprotected borders.

The May day is baked hot and dry. The cylindrical gouges of horses, the same type that I stumbled through on my first hike to Poite many months ago, are now bone-dry pits. We start down from his house and walk through the village,
past the spring by the bottom of the hill where children fill their water buckets. The trail joins the main road through the village, and we pass the school and the main shop. We reach the top of the first hill in town, and Mateo points west.

"That's Guatemala, Mr. Tom."

I see green hills rolling away from us but spot thatch huts dotted on one of them. I've seen these houses before, but always assumed they resided in Belize. I guess from reading Menchu's accounts, Guatemala seemed a distant, strange, violent place in my mind. I didn't realize just how close Guatemala lies.

"How far to Santa Cruz, Mateo?"

"One hour."

Milpas cover most of the distance between us and the thatch houses in Guatemala. But behind the thatch houses, like a dark wave ready to crash, looms the high bush, climbing thick up the face of the low mountains. I spot the tiny white dots of cranes floating above the bush, revealing its immensity. I feel a rush of excitement. I imagine we'll cut through Santa Cruz and climb through the overgrown hills stuffed with vines and predators. I look at Mateo, and his easy smile reassures me. The machete hanging from his side helps, too.

We leave the main road that heads back to Punta Gorda and take a trail down to a creek. Like many creeks and rivers in Toledo, this creek will probably disappear underground, burrowing through the soft limestone earth to surface again later. Hopping along some well-placed stones to the opposite bank, I spot a few women scrubbing clothes pausing to consider us. Mateo looks back at me and smiles.

"Now we take a trail through the bush, Mr. Tom."

Bush? I think that's what my face replies to him, but I'm not sure he reads my expression. I don't see any bush to speak of. We veer to our left and follow the
creek along a little used path. Covered by short thick brush, the ground is still damp, and branches twined tight with ivy cover our heads.

This is the low bush, not the high bush that I'm interested in. Ben and I have already walked some trails like this. I'm sure Mateo knows this. Whenever he and I talk about the bush, we talk about the high bush. Is he hoping to quiet my petitions of a trip to the bush by an hour hike through low bush? He turns around to check on me every few minutes, and I feel as if he checks to see if I'm enjoying myself. I hide my disappointment. This isn't what I hoped for, but entering Guatemala by a Mayan footpath still excites me. And we spot a toucan, ridiculous rainbow snout and all. A rare sight on a footpath, since they don't prefer human company.

At about the mid-point of our walk we stop for a rest. We pass through a broken half of a fence and lean against the post. I ask Mateo when we would enter Guatemala. He looks at me, then at the fence, then at me.

"We just did, Mr. Tom."

I assumed the fence marked a farm, but Mateo explains that is the border. I'm in Guatemala.

As if right on cue, three soldiers crest the hill before us. They wear camo camouflage and each carry a rifle. Menchu's description of Guatemalan soldiers abducting and torturing villagers leap into my mind.

"Guatemalans?" I ask Mateo nervously.

"No...Belizeans," he replies quietly. As they approach, I see why Mateo assumes the soldiers are Belizean. They're black.

The soldiers appear friendly enough, given their surprise at finding a gringo in this area. They ask what business I have in Guatemala, and I explain I'm a Jesuit Volunteer from Punta Gorda on vacation with a friend. I've spoken with Belize Defense Force (BDF) soldiers before, and they respond well to a respectful
address. Very similar to the Texas Highway Patrol I encountered as a teenager.
The fact that I'm a volunteer for the Church still has some clout with many
Belizeans, especially when repeated frequently. I know I'm kissing some serious
ass, and I wonder what Mateo makes of my behavior.

"Yes, sir, we'll be back in Belize today."

"No, sir, we are not carrying any electronic items to sell in Guatemala."

"Yes, sir, I am a U.S. citizen. And a Jesuit volunteer for St. Peter Claver
Church."

I fight the urge to salute them. Luckily, they don't ask for identification,
lucky for me since I don't carry any. They inform me that upon entering Santa
Cruz, I need to check in at Tree Tops Station, the BDF outpost.

"All foreigners in Guatemala need to check in for their own protection,"
the soldier in charge explains to me in excellent English. "Guatemala is not always
kind to strangers."

"Absolutely, sir."

Not once do they address Mateo. Mateo stands silently still, and I have to
check during the conversation if he's still there. I can't read the expression on his
face - a new one to me. Some kind of a neutral acceptance, I suppose.

Once the soldiers trudge away behind us, I remind Mateo that I don't have
any I.D. I ask him if we should check in at Tree Tops. He watches the soldiers, his
arms crossed on his chest, not responding until they completely disappear.

"Do you want to leave Guatemala before dark?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Then we don't stop at Treetops....sir," he answers. I laugh, impressed at
Mateo's wit.

Santa Cruz reminds me of some of the barrios I saw as a kid when my
family traveled over the Texas border to Matamoros, Mexico. Crumbling brick
walls, dirt streets, stray dogs, metal siding houses with half-clothed children spilling out. The smoky smell of tortillas baking mixed with the earthy fumes of horse manure. The cries of Spanish merchants selling their wares mixed with the scratchy strummings of guitar and marimba bands on old A.M. radios.

Larger than Jalacte, Santa Cruz actually has an area regarded as "downtown." Several shops, a hotel, a pharmacy and a few restaurants are cemented into the side of hill. In the distance, I spot some farms and houses, but Mateo and I keep to downtown. I buy a plastic soccer ball for Arnulfo and some crayons for Concepciona and Katelina. I ask Mateo if I can get anything for Matilda, and he points to a lean-to store that holds a woman standing by a freezer. Frozen chicken. I ask Mateo if he needs anything, but he says no. I buy myself a new steel machete with a hard-wood handle - two dollars U.S.

Some people in town stare at me, but most smile when they do. We pass a bar with a rowdy crowd gathered outside on the patio. A Mayan man in his late forties slumps against the wall, almost passed out, while two other Mayans sit next to him at a table drinking. They speak Ketchi, but I can tell they’re chiding their friend on the ground for not drinking and encourage him to use his bottle. One man even forcefully puts the bottle to the drunk man’s lips, spilling wine all over him.

I watch Mateo as we pass this scene. I have never seen Mateo drink, and I wonder what he thinks about drunks. He doesn’t seem to take any notice of the group, but I wonder if he knows I’m watching. I realize I often watch Mateo very closely, expecting to learn something new about the Maya by how this one man acts. I have more theories about who he is and what he thinks than a character in a book. I also wonder if he watches me as closely, but I never feel like he does. Does he think all Irish-Americans are like me?

"Parlez-vous francais?"
Someone calls in French from the bar patio. I turn to find a tall, gaunt Guatemalan man leaning over the railing and looking hopefully my way. Hair long and curly, he wears a dirty Hawaiian shirt, an assortment of necklaces that include shark teeth, and broken Ray-Bans with only one dark lense that make him appear like some groovy cyclops.

"Parlez-vous francais?" he repeats louder, now pointing somewhat belligerently at me.

"Uh..oui, je parle un peu de francais." I took French in high school and could manage a little French.

The man claps his hands and runs his hands through his hair in relief.

"Oh..good..good..you must come," he said, motioning me to his table with three other men. "I buy you a beer and we speak French."

I'm not sure what to do. I don't think Mateo wants to hang out in a bar, but then I don't want to be the one rude American in all of Santa Cruz. I look at Mateo for advice. He gives me a tired look and rubs his forehead. I had no trouble interpreting that signal.

"We had better go, Mr. Tom." I feel sorry for dragging him into this.

Taught in the states in grade school, Jose remembers as much French as I do. His English runs a little better, and he skips from French to English and then to Spanish to his friends, who usually respond with a laugh. Besides all being Guatemalan, they're all covered in dust, and I discover they are truck drivers on a break. Jose delivers shipments to the pharmacy, and he says he's got "some good stuff" he's willing to sell to me, but I decline as politely as possible. Tripping out in Santa Cruz with Jose doesn't sound wise - I'm at least relatively sure Bishop Landa would not support the decision, although Thompson might jump at the chance.
I don't feel any hostility from them, but they're definitely having some fun with me, which is fine. Mateo sits quietly, and they don't seem to notice him, even when I introduce him. I'm worried Mateo's upset, maybe by what they're saying in Spanish, when I notice he's actually watching the three drunk Mayans next to us, the two of still trying to force the third to drink.

Mateo watches them very calmly for awhile, then he leans over towards them and talks to them in Ketchi, the same kind of angry hissing that Matilda uses on the animals when they steal food. They don't seem to be interested; they actually wave him off and toast him with their wine. But Mateo keeps talking for a good minute. He persists until they stop laughing at him and put their bottles down. He keeps persisting in his speech as they become angry and hiss back at him. And keeps on until his sheer persistence quiets them to ashamed mumbles. Certainly the most I've ever heard Mateo speak, and I didn't understand a word, but I felt his point. They don't take another drink.

Luckily, the three Guatemalan men need to leave before we do, so I avoid an uncomfortable departure. Jose hugs me and tells me to look him up if I'm ever in some small town in the Peten. They all shake my hand, and we say our "au revoirs." I never believed high school French would come in handy in Guatemala.

The frozen chicken thaws quickly, so Mateo and I head back as soon as our friends leave. On the way back to Jalacte, I ask Mateo what he told the three Mayans.

"I just told them they drink too much, Mr. Tom."
When Jake first displayed his teeth - white calcium smoked out by tobacco - people noticed. The worst teeth I’ve ever seen. Encouraged by a captive audience, he explains how he can’t find a good dentist in all of Belize.

“You, Mr. Bruno, need to find us Americans some dentists!”

Mr. Bruno, the American ambassador to Belize, smiles politely. Not much he can say at this point, since Jake has the microphone. The guest of honor at the annual Fourth of July picnic at the Voice of America Radio headquarters in Punta Gorda, Mr. Bruno has been upstaged.

Earlier in the year, I took a tour of the radio station by Chuck, an American who runs the station with a very small staff. Chuck explained why the U.S. government built the station, so I got a small part of the big picture. The U.S. government established V.O.A. in Punta Gorda in the early eighties when communism threatened to take over Nicaragua and El Salvador. The radio station bombarded these areas with pro-democratic rhetoric for years, keeping the red trickle of communism from seeping north. With the threat of communism gone, V.O.A. survived on a small budget and only relayed the latest American music.

During the tour, I asked Chuck why the station stayed operational. He explained it would cost more to move or tear down all the transmitters, offices, dishes, computers and communications devices than to keep a small staff to run the station on a shoestring budget.

"And you never know when we might need the station again," he added ominously.

Although I thought that a strange reason to keep a station running, I didn't comment. And thanks to the backwash signal of the station, I would return to America after my two years in Belize with the hottest U.S. pop buzzing in my head, much to the amazement of friends and family. The one carry-over of the V.O.A. war on communism would also stick in my head: the jumpy,
trumpet-blaring, three second promo of V.O.A. that played every two minutes.

"DUH-DUH-DUHHHHHH!!! V.O.A. THE VOICE OF AMERICA!!"

Otto the Bavarian now joins Jake, a vet with one leg, at the podium. "The dental clinics that these Evangelical groups from the States offer come only maybe once a year," Jake continues, obviously a bit drunk. "And then they just go out to the villages, never come into Punta Gorda. I have to drive all the way out to San Antonio for a dentist."

"Ja - ja," chimed in Otto, toasting Jake with his beer. Since Otto is Bavarian, no one's sure why he attends the all-American Fourth of July picnic, but I'm told he does so every year. A large man with a reputation for a mean temper, Otto makes himself at home almost anywhere, and usually no one asks him to leave.

Under a big blue tent and surrounded by red, white and blue streamers, I stand next to Rick and Ruth and their two children, Joy and Jonathan. Rick and Ruth live on a farm on the Colombia River, about forty miles outside of town. The only way to get to their farm is to bushwack or take an hour-long dory ride up the river. They are dressed appropriately for their lifestyle: rubber boots and loose, durable clothing sewn by Ruth. Both in their mid to late twenties, Ruth and Rick lead a rugged life which has left a mark. Rick's forearms glow sun-burned and muscled from chopping his bush, to the point they seem swollen, and sun wrinkles tickle the corners of Ruth's eyes. Joy and Jonathan are Land's End catalog blonde hair, blue-eyed beauties, except their outfits are probably six dollars U.S. combined.

Rick followed the Grateful Dead for years, selling trinkets, shirts, and little black boxes which beeped and clicked at just the right tone into telephone receivers to get free long-distance calls. But then Jerry Garcia died, and Rick made his way down to Belize, drawn, as many Americans here are, by the cheap land and
friendly English speaking culture. Ruth, a friend of a friend of Rick's, visited his farm one summer and decided to stay and leave her Bible-belt midwest town behind. Ruth gave birth to Joy and Jonathan at their home in the jungle.

Mr. Bruno somehow has the mike back and explains to Jake and Otto that the U.S. government really has no control where Evangelical groups decide to practice dentistry. He assumes they travel to the villages in order to convert the Mayans. The mention of what the U.S. government can or can't do only seems to light a fire under Jake.

"You're telling me the government can carpetbomb Cambodia but can't get me a dentist?"

Next to Rick and Ruth, two other friends converse. Joe, a native of New York like Rick, served as a Peace Corps volunteer in the early eighties in Jalacte. He told me once he vaguely remembered the Ack family. "Back then, we had to hike all the way from Pueblo Viejo - we didn't have it easy like you slackers now," he likes to remind me. He also says the high bush loomed all around Jalacte just fifteen years ago.

I often imagine what the land around Jalacte looked like just fifteen or twenty years ago. A Belizean friend who taught in Jalacte back in the old days once told me the sad story of his motorcycle.

"I used to drive from Pueblo to Jalacte on my bike when there was no road, even though people told me not to. One day during the rainy season, I came down a hill too fast and hit some deep mud at the bottom. My bike sunk up to the gas tank in mud. I couldn't get it out. Nothing left to do but build a cahune lean-to over my bike and wait for the dry season. I checked on it every time I passed the next three months, and then I chipped my bike out when the mud dried."

Mr. Bruno tries his best to weather Jake's rant. Most of the crowd has turned away from hearing Jake just be Jake. Mr. Bruno wears a bow tie, which I'm
told is his signature mark. A graying, intellectual-looking man in his late fifties, Mr. Bruno seems a bit stiff. But, living in Belize City, he's probably not used to the jungle Americans down south.

Joe chats with Paul, a geologist who mines dolomite in limestone outside of P.G., a mineral used in fertilizer to balance the high acidic content of most tropical soils. Paul discovered the dolomite outside of Punta Gorda several years ago, and established a quarry that dug the mineral up and shipped it to fruit farms in Belize and other parts of the Caribbean. He lives in the nicest house in Punta Gorda, which actually has an above ground pool. He's a warm and friendly man, and I've been to his house several times for gin and tonics and a swim.

Paul and Joe discuss the Mayans of Southern Toledo. Both are convinced that the Mayans had outgrown their way of farming, namely slash and burn. They believed the land could not sustain this method of cultivating plot by plot because of the growing population of Belize. Many Mayan archaeologists, including the famous Sylvanus Morley, blamed the first mysterious downfall of the Maya on this theory of "agricultural exhaustion" (Maya 146). Paul and Joe thought the Mayans in Belize would have to turn to the weaving and pottery of their neighbors in Guatemala and Mexico. In other words, trade in farming for tourism.

"But I think that's what makes the Belizean Mayans so unique," I argue. "They still perform the customs of their ancestors."

"They're simply getting to be too large a group for such a small land area," Paul answers. "Slash and burn farming uses up a lot of land. Eventually, they'll run out of land and have to create a new way of life. Better to change now than be forced into it."

"God bless America!" Otto yells over the microphone for some reason. A spattering of applause results.
With the new road coming, more tourists would be able to come down to Punta Gorda, offering them the chance to visit the Mayan ruins of Lubaantum and Nim Li Punit. Already under major renovation, Nim Li Punit hosted a large crew working to excavate a tremendous ballcourt area. I visited Nim Li Punit weeks ago, and a new sign welcomed me, announcing a $10 entrance fee for non-natives of Belize. I had always visited Nim Li Punit for free. I didn’t mind Belize making money off rich Americans, but I liked to think I wasn’t one of them. My own little fantasy, perhaps.

With more tourist money coming in, however, more ruins could be excavated, ruins on the scale of Tikal and Chitza Ni’chen. Some believe the largest cities of the Mayans still slumber under the rain forests on Belize soil. With the proper development and resources, Punta Gorda, with Mayan ruins, Garifuna culture, cayes, and proximity to Guatemala, could certainly become a tourist attraction.

But this was all contingent on the completion of the road from Belize City, a plan presently blocked in world court by the Mayan Mopan Council, headed by Julian Cho. The council contests that the road would affect the Mayan culture in ways never discussed or thought of by the Belizean government. The council also fears that more logging, like the kind done by the Malaysians in and around San Jose, would be possible because of this road. The road, and the council’s ability to block the progress, is a hot topic of debate in PG.

These issues swarm my head as Paul explains his side. Jake demands that the U.S. ambassador look at his back left molar.

"Or what’s left of it!"

Paul speaks in a gentle, confident voice. I have never heard this argument before, but he seems to make sense. I want to ask Mr. Wright’s opinion, though. I never heard Mr. Wright disparage slash and burn farming. I respect Paul, but the
fact remains that he makes his living by removing huge clumps of nutrient rich earth from Belize.

And the idea of Mateo destroying the land slowly to make a living rattles me. I have never met anyone who seems so in tune with the natural world as Mateo. He only farms enough to feed his family and sells at a minimum of profit. Mateo told me he makes about 600 quetsales off a good harvest, once a year, which is the annual equivalent of 100 U.S. He works on his neighbor's land as much as his own. How could I understand this man, or a hundred of men like Mateo, to be greedy with the land?

I also just watched a PBS program on cable in the rectory the other night. The program dealt with global population, and one statistic stood out: if the rest of the world consumed the amount of natural resources that the United States did, two more planets would be necessary to support the global population.

Mr. Bruno and Jake continue to exchange for a few more minutes, Jake displaying more colored oral mess, until Mr. Bruno promises to look into the matter. I feel like I'm the only one who noticed the whole scene. Looking around, I can't help laughing at all of us under the circus tent. A Jesuit volunteer who can barely bring himself to go to church. A miner that condemns the ancient environmental practices of the Mayans. An ambassador in a tropical country that looks like he works on Wall Street. Who do we think we are? What is the Voice of America now? For the sake of Belize, I hope that voice doesn't come out of Jake's mouth.
11.

BACK AT MATEO'S
During my second year, in the damp heart of the rainy season, I got stuck in Jalacte for four days once. I took the market bus to Jalacte on a Wednesday, planning to leave on Friday. But the rains washed the road out, deep gulleys of water swallowing the way back to Punta Gorda, so the bus didn’t come on Friday. I waited for the bus Saturday morning, leaving Mateo’s at 4 a.m. and standing outside the school. I waited for an hour, but the bus never came.

I slipped and struggled back up the mud-slicked hill to Mateo’s house and climbed back into my hammock damp and cold. My shivers reminded me that many ancient Mayans believed hell to be unbearably freezing. The next bus to town wouldn’t arrive until Wednesday.

I awoke a few hours later, sneezing and miserable. I couldn’t believe how cold I felt in 65 degrees. The rains continued all day, dripping off the thatch outside and making the village a mud swamp. I start to wonder how much water thatch can really take. A cold wind gusts through the open doorway, spreading dampness through the house. I wrap my blanket tighter, but it’s thin and worn. The air, a smoky, cold mist, makes my hammock feel like a cold bathtub.

I roll out of my hammock maybe three times that day. I’m sure I’m a horrible guest. I have always had the luxury of coming and going from Jalacte whenever I please, but now I feel trapped. Some of the conditions that I romanticized in Jalacte - the isolation, the thatch houses, the water pump, hammocks - don’t feel as romantic anymore. Swinging in my hammock, I fixate on the fact that the floor really is dirt for a good twenty minutes, my anxiety over uncleanliness relieved only when the sheer repetition of the word dirt in my mind climaxes into something insanely ridiculous.

Dirty dirty dirty dirt dirty dirt dirt dirt dirt dirt.

Mateo and his family seem like strangers moving around me, and the usually welcomed silence aggravates me. The family remains in the kitchen, and I
sense they whisper because of me. What can we really say to each other? What does Mateo actually think about me?

Concepciona leaves and returns soaking wet with firewood. The small sticks she gathered look even wetter than she is. She smiles weakly at me, but I don't think I smile back. I feel out of place and want to go home, way back home, to people who understand me.

I'm not sure how that day of self-pity moved along, but, mercifully, it did. I welcome the darkness, feeling like I can hide there better.

Arnulfo starts crying in his sleep around midnight, and soon the whole house stumbles awake. Matches scratch feverishly against the backdrop of rain pelting fat leaves. The walls come to glow in candle-light.

I watch groggily from my hammock as the family huddles around Arnulfo. A quick Ketchi conference, and Concepciona quickly leaves the house with a shawl over head.

"What's wrong, Mateo?" I ask.

"This boy has fever, Mr. Tom. Concepciona left to get a bush doctor."

I heard a lot about bush doctors, but had never met one. Thompson wrote about staying up for an all-night vigil with a bush doctor and a family, a ceremony for a sick child in San Antonio. The bush doctor, or "sorcerer" as Thompson called him, worked on a boy plagued by painful sores. While chanting prayers that not even Thompson understood, the bush doctor removed some minnows from a bowl and tapped the fish lightly on the sores. Thompson believed the bush doctor even made the sign of the cross with the fish. After much chanting, he took the fish and the water and threw them away at the edge of the village. Thompson believed the minnows, which peck at your skin when bathing in rivers, were thought to have swallowed the infection. This done, they were disposed of.
I roll out of my hammock and take a look at Arnulfo. He’s sweaty and hot, squirming in his hammock in obvious discomfort. I wonder if he has malaria. If his temperature rises and falls sporadically, malaria is possible. I search for a reaction in the family, their faces flickering in the candle light. They watch Arnulfo intently, but I catch them watching me as well. Maybe we’re trying to read each other, I don’t know. At the moment, I’m tired of guessing what Mateo’s thinking. Arnulfo groans.

Belizean malaria is not nearly as serious as African malaria, unless untreated. The Fathers told me villagers did die from malaria, mainly small children and the elderly, when not given the proper treatment. Mr. Wright didn’t believe that bush doctors helped in cases of malaria.

“I think their medicine is good for many things - the tea they make from the jackass bitter is good in cleaning the blood and preventing malaria. But once someone, especially the old or young, has malaria, it’s best to get them to the hospital for treatment.”

Mr Wright told me most children and elderly died from malaria from simple dehydration. I have in my backpack a few packs of rehydration salts that I always carry with me, ever since I discovered I had a pension for dehydrating very quickly in the tropical humidity. I remember my first long motorcycle ride on a sunny day. When I hopped off my bike, my legs buckled and I nearly fell. The breeze on the bike had kept me cool, but the hot sun had dried me out. Fr. Conroy gave me a bagful of rehydration salts that he carried on his hikes, and I never got dehydrated again.

“Mateo, I have some rehydration salts. Arnulfo could be dehydrating. I could mix some salts in some water, and he could drink it. It would help him.”

Mateo looks at Matilda, who then looks at the floor, as if she’s recognizing dirt for the first time. Clearly, he isn’t excited about the offer.
"I think we wait for the bush doctor, Mr. Tom."

Thinking back, I know I probably shouldn’t have pressed the issue. But I had a miserable day and felt sincerely worried about Arnulfo.

"I really think he should drink this, Mateo. If he has malaria, he could be in serious trouble."

Matilda doesn’t understand English, but she sure looks up from that floor. She’s noticed this as the first time I’ve used a demanding tone with Mateo like she notices a cat creeping in to steal a hot tortilla. Mateo doesn’t smile, doesn’t frown, doesn’t respond. His hands do not move to tickle his moustache or pull on his chin to forewarn me of words. Completely still and quiet, he actually makes direct eye contact with me. I’m paralyzed by his stare. I wonder if this is the trick he uses on jaguars.

"My son gets sick a lot, Mr. Tom."

I return to my hammock quietly. I wonder if the family and bush doctor will remain awake all night with Arnulfo and chant Mayan hymns like Thompson described.

Concepciona returns with the bush doctor. I think I’m expecting a man in some type of costume, not that Thompson described any bush doctors in costume. The man with Concepciona looks about Mateo’s age, a little taller, and he actually wears jeans. I’ve seen a few Mayans wearing jeans before, but I didn’t anticipate a bush doctor in blue jeans. He gives me a quick smile, just quick enough for me to wonder how many quick Mayan smiles I had received and what on earth they all meant.

The bush doctor speaks with Matilda and Mateo in a voice as soft as the flickering candle light. He pulls out some dried, crushed leaves from his bag. I smell a bitter scent from his pouch that fills the room. Matilda boils water on the comal, and the bush doctor drops in the leaves. The tea smells like a fresh-cut lawn
in the summer in Texas. He lets the tea cool for awhile, and then he makes Arnulfo drink it. As I remember, Arnulfo vomits immediately. This alarms me, since I'm already concerned about him being dehydrated. He throws up again minutes later, and I'm ashamed to admit that I wonder how you get vomit off a dirt floor.

The bush doctor leaves, nodding and smiling along the way. He has the pleased expression that his work is finished here. Mateo and Matilda thank him earnestly, just as Arnulfo's vomit splashes on the floor for the third time. I'm not as convinced about Arnulfo's health. But Arnulfo falls into a sound sleep, as does the rest of the family.

Somewhat disappointed that no vigil or chanting occurred, I have trouble getting back to sleep. The damp night presses through the thin walls and chills me. A wave of fear makes me tremble: What if I catch Arnulfo's fever? I know I can't catch malaria from him - that comes only from an infected mosquito. But many types of fever and sickness bubble in the jungle. I can't get comfortable, and I start to shiver. I'm not sure what the time is, but I know the warming glow of dawn will break several hours away.

Unable to sleep and shivering more and more, I decide to try to light a fire. My hammock hangs the closest to the comal, and if I can at least get some embers going, I'm certain the iron platter can warm me up a bit.

I'm reminded that I'm no Boy Scout. I try unsuccessfully for at least ten minutes to ignite anything, including Concepciona's soggy wood pile. I can't find any matches, so I try to urge the one candle still lit in the room to spread onto damp wood. I'm about to give up when I feel someone behind me.

I turn to find Matilda. She gently motions me to return to my hammock, which I do. She rummages behind the comal to find a lighter and a string of plastic, much like the plastic used to hold a six-pack of cans together. She lights the plastic...
and lets the flaming plastic drip onto the wood until the fire spreads. I've never seen her do this before. I suppose it's her emergency system in case knucklehead gringos get cold in the middle of the night.

She blows out the flames, leaving glowing coals underneath the comal. Thompson listed his favorite Mayan euphemisms in his book, including a striking translation for "hot coals": "fire flowers". A perfect description for the glowing beauties with warm petals. Matilda takes a stick and pushes the coals underneath my hammock, laying them out underneath my body. The warmth of the fire flowers blooms under me, the most wonderful feeling I've had in days. Matilda smiles at me, and my last image of her before I drift to sleep is her sitting on her haunches and staring at me.

I awake to sunshine and Matilda working in her kitchen. She shows me the same smile, and somehow I'm certain she hasn't slept all night. She kept vigil over the gringo she's known for only a year instead of her son. Did she suspect one was in more trouble than the other? Arnulfo hangs on the rope of my hammock, all robust smiles, waiting for me to wake and play in the river. He looks as strong as ever.
12.

WRIGHT IN HOSPITAL
I hear through friends that Mr. Wright is in the hospital. I know I should visit, but I hate hospitals. And I’ve already heard horror stories about PG’s hospital. The doctors are mostly Cubans sent to Belize on internships. They also ran clinics in the villages, and, most of the villagers I knew, including Mateo, said the Cuban doctors are very rough with patients, especially when giving shots. “I don’t think they want to be here,” Mateo once told me. I pictured men with unkempt beards, wearing green army outfits and black boots and smoking cigars and poking Mayan children with shots and laughing their rum-hot breath on them. Maybe I did listen to V O.A. too much.....

I also hear the hospital is not very clean, but mostly my own experience in hospitals keeps me away. I contracted tuberculosis while working at a homeless shelter, and I remember the process of diagnosis and treatment left me feeling like a big petri. In and out of the hospital for a few months, I grew to hate the bright lights and white uniforms and squeaky floors and busy doctors who seemed to talk to beepers and charts more than me. I realize that I’m incredibly lucky and privileged to have been cured of tuberculosis, still the third leading cause of death in the world. Nevertheless, hospitals give me the creeps.

I walk reluctantly towards the PG hospital. The hospital is a short walk from Mr. Wright’s house, just across from the cemetery. Why they located the hospital across from the cemetery didn’t seem to be the most encouraging of signs, but maybe that’s a customary location in Central America. I don’t know.

The hospital buzzes with movement and shouting, as the free clinic in the morning still runs. Most medical care remains free in Belize. A long line of Mayans wait patiently outside for their turn. I follow the colorful line of traditional clothing and tanned faces into the three story concrete building, the largest building in PG.

I find a nurse and ask where I might find Mr. Wright. She’s extremely helpful and beams at the mention of his name.
“Mistah Wright our best customer, you know. You sneaking him some rum?”

She laughs when I shake my head in embarrassment, then leads me to the men’s ward. The men’s ward rests on the second floor. A 40’ by 20’ room painted in fading blue, ten beds (only five occupied) filled the room. I spot Mr. Wright lying on his side on one bed with a doctor hovering over him.

The doctor, from Cuba, is very polite. No cigar, no green fatigues, no rum breath. He explains in excellent English that they drained some fluid from Mr. Wright’s body, some type of bile that swelled an intestine, I think. I remember seeing a catheter tube coming out of Mr. Wright filled with something dark. The doctor explains Gonzalo found Mr. Wright passed out in his chair. If Gonzalo had found him a few hours later, Mr. Wright would have been dead. As it turns out, the doctor wants to release him in the next few days.

I think Mr. Wright sleeps, until I hear him say, “Eh? What’s that? Is that young Molanphy I hear? Come over on the other side of the bed. You’re on my bad side.”

He’s in as jolly mood as ever, which amazes me. His face is drawn and a little paler, though. I ask him about his health, but he doesn’t seem too interested in his present condition. Except for the fact that my questions remind him of another time he spent in the hospital.

“Oh, I’m in fine shape. This is nothing compared to that time in New Zealand. I was left for dead that time. But I didn’t die, and, actually, my sickness became quite a gift. That sickness produced my earliest memory of my childhood.

"I was on a soil survey in Fiji in the fifties with a young native boy as my guide. We were investigating a volcano and had to walk along the cliffs of the ocean to get there. I remember the waves were pounding the cliffs that the path ran on. At the end of the day, we followed the same path back in darkness, but the
waves had weakened the path so much in such a short time that we slipped and fell onto the rocks below. Vuli, the boy, broke his arm, and I hit and scraped my head in such a way that my hair was hanging off the back of my head like a bad toupee. The village had a bush doctor who said Vuli's arm had a clean break that would heal nicely, which it was and did, and then he took some powder medicine and blew it on my scalp and patted back my hair. I even went to the hospital later to check for any damage, but they gave me a clean bill of health.

"Eight years later, while in Apia, capital city of Western Samoa, I started having headaches that would just drop me to sleep. This occurred more and more frequently until one day I just didn't wake up. The rest of the story I'm a bit spotty on because it comes from what people told me. People started to drop by the hospital and say good-bye, I'm told. Then they sent what they called a 'mercy flight' from New Zealand to take me to a proper hospital. The thing about these mercy flights was that the New Zealand government was trying to pull funding from them, so the director of the mercy flights made sure the press knew that I was being saved by his program, since I was fairly well-known at the time. My flight was met in Fiji by reporters with cameras, and I do remember a lot of flashing lights at some point.

"It turns out that fluid had been filling the space between the bone and my brain after that knock eight years ago in Fiji, and some minor brain surgery soon cleared that up. I remember waking up in a hospital room with a small Samoan girl who said, "Oh, you're awake!" and then showed me the cover of a New Zealand newspaper with my photo on a stretcher coming in from the mercy flight. I heard about the rest over the next few days because I had to stay in the hospital while my brain slowly expanded after being compressed by that fluid for so long.

"While I was resting in the hospital waiting for my brain to expand, I had a vivid memory of my mother holding me up to a window, and outside I remember
seeing terrific fire and black smoke on some water, and a girl was crying. I told my mother about that memory later, and she was surprised. 'You can't remember that,' she said. 'That was in 1917 during the war when you were two years old. A German Zeppelin had just crashed into the river Thames, and I held you up to look at it. Your sister was crying.' The doctors told me that in cases when the brain has to expand, very early memories sometimes pop-out.

"That's my earliest memory."

Mr. Wright seems healthy enough to me. "What have you been up to? How's that friend of yours, Mateo?" he asks.

I tell him about Mateo, how I really don't think he wants to take me into the bush. I tell him about my embarrassment from assuming Mateo and Matilda couldn't take care of their own sick child. I tell him about my day with the teachers, and the discussion over logging. And I tell him about the V O.A. picnic, and how some American friends think slash and burn needs to stop.

"Well! You have been busy!" he laughs.

Mr. Wright understands the concern over slash and bum, but he maintains that it's still the best method for poor people to farm. "As long as they give the soil time to replenish itself," he warns. "At least they're not driving automobiles around L.A." he winks.

As for logging, he made himself clear in the U.S World and News Report article. He realizes that Belize may benefit financially from this deal, but future generations will pay for that money.

And as for embarrassing myself at Mateo's, he laughs that off. "My experience over the last fifty years has been that Mayans are some of the most forgiving people when it comes to silly gringos."

I would love to ask Mr. Wright more questions. But I could see fatigue creeping up into Mr. Wright's body, and he doesn't argue (for once) when I say I
better go. He rolls over to his better side as I leave. I thank the Cuban doctor on the way out.
13.

HICOTEE CREEK
Hicatee Creek, the absolute farthest village by foot, sits after a five hour trek from Otoxha village, the end of the road. By boat, Hicatee rests after a beautiful trip down the Sarstoon River, two hours of howler screams and iguanas splashing into the water from majestic ceiba trees. But the boat trip comes only once a year with the Bishop for Confirmation.

Ben and I make our first attempt to Hicatee Creek soon after our Poite adventure, still during the rainy season. Because the mud would be thick, I decide to wear rubber boots, very popular among the Mayan men during the rainy season. Ben wears them, too, but he warns me they might be a little rough on my feet.

"I'm not so sure you have Mayan feet, Tom."

Despite wearing two pairs of socks, my feet prove no match for the rubber boots. By the time we complete half our walk, the six miles from Otoxha to Dolores, the hot rubber has shredded through the two pairs of socks and begun eating my big toes. What starts as blisters on my toes becomes, in the words of Mr. Wright, a bloody mess. And Mayans wear rubber boots without any socks and walk twice as far. I can't help to wonder what Mateo would think of my soft white feet. Maybe he already knew they couldn't withstand a trip to the bush.

I can't hike past Dolores. I inspect my feet - pale, bleeding cave fish - and inform Ben I can't go on. Ben needs to bring some forms to the principal in Hicatee Creek, another two and a half hours.

"Joe couldn't wear rubber boots, either," Ben says. At least Joe didn't outdo me again.

We decide to spend the night in Dolores. I'll teach a class in the morning in Dolores as Ben treks to Hicatee Creek. When I finish teaching, I'll slowly head the other direction to Otoxha, wearing my sandals, and Ben would either catch up
with me or we'd meet in Otoxha. From Otoxha, only a motorcycle drive home would remain.

The next morning, after I teach two classes (rousing games of hangman using religious terms), I pull my backpack on and head home on my Tivas. The teachers have a first-aid kit, so I wrapped both toes well and tape them securely. The children wave goodbye, and I feel confident on my first solo trek. I don't have to worry about keeping up with Ben. All I have to do is follow the trail we used yesterday. No way I could get lost.

Rain teemed most of the night, and the trail continues to be slicked by a heavy mist. Most of the trail from Otoxha to Dolores runs in a creek gulley, so sometimes I'm literally walking upstream in a few inches of water. Some puddles cover deep mud-holes that devour my ankles and overmatched Tivas. Possibly due to the high acidic content of the mud, the velcro fails. I'm forced to tie the straps together like two fat, sloppy shoelaces. Even then, the sandals slip to the side and I walk barefoot on and off.

The hungry mud begins to eat the bandages away. I feel the mud oozing into my cuts, an unsettling, itchy sensation. Countless stories of infection and loosing limbs from the numerous jungle parasites fill my head like the mud slopping through my bandages. I wash my feet with my drinking water, rebandage them, and try to gently put my boots on. The bloody fish scream at the prospect of returning to the cave.

Disgusted with my boots and tired of carrying them, I leave them outside the next home I pass. But just as I'm dropping the anonymous gift off, the owner pokes his head out and catches me. The old question, the one I had over and over again in Belize that shaped my days, recurs: What does this person think of me? A soaked, hunchback gringo, wearing sandals on the side of his feet, dropping boots off at my house.
We initiate communication with the usual exchange of nervous smiles. I try to explain I’d like him to have my boots, but he doesn’t understand English. He’s a middle-aged man, a little younger than Mateo. I simply try to hand him my boots, but he shakes his head and points to my feet. Of course, he thinks I need these boots! Maybe he thinks I don’t know how to wear them. I must appear as the most illogical, clumsy creature imaginable to him.

I attempt to hand him my gift, again, and he points to my feet, again. We continue this until my arm gets tired from holding the boots up. We end the communication with the usual exchange of nervous smiles, revealing the progress of our exchange. I leave, and just around the corner, I drop the heavy boots on the side of the road. Someone will use them, and he won’t be me.

I’m shown just how pathetically slow I’ve traveled when school children begin to pass me. They head back to school after lunch. I recognize one student, Juan, who stops on the bank above the road to watch me. He finishes a tortilla in the rain. I pause under his watch to fix my sandals again. I’ve walked for over an hour, and I haven’t even left the Otoxha suburbs.

I look up to find Juan still watching me, munching on his soggy tortilla. The lead sky and pelting rain darkens his features. I imagine he’s a mini-Chac, casting judgment down on me. What can I sacrifice to appease him? A rubber boot?

I know he speaks very little English. I’d love to know what Juan thinks rights now. We spoke about the Golden Rule in class. Maybe he imagines what he should do for me. Maybe he tries to put himself in my situation, to discover what he would want if he was me. But what Mayan would have trouble with footwear? Maybe he thinks I need a good pair of rubber boots. Or maybe I’m just entertaining to him.
I would love to know what any of these children, skipping barefoot over the mud, thinks of me. Why does he go so slow? Maybe everyone moves that slow in the States. Maybe he's collecting something. Why are his sandals on the side of his feet? Why does he carry his load on his back instead of by a strap to his head like my mother and father would do? Americans must have very strong backs.

I struggle and pummel my cloddish feet through the mud. The patter of rain and the...what's the word...sluckslock of my feet entering and exiting the mud is the only sound. The wet metal smell of constant rain and the dampness pressing on my skin consumes me. I can barely see brown smudges of huts through my spatterred glasses. The wet, grainy rub of mud itches my bad toes.

I pass a little girl outside staring at me with her hand over her mouth. I summon up the good humor to wave and smile, and she quickly disappears inside her house. I realize I'm a blue hunchback monster, slipping and sliding more sideways than forward, favoring one bad knee, losing more balance with each step. I'm sorry I frightened her.

Moments later, the hair on my wet neck raises and tickles me. I turn expecting to find the little girl sneaking one last look at the clumsy creature. Instead, I find her entire family lined up one the road watching me. Mother. Father. Grandmother. Grandfather. Two brothers. One sister. The little girl dragged the whole clan out to see me. I guess you can't pass up entertainment like me when you don't have HBO. They all stare in disbelief. I smile and wave. The parents smile and wave back. An encounter that gives me new energy to carry on.

I soon reach exhaustion and fall often. The possibility of not reaching Otoxha by nightfall, of reliving my scrambling from Poite but with bad feet, clouds my mind. My bandages have loosened, and my toes began to throb. Should I stay at someone's house until Ben passes? The only Ketchi I know is "Us," good, and "Toho cre" thank you. Would someone let a very strange stranger into their house?
After some impatient thought, I realize I feel too awkward to barge into someone’s home. I adjust my soggy pack, slip my sandals off the sides of my feet, and press on to Otoxha. In retrospect, not the wisest choice. I know that pride pushed me on; I couldn’t bear the ghost of my predecessor beating me one more time. I stewed thinking of Joe’s legendary prowess. He could probably jog this trail while playing guitar, juggling hymnals and saying the rosary. Steeled by that ridiculous image, I became even more determined to reach Otoxha before dark. The houses fall behind me, and I realize I won’t pass another person until I reach Otoxha. Maybe if I had more faith in the Golden Rule, I would have relied on someone’s hospitality in Dolores.

The mid-section of the hike follows hills up and down. With the misty rain thickening to drops, the ground swells with water, and I slip more than walk. I reach the bottom of one hill and face another with a creek blocking me. To cross the creek, three stones poke their shiny faces as a bridge. Maybe rubber boots or Mayan feet (or Joe’s Ultra-Tech Jungle Cross-trainer III) could have clutched the rocks, but my first step skims off what I thought is a strong foothold. My pack lurches on my back, its weight driving my ankle into the creek at a bad angle. I feel my ankle twist and the muscles burn. Luckily, the creek flows only a foot deep. I crawl to shore.

A sprained ankle, but not a bad one. My foot shot through only pebbled mud and water. If I had landed on a hard surface, I might have broken it. I’m hampered even more, though, and I can’t climb the hill. I attempt three gimpy lunges up the hill and end in a painful slide back.

After a few minutes of this, I crumple into a wet heap by the bank and explode in hateful expletives. I have never felt so tired or angry. I don’t really fear for my life; Ben will pass by at some point. I’m just frustrated I can’t accomplish what volunteers before me did and that Mayans do everyday. Joe never got a
sprained ankle, never got lost. I imagine Joe skipping up the hill before me, his strong ankles flexing and glowing in good health. All I can do is curse, and I think I did that well. Bishop Landa's ears would have burned. I can't even imagine what Mateo's reaction would have been. The jungle watches me, and the rain taps my face to further irritation, so I scream an expletive at each raindrop.

"Having trouble, Tom?"

I turn around to find Ben smiling. His big brown eyes brim with concern. I don't know how much he heard me curse, but I feel ashamed. I never cursed in front of him.

"I sprained my ankle, Ben."

He inspects my ankle. The left side has ballooned to swallow my bones. Ben grimaces at my bloody, half-exposed toes, muddy bandages hanging off them like decayed skin. He glances at the time on his watch.

"I don't think we'll be able to reach Otoxha before nightfall," he decides.

4 o'clock already! I left Dolores at one o'clock, planning to reach Otoxha by five at the latest. I've barely made half the trip. Now that I sprained my ankle, I'll only go slower.

"Tom, I'll go ahead to Otoxha and send a horse back for you."

"O.K., Ben."

Ben leaves me his water, which I gratefully accept. I poured most of mine on my feet. I feel so embarrassed to be a burden. But Ben remains cheerful the whole time. He never mentions Joe, never shows any disappointment in me. I'm reminded why he's one of the kindest men I have ever met.

Ben disappears above the hill, and I'm alone. Without the sluckslock of my sandals, I hear birds warbling and the tinkling of the rain on the creek. I sit on a rock by the creek and try to relax. Ben could probably reach Otoxha in an hour, if he hurries, and the horse and rider might find me in a half-hour. I should spot a
horse and rider cresting the hill at 5:30, just before the snakes came out at night.
I’m certain I’m in minimum danger— I don’t think Ben would have left me,
otherwise — but can’t help feeling a little nervous. I know Tommygoff’s prowl near
water. I elevate my ankle to keep the swelling down.

I shake my head at my big plans. I wanted Mateo to take me to the bush? I
can’t even last on the trails. I could just picture Mateo having to carry me because
I stubbed my toe on a hike. did Mateo know all along I wouldn’t last on bush hike?

The rain actually lets up as the sun slowly sinks down. The head of the
horse first appears over the hill, then the Mayan owner. He leads the horse steadily
down the hill, stopping about ten feet before me. In his early twenties, he wears a
pancho and a cowboy hat to keep the rain off. Rain drips off the brim of his hat,
and his face is in shadow. I can’t make out his face. He takes a long look at me, I
think. I assume he’s my ride, but then I panic a bit as he continues to watch me
silently.

"Are you the gringo I’m supposed to save?" he asks quietly.

"That's me," I answer with a weary laugh.

A crafted, hand-made, wood saddle sits on the horse... A beautiful saddle.
In fact, after ten minutes of balancing myself on the rock-like frame, I’m
convinced the saddle is a piece of art that should be stored in a museum and never
used ever again for any reason. Just priceless. We reach Otoxha by dark, but I hear
Ben’s laugh even before we arrive. I never tell Mateo about this hike.

A few weeks later, I discovered a souvenir from my hike. Just above my
ankle swelled something like a pimple with an opening on top. I showed Ben, and
he confirmed my suspicion: beefworm. A beefworm fly had struck just above my
ankle, laying its eggs just under my skin. Ben said the larva crawled out of the
opening. He inspected the opening carefully, and told me to clean the bite well.
Thompson suffered a nasty beefworm bite while excavating in the Cayo region of Belize. The larva did not crawl out, but died underneath his skin and caused a painful infection. His leg swelled to “nearly twice natural size.” (24) Thompson retreated out of the bush for medical attention. Applying hot compresses on the infection softened the abscess, and a friend of Thompson’s was able to “press out sacs of puss extending to the knee.” (241) On his return to the excavation, Thompson discovered from a Mayan friend why his bite became infected. The pregnant wife of one of the workers had looked at Thompson, and many Mayans believe the stare of a pregnant woman causes infections in sores.

“You’re lucky. Those usually get infected.”

Ben stared at me incredulously, the first time I felt I impressed him. I bet Joe never sloshed an open beefworm bite through mud. I showed Mateo my clean beefworm bite, and he agreed that I was lucky, giving the same incredulous look as Ben.

I felt pretty tough.

The next year, on my second attempt to reach Hicatee Creek, I go alone. The reason for this brilliant idea walked into the St. Peter Claver office one innocent Tuesday afternoon.

Ben’s out of town for a few days, and I decide to keep Sherlene company in the office. Rainy weather encourages that decision. Sherlene and I sit with the glass blinds of the window turned open, a damp breeze off the Bay of Honduras eliminating the need of the old, rusty office fan that squeaks more than cools.

Sherlene, a Garifuna woman who’s pregnant, seems happy to have company. Her mother calls often to check on her; Garifuna have various rituals and superstitions involving pregnancy. A few weeks ago, we had an eclipse, and her mother forbid Sherlene to venture out underneath its rays.
I help Sherlene file baptismal certificates, answer the phone, and catch up on the town “shush,” Creole for gossip. Sherlene has a fantastic laugh - I’m entertaining her with some of my hiking adventures.

"How are your feet?"

I look up to find a Mayan man in his fifties grinning very close to my own face like we’re old friends. Tall and thin, I assume he has Spanish blood in him as well as Mayan. His eyes, large and bright, are definitely Mayan. I don’t recognize him one bit, even at close range.

"My feet?"

"Yes, I heard you had trouble with your feet."

I grin back, accustomed to the friendly teasing that comes with the job.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure we've met."

"No, we didn't meet. We didn't meet because of your feet!"

The man laughs hard, inciting Sherlene into her tremendous giggle. He’s Omar Vizquel, the principal of Hicatee Creek. Ben told them about my feet when he visited Hicatee alone last year. Omar didn’t forget. I would have loved to be a fly on the wall for that conversation.

"When will you go to Hicatee Creek? I hear you like Jalacte more than any other village."

Because I visit Jalacte so often, the “shush” is that I kept several Mayan girlfriends stashed away there.

"Well, Mr. Juarez won't be back until next week, and what with the rain now -

"Rain? Rain melt you? And you wait for Juarez? Last volunteer loved to hike alone. He was in the villages all the time..."

A treatise follows on the exemplary performance of Joe. Joe hiked more often, Joe played guitar, Joe went to Church twice a day, etc. Joe was THE perfect
volunteer, a Terminator/Boy Scout always at the right place at the right time with
the right thing to say. Blah blah blah...Joe...Joe...Joe

I knew I shouldn’t hike alone, not yet. Joe hiked alone, but not until well
into his second year, the year I just started. But listening to Omar espouse Joe’s
graces, I wanted to one-up Joe badly. This could be my opportunity to impress
Ben, a big fan of Joe’s. And if Mateo knew I hiked to Hicatee all by myself, maybe
he would offer to take me to the bush.

"How about Monday?" I find myself blurring out.

"We'll look forward to seeing you," Omar smiles, nodding to Sherlene and
leaving. I’m left with the sense he’s done that before. Maybe even to Joe.

“Bettah not wear da rubbah boots, boy!” Sherlene giggles.

The weather actually cooperates on my hike. Four days of hot sun dried the
mud to a firm rubber. It’s my favorite dirt-state to walk and drive on - not too dry,
not too wet. The drive to Otoxha rolls dust-free, and the hike to Dolores goes
smoothly. Teachers in both villages welcome me with laughs and shouts, slapping
me on the back and congratulating me for my solo hike. Students sit attentive and
responsive, as usual, and I have a wonderful lunch of caldo with the teachers in
Dolores. I only have three more hours, maximum, to reach Hicatee Creek.

"How do I get to Jiccatte Creek?" I ask the teachers between spoonfuls of
spicy caldo. We sit in the cool insides of the alcalde’s home, new green thatch
deflecting the sun.

"Easy, Mr. Tom. Follow the trail until about midway. You’ll see a tractor in
a field. Turn left onto the footpath, and that will take you to Jiccatte Creek."

I try to obtain an exact spot where the tractor would appear, but the
teachers are like most Belizeans when giving directions or recipes: very vague.
Belizeans seemed to cook and walk by feel and experience. Several times I had
tried to corner Laurie, the priest's cook, on how to prepare her delicious rice and beans.

"Lee bit of beans, coconut watah, and rice and so."

I've watched her prepare the dish many times. Every time I try, though, my rice and beans come out "lobby lobby," a thick, sticky mass of beanrice. The teacher's directions remain the same, even after I ask for details several more times. I hope my walk to Jiccatte turns out better than my rice and beans.

Trees arch and mingle their limbs overhead for the first few miles of my hike, creating the sensation of a tunnel. The sun peaks through in parts of the ceiling, and I see ghostly columns of light down the trail. I hike in the heat of the day, so the jungle sleeps quietly, creating an eerie atmosphere.

After the tunnel, the trail opens up to rolling meadows of abandoned milpas, some still smoldering from slash and burn. Green hills roll off into the distance, some bearing limestone scars that gleam out of the thick bush. The day bakes hot, and I soon miss the cool of the tunnel. The trail is now drier, though, than underneath the bush that never sees the light of day. I drink more rehydration salts and feel grateful for the salty lunch of caldo.

Walking alone, surrounded by jungle, feels adventurous. Viewing the distant, dark hills, I wonder what a climb through the thick bush would reveal. Stumbling upon old Mayan ruins or relics, or maybe discovering waterfalls spilling from a deep cave. I'm not ready to leave the trail, though, and certainly not by myself. But I smile, happy to be alone in the jungle, anticipating describing my first solo trek to Mateo.

After about an hour and a half walk, I begin to search for the tractor. Knowing Belizean directions, I don't panic when the tractor doesn't appear exactly at the midpoint. But I would like to spot it soon.
Another fifteen minutes pass, then another half-hour. Could I have passed the tractor? That seems impossible. The teachers said I couldn't miss it. "One big tractor, Mr. Tom. Caan miss it!" Maybe it's just further than an hour and a half. Maybe the tractor is an hour and a half walk for them, but longer for me. Could be two hours for me, easily. I know I don't hike fast compared to Mayans, especially with my pack on. And I haven't hurried, either. I'm sure it's still ahead.

When my hike reaches close to two and a half hours, I begin to worry in earnest. I left Dolores at about one o'clock. Darkness comes at about six, so if I turn around, I'd reach Dolores at night. But the tunnel that I walked through would be dark before that. I brought a flashlight, but fear of what my flashlight might turn up in that long tunnel unsettled me as well.

And I knew I didn't want to turn back; that would mean another failure to reach Jiccatte. Joe hiked to Jiccatte four times while in Belize. In my second year, I haven't reached Hicatee even once, carted back in ignominy to Otoxha on a horse on my only attempt. I can only imagine the laughs Omar will have on me if I don't reach this time. Plus, I'd have one more failed hike I couldn't tell Mateo about.

How can I miss a tractor, just about the largest piece of machinery around?

The trail disintegrates slowly, edges mixing with underbrush, vines stretching before my feet and limbs pushing into my face. Then the trail disappears completely, becoming a washed out creek gulley, then a field of fallen logs over swampy terrain faces me. I scramble up on one of the larger logs for a better view.

I spot some thatch huts in the distance. Just bigger than dots, but definitely homes, wisps of smoke trailing from their tops. Might not be Hicatee Creek, could even be Guatemala. But even Guatemala's better than trying to head back to Dolores. At this point, with the sun melting into the dark jungle, I'm not shy about
depending on the hospitality of strangers. I scramble down off the log and head directly for the houses.

Without a trail, I struggle over the marsh and logs. A forest once stood here, with some sizeable trees still rotting away. The ground has fallen apart without the roots and under the constant rain. I trudge through decay and bubbling, oily water. An unfamiliar stench thickens the air, the heavy smell of rotting wood replacing the aroma of the jungle. Is this the result of too much logging or too much clearing for milpas? I try not to rush or let my mind panic. The logs I clamber over are slick, and I remain mindful of snakes. But eagerness grabs me, exciting my hands and feet, widening my eyes and making my head light. I try to remember my panic years ago in Idaho, and how that had just got me more lost.

I pull myself onto a big log to get an idea of my progress. Dismay smacks me, the eagerness that energized my body draining from me. The huts are closer, but now I discover what lays before them: Hicatee Creek, and a good portion of her, at least twenty yards wide, moving at a fast current and unknown depth. I’ve lost the trail so badly I hit the creek that empties into the Sarstoon River, the boundary between Guatemala and Belize, the river that leads to the Bay of Honduras. By the looks of the creek’s charging eagerness, the waters aren’t far from the Sarstoon. I’m rueful that one of us is close to home.

I don’t spot anyone around the homes on the other side, but I yell and wave my arms just in case. If someone sees me, they might have a dory to pull me across. The water seems too fast to swim through, especially with a backpack. I continue to make a spectacle of myself, but no one comes out. What would a Mayan do if they did see me? If I’m lucky, my reputation precedes me.

*It’s that crazy gringo trying to reach Hicatee again.*
The green molars of the jungle hills eats up the sun. I can't reach Dolores without a lot of time in the dark. I decide I might have to spend the night by the river, or at least until someone from the other side discovers me. After finding a sandy area on the river protected by trees, I pull out my sleeping bag and stretch out on the beach. The bag is my brother’s ten-year old wool sleeping bag that he used in Boy Scouts. Why I thought it would be just perfect for the tropical jungle, I have no idea. I think, with some crankiness, of the sleeping bag Joe probably carried. H-4220 Superlight Humidity Activated Mosquito Repelling Body Cooling Night Light Super Sleeper. Or something not made of wool, at least.

The sandy beach and rushing river reminds me of my encounter with a TommyGoff snake just a month ago. Outside of San Ignacio, in the Cayo District of Belize, I joined some Jesuit Volunteers on a canoe-cave expedition. Bartholomew, our Rastafarian guide, took us on a four-hour tour in canoes through caves that soared to forty feet in height above us and shrank to narrow chasms where we ducked to fit through. I remember spotting broken Mayan pottery on high ledges and shrinking down in the canoe when we slid underneath nests of baby bats that Bartholomew made squirm with his flashlight.

When we floated back out into the sunlight, we hit some mild rapids, and the canoe that myself and two other volunteers guided, flipped. No harm done. Sam, Jane and I dragged the canoe to the sandy beach and laughed at our predicament. Bartholomew and the rest of the volunteers floated behind us, and we decided to sit and wait.

“Jane, don’t move,” Sam ordered quietly but tersely.

I wondered at Sam’s tone until I saw what he saw: a Tommygoff, two feet from Jane, coiled and camouflaged perfectly. We stepped slowly away. The Tommygoff sat between us and our canoe. The snake stayed curled up until Bartholomew arrived. He seemed more upset about the snake than us.
“Caan have no big Tommy hangin’ out where I make me money,” he scowled, shaking his head.

He ordered us all to scramble upstream along the bank. When we stood at a safe distance, he began throwing rocks to frighten the snake away. I remembered hunting in East Texas many years ago and trying to scare water moccassins back into creeks the same way. A few well-placed throws, and they always disappeared in a hurry.

When Bartholomew started throwing rocks, I discovered Tommygoffs are not water moccassins. The “big Tommy” had no intentions of leaving and actually lunged where the rocks landed. I almost expected the fierce snake to catch a stone and plug Bartholomew. A strange dance began, with Bartholomew cursing and hopping, his dreads shaking wildly, throwing larger and larger stones nearer and nearer to the snake. Slowly, grudgingly, and with hissing we could hear thirty feet away, the snake slinked back into the bush. We gave Bartholomew an extra tip for the show.

On my Hicatee beach, I notice footprints dot the area, and the beach seems cleared and well-used. I hope the human activity is enough to deter animals and snakes from creeping through in the night. But one animal only encouraged by the presence of humans soon arrives: the mosquito. I wrap up in my wool cocoon and curse myself for not bringing a net. As the sun sets, the mosquitos buzz louder, dark spots hovering between my face and the setting sun.

The mosquitos remind me of Fr. Conroy’s run with malaria. He suffered malaria several times, and the last time sent him either to the toilet or to the bucket every hour as his temperature soared over a hundred or dropped below 97. Fevers, chills, nausea, hallucinations. Visiting with Fr. Webber, I remember catching Fr Conroy staggerring down the hall, pushing himself to the bathroom by leaning on
the wall. I could see his pale, sweaty face gleaming in the dark hallway. He had caught malaria while hiking in the bush. Malaria sticks with a person for life and can reoccur at any time. I eagerly blow away the mosquitos that try to perch on my exposed nose.

One buzz grows louder. Just as I believe the mother of all mosquitos has come to swallow me whole, I realize I hear the hum of an outboard motor in the approaching. I flop out of my steamy sleeping bag and run to the shore. In the distance, I can just spot a boat cruising my way. I jump up and down and holler, and they veer towards me.

Two men occupy the long, aluminum boat. They cut the engine and let the boat glide onto the sandy beach with a grinding crush. The man by the engine who steers the boat is older, maybe in his forties. He has long, dark hair that drops out of a San Francisco Giants baseball cap. His blue jeans and gray T-shirt look remarkably new - I realize most of the clothes I see in Belize are pretty worn. Studying me with cautious eyes, he chomps thoughtfully on a fat cigar. I remember my prejudices about mean Cuban doctors and hope I'm wrong again.

His first mate is younger and doesn't make eye contact with me. Wearing no shirt, he has a n eagle tattooed on his left shoulder. A silver hoop dangles from his ear.

Fighting the fear I've been recused by Castro and his pirate, I try to explain my situation. It quickly becomes awkwardly apparent they speak only Spanish and I speak Spanish badly. The mate looks eagerly back and forth between the captain and me. The captain folds his arms and chews thoughtfully, smoke clouding his face. My Spanish does bring some smiles, which I consider a half success. I mention Hicatee Creek and point where I believe the village lays. I point in a wide arc just in case. I assume the village is not far, but their astonished expressions indicates otherwise.
After some discussion, the captain motions me to enter the boat. I almost step on what lays between them: a sea turtle, flopping madly on its back. I pull back at first. I have seen sea turtles at market before, but never one so close. Beautiful creature, soft yellow belly and flapping mad fins. When the turtle wobbled, its shell on the aluminum boat sounded like distant thunder.

The captain laughs at my hesitation. The younger man doesn't seem so happy. I remember not feeling nervous at all to hitch a ride with two strangers. I think I was so relieved to get away from the mosquitos and the idea of sleeping out in the open. Maybe exhaustion replaced logic. Maybe I finally trusted the Golden Rule; if I was a Guatemalan fisherman and found a lost gringo, I would certainly rescue him. Not that I knew the first thing in Guatemalan fisherman's heart or mind, or any other stranger for that matter.

The breeze from the boat ride cools me, the evening settles into a chirping, glowing beauty, and I'm glad to be moving in the right direction. I don't even think about the fact I have my back to two men I know nothing about. I do check on them occasionally, offering a smile, which only the captain returns.

The river starts to narrow. The captain orders his mate to slow down the motor. The trees crowd over us, and the day becomes darker by the minute. My rescuers began to squabble a bit, and I realize they want to turn back but don't know what to do with me. Hicatee Creek remains farther than I thought.

I crouch at the front of the boat to evade the moss now hanging above us. The mate has to cut the engine, and they both paddle. I offer to help, but they both shake their heads. Even the captain seems tired. I search the shore for a trail, but tree roots like gnarled arms grip and cover everything.

"Mr. Tom!"
A dory with two Mayans lies hidden near the shore under the bow of a tree. I recognize Juan Coc, a villager from Jiccatte Creek. I wave back to him, and our boat swerves to meet them.

I tell Juan I’m trying to reach Hicatee Creek. His face flattens into that openly mystified expression that the poachers shared when I told them my plans.

“You’re coming from Punta Gorda?” he asks.

Juan agrees to bring me the rest of the way. He explains this to my rescuers, and they nod eagerly in approval. I offer the captain all the money I have, $5, but he laughs and brushes me off. I climb gingerly into the low dory, accidentally rubbing the underside of the sea turtle with my knee cap. Soft cool rubber. The Guatemalans leave. I’m sorry for the long trip I gave them.

The rest of the way to Hicatee Creek is much better suited for a dory. The immense pale bodies of limestone rocks rest like white shadows underneath the water, waiting to chew rudders or propellers. But we glide safely over the ghostly boulders and under a green canopy that seems to press closer and closer with the weight of the darkness above. Night sounds begin, scratchy and skipping like an old record.

We reach Hicatee Creek safely. I wonder what Mateo would have thought of my adventure. Not exactly the trip I had planned, but I thought I showed some verve. I’m not sure how much I’ll tell him. I realize how desperate I am to prove myself to Mateo.

When I did return to PG, I found out from Charles Wright that my two Guatemalan rescuers were probably poachers, hunting sea-turtles out of season.

"Bastards always fish out of season, and Belize doesn’t have the manpower to monitor their own shores. I know fishermen from Puerto Barrios who will scrape lobsters off the coral before they’re much bigger than crawdads, killing the
sea and next year's crop. Bastards." Happy I reached home safely, Mr. Wright
discouraged me from taking boat rides down the Sarstoon with strangers.

I never tell Mateo about my trip.
14. CONFIRMATION
The 1998 Confirmation Tour of Southern Toledo with Bishop O.P. Martin ended in Jalacte, the last of the 32 Catholic schools in the district. All schools had prepared for months, and the preparation shined through in the ceremonies. Children sang traditional Ketchi and Maya-Mopan songs, recited poetry, and a brave few even performed liturgical dances. Packed churches watched boys in black pants and white shirts and girls in all white gowns receive the anointing of Holy Chrism on their foreheads.

I sat in the back of the churches, and couldn’t help but feel a bit proud. So much work and preparation, such robust singing from people normally so quiet, the Bishop working himself into a dizzy sweat with his pronouncements. I don’t always understand the value of tradition; the fact that doing something over and over again lends a ritual or a group or a person power makes me nervous. Do we forget why we started doing the ritual in the first place? Do we fear a change in the ritual, even for the better, just because we’ve done it one way for so long?

But everyone seemed so pleased in those churches, so happy to be in community and supporting the children and urgently swearing to do the right thing from then on. I know we all fall apart after mass, no matter how bold the show is. I know the Golden Rule cannot be practiced at every moment. I know we break all the promises we make during mass; mass, in one hour, attempts to fix the unfixable realities of human life. But I have a soft spot for unabashed idealism, as long as such grand plans don’t make me think for a second I’m better than anyone else.

After his homilies, the Bishop chose three or four students to answer questions: What are the Ten Commandments? What are the fruits of the Holy Spirit? (Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) Dozens of children half my size bravely stood before hundreds of family, friends and strangers and never once missed a question from the Bishop. And the Bishop held quite an imposing figure, himself. A stout Garifuna Belizean,
his voice a deep timbre, the Bishop stood next to the candidates with his strong hand on their shoulder that did not move until they were done. I wondered if Concepciona, herself a Confirmation candidate, would answer any questions from the Bishop in Jalacte.

I reach Jalacte before the Bishop on my motorcycle. The principal of Jalacte asked me to arrive about an hour earlier in order to help prepare the Church for confirmation. The Bishop requested the grade school be used for the ceremony, since the Church sat on a high hill, a difficult climb for the Bishop with his bad back. I find Jalacte in a terrible state.

On the soccer field in front of the school, several families gathered. I pull up cautiously to the throng, and when I cut the engine, peals of agitated, high-pitched Ketchi replace the growl of my motorcycle. Used to the calm clicks of Ketchi, I’m made dizzy by the boisterous crowd of about twenty who moan and cry uncontrollably. Some women weep openly, some cover their faces in their hands. I’ve never seen Mayans showing such emotion in public.

I find the principal inside, the school only half-prepared for the ceremony. He sits quietly with his teachers on their students’ tiny desks. The desks creak when the teachers shift uncomfortably upon noticing me. The long dusty schoolroom still has cobwebs hanging in the corners.

"There's been a tragedy, Mr. Tom," the principal explains.

Two families, one from Belize, another from nearby Guatemala, have had a long-time dispute. No one seems clear exactly about what the dispute entails. The principal heard the father of one family once attacked the daughter of the other. Whatever the reason, bad blood existed between the bordering families for some time. From reports of Belizeans in Santa Cruz, Guatemala that morning, the father of the Belizean family shopped in Santa Cruz earlier that day, reportedly a bit intoxicated. He met two members of the rival Guatemalan family, and a heated
exchange began and ended with the father storming out of Santa Cruz. Witnesses watched the two members of the warring family follow him. The same witnesses, on their way back to Jalacte, found the father's body on the trail, hacked to death by machetes.

The principal explains the people on the soccer field are the man's family and close friends. Many of the mourners surround a woman, the wife of the deceased. The woman seems exhausted from grief, her tear-streaked face shining in the hot sun. The people around her support her limp body. The principal explained that the family waited in the soccer field for the body, which friends carried from Guatemala.

The scene is surreal to me, and has become more so in memory. I remember the families surrounded by thick, vibrant green grass. I remember the smell of the copal incense already burning in the school. I remember the breeze that cooled the sweat on my forehead. I even remember the heat of the sun that day, and thinking the people in the middle of the open field must be hot. But I can't remember one face of that crowd, one face of the mourners. I don't think I could look that closely at them.

I watch in mute sadness, until I realize the principal and the teachers wait to see what I would do. Am I supposed to tell them to hurry and finish decorating the Church because the Bishop would be arriving soon? Maybe if I had that kind of faith in Catholicism, the confidence that the act of a high mass such as confirmation would ease people's pain, I would have told them to prepare for the Bishop. But I don't have that kind of faith.

I gaze helplessly at each of the teacher's, then out to the field. A few people in the field spot me, mostly the children to whom I teach religion.

*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*
I can’t imagine what the Mayans in the field want from me. Do they want me to leave? Do they want to have Confirmation mass? Part of me wants to ask each and every one what he or she wants, but that would be a sinful intrusion. For the first time, I’m ashamed that I’m always so concerned about what I should do in Belize, as if everything revolves around me. What is my slight discomfort compared to their pain?

I suddenly spot Concepciona in the field. She’s clinging to the skirt of an older lady comforting the wife of the deceased. Her vast eyes capture me, even through the distance and questions that separate us. That was the only time I remember turning away from her stare.

“Can I do anything for the family?” I ask the teachers weakly.

They exchange looks, and the principal smiles.

“No, Mr. Tom.”

They must sense, correctly, that I’m in over my head. I sit down on a child’s desk with a squeak. I’m about to ask if they think Confirmation mass should still be held, when they have a quick discussion in Ketchi. Slowly, they stand up from their student’s desks and begin to decorate the school. The principal asks me to help.

We hang colored green and yellow streamers from the rafters. We remove the school desks and line the benches up to form long rows. We decorate the altar with flowers and incense. We open up all the windows to let the air flow through. We sweep the floor and jab away cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. We stack hymnals by all the entrances. We place a peeling picture of the Virgin Mary behind the altar and a rusted cross above her head.

As I push desks and sweep floors, I watch the family weep outside. What would they do if I ran to them and told them I’m sorry for their pain? Would they understand me? Would it make things worse? Was it my place? Why am I so
concerned with my behavior in this situation? I don’t think any of the crowd, except Concepciona, even notices my presence. I feel the principal’s hand on my shoulder as I look out the window.

"Best thing is to get ready for the Bishop, Mr. Tom."

I’m not entirely convinced of that, though. We finish the Church, and I search for Mateo. I need his advice. Does he think Confirmation mass should not be held? Would people read the violence this morning as a sign that mass should be canceled? A catechist for thirty years, Mateo’s insight on this matter seems invaluable.

I find Mateo with a group of older Mayans around the back of the Church. I sense I’m interrupting something, but I wait awkwardly until the Ketchi slows down and disappears.

"Mateo, I’m sorry to interrupt. I’m wondering, with this tragedy, if we should still hold Confirmation mass."

Mateo looks very tired. He asks the men around him something in Ketchi, and a few respond with slow nods. None of them look at me. Mateo rubs his neck slowly and looks towards the ground.

"The Bishop has come from far away and the children have worked hard, Mr. Tom."

He’s right. The Bishop’s schedule won’t allow him back to Jalacte for another year. If we cancelled Confirmation, the teachers, parents and students would have to repeat most of their preparation next year. Canceling confirmation doesn’t make practical sense.

I promise Mateo that I’ll inform the Bishop about the murder. It seems the least I can do. I’m certain the Bishop would address the tragedy in his homily. I ask Mateo if there’s anything else I can do. He smiles and says no, then turns back to his friends and resumes the discussion. I realize if any help is given, if any
alteration to adapt to this changed day in Jalacte village is made, it won't come from me.

A man comes running down the hill to the family. He speaks Ketchi, and the family and friends move as a group back up the hill towards Santa Cruz. The bright green soccer field returns to a bright green soccer field. I spot the white dress of Concepciona blinking in the crowd. The principal tells me friends of the family brought the body home. I watch the backs of the crowd climb the hill. All the things I wished they understood about me - how sorry I was, how I wished I could ease their pain - slowly dissolve with their exit. I realize I’ve been a fool, more concerned with my feelings than theirs.

The Bishop arrives ten minutes later, and boys and girls in white and black walk solemnly down the green hill to the Church to meet him. They line up as practiced in two rows, boys and girls, outside the Church. The teachers greet the Bishop warmly. No evidence remains of the morning's tragedy.

The Bishop and Ben hurry into the teacher's quarters to prepare for the mass. Mass ran long in Pueblo Viejo, and the bishop hates to be off schedule. I ask if I can speak to Ben outside, and I quickly describe the morning events. He shakes his head sadly

"Boy, I tell you, these things happen around the border," he replies.

"I'd like to tell the Bishop," I ask. I've never asked to talk to the Bishop privately, and Ben seems surprised.

"All right, Tom."

The Bishop sits in the corner of the room, trying to catch a breeze from the window and fanning himself. During the confirmation tour, his stamina constantly impressed me. He personally attended every Confirmation mass in the country of Belize, a rigorous schedule that ate up almost half of his year. But the schedule wears on him, and I’m nervous to interrupt his usual alone time before mass.
"Bishop?"

He turns slowly, his large face covered in sweat.

"Yes, Tom?" he asks in his deep timbered voice.

"There was a tragedy this morning. Two men from Guatemala murdered a man from Jalacte. Many people were mourning in the soccer field just before you came. I think the village is terribly upset."

I'm not sure what I want him to say. I think part of me wants him to postpone confirmation for an hour and visit the families. I realize that's a lot to ask. And he had the faith in Catholic ritual to heal and mend that I don't. He pauses and shakes his head.

"Then we must make this a special mass," he decides gravely.

I stand, a bit dazed, for a few moments. The Bishop asks me to prepare his mitre, a long staff. I unroll the three pieces from a red cloth and screw them together. I hand the staff to the Bishop. He placed his crozier on his head.

"Let them know I'm ready," he tells me.

He speaks with confidence and strength. He looks like he did a week ago, fresh and ready for his first confirmation mass. The mornings events have inspired him to perform a special mass. I wonder if it's really that simple for him, to convert another person's pain to his own inspiration to save them from that pain. Maybe I'm witnessing the Golden Rule in action; if the Bishop lost a family member, would he want someone to perform a special mass for his lost loved one?

I walk to the church, staring mostly at the foot of grass ahead of me, and let the principal know the Bishop is ready. The principal and teachers straighten the line of students that has slumped and warped in the sun. The entrance hymn begins, a Ketchi hymn the people know the Bishop particularly enjoys. The students enter first, and the singing leaps a notch when the Bishop ducks into the church. The marimba player taps the keys of his instrument skillfully, the keys
singing like rain on tight tin.. A late afternoon breeze glides into the packed church and dances the streamers playfully. By all appearances, a mass like any other confirmation mass I've attended.

I don't spot any of the family of the deceased, but I notice several of the friends in the soccer field. They sing with their heads down like everyone else, kneel when the Bishop says to kneel, stand when the Bishop says to stand. I do the same.

Standing in the back, I look sideways at the people around me. I look into their faces and can't find any vestige of grief. I wonder if this, then, is an example of the Maya way of adapting Catholicism to their needs. I wonder if the mass is an intrusion, but by accepting mass on their own terms, mass becomes a comfortable distraction. If that is the case, I realize, my approach to Catholicism may be similar to the Mayan approach. We take what we need when we need it. Maybe I had more in common with the Maya than I thought.

I search the faces I can't read and chew this theory over for a while. I find Mateo, singing loudly from his hymnal. I've definitely seen him look like that, his brow furrowed while trying to chop wood. For all I know, he's thinking about chopping wood. I realize my simple theory is another vain attempt to connect with a quiet, amazing people that I would forever wonder what went on in their heads.

The Bishop mentions the tragedy in his homily and relates the event to the beginning of a new life for the confirmation candidates.

"Whenever there is death, there is new life. That is our belief," he proclaims.

I again search the faces of the friends of the deceased for a reaction, but I can't decipher any. Their feelings run either too deep, too plain or too Mayan for me to fathom. I leave the church after the homily to get some fresh air. After so many confirmation masses, I seldom sit through an entire one. The Bishop's
homilies change very little from village to village, and the crowds stuff the
churches with heat. Ben never leaves a mass, but I don’t have Ben’s faith or
stamina. I heard that Joe played guitar in all the Confirmation masses, but that’s a
contest I concede.

A group of BDF interrogate some villagers about the morning’s events. I
recognize one soldier from town, someone I occasionally play football with, and he
calls me over. He’s gathering evidence about the suspects to bring to the
Guatemalan police. Ramirez, my friend, is not optimistic about finding the killers.

"Dey can hide in dat bush for long time, man. And we caan look for dem in
Guatemala, right? Most likely, dey never be found."

Mass ends. The one man in town with a camera takes pictures of the
Bishop and the newly confirmed. We return to his dressing room. I take apart his
mitre into three gold rods and wrap each part in red cloth. A private ritual, a
private ceremony between the Bishop and me after each mass. We never speak
during it.

I express again to Mateo how sorry I am, and tell him to tell Concepciona
the same, who I can’t find. The Bishop, Fr. Ring and Ben leave in the truck. I
follow behind on my motorcycle, and we reach town by evening. I don’t return to
Jalacite for another three months, my longest wait.
15.

ICE CREAM PARLOR
I sit in the back of a pick-up truck with Mateo and his family, three months before I return to the States. We’re on the way to Punta Gorda, courtesy of the Bishop, who just finished Confirmation mass in Jalacte, one without the dark atmosphere of the year before. After mass, I invited Mateo and his family to return to town. Mateo and I discussed the possibility many times, and, since we had free transport, this seemed like a good opportunity. The family agreed, and the children seem excited. Mateo tells me the whole family has never been to town together before. We enjoy a cool evening ride back, the jarring potholes nulled by the exchange of smiles.

We arrive at my house and clamber up the front stairs. Mateo and his family sit on the porch and watch the ocean, murmuring Ketchi and pointing towards the lights of Puerto Barrios. The Acks fed and sheltered me so many times, I’m anxious to be a good host - nervous, though, about what food to serve. I know they love coffee, so I offer some Folger’s instant. Not sweet ground cacao coffee, but they nod enthusiastically.

After I offer coffee, Matilda stands up from the bench and heads inside the kitchen. She looks for a pot to boil water. I ask Mateo to tell her that I will make the coffee. Mateo calls to her, and Matilda sits back down, begrudgingly. I wonder if she’s anxious to serve her familiar role, or just afraid of my coffee.

We sit on the porch, drinking coffee and watching the shadows of clouds eat up the water of the bay. The moon sits fat on the water, and I think of the ancient Maya tale of how the Moon and Sun married.

Sun and Moon have a tumultuous marriage according to many Mayan stories. During one of their rifts, Moon left the Sun to join the King Vulture in his nest. Anxious to retrieve his wife, Sun borrowed the hide of Deer and pretended to be dead. Soon, the vultures circled the fake carcass. When one of the birds hopped close enough, Sun grabbed the vulture’s foot, forcing the vulture to carry him back
to King Vulture's nest. Once there, Sun persuaded Moon to leave her vulture lover and his nest. An easy task, since Vulture's nest, which looked white and beautiful from afar, was actually made of bird droppings. Sun and Moon still have fights, and ancient Mayans believed that eclipses mark their quarrels.

Concepciona and Arnulfo swing in the hammock, and I listen to Mateo and Matilda chat. They hold hands, the first time I ever notice that. I wonder if this is like a date for them, the Sun and the Moon enjoying each other's company.

A tradewind picks up and blows away any humidity remaining from the day. I'm happy and think fondly of Mr. Wright, who passed away a few days ago. I refuse to be saddened by his departure, because I know he always laughed at the indulgence of grief. I'll miss our chats and his stories, and I'll never forget the smell of his tobacco laugh.

My neighbors drop in for a visit, Emmanee and Darrin. Seven years apiece, Emmanee and Concepciona meet by the hammock. Emmanee, a Garifuna girl, has her hair braided in multi-colored beads. Concepciona, in her traditional Mayan yellow dress, meets Emmanee shyly. I won't forget the smile between them with the Bay of Honduras glimmering in moonlight behind them. They stand about the same size, have about the same weight and frame, but remain about as opposite in culture as imaginable. But they're both Belizean kids, and they both know how to swing in a hammock.

I ask Mateo if the family would like to eat at the Ice Cream Parlor. I thought about cooking, but I felt like Matilda might be uncomfortable if I serve her. The parlor would also have more for the family to choose from. Mostly, though, I'm tired from a long day of confirmation masses and don't feel like cooking for five. I imagine Matilda would like to have the option of not cooking sometimes in Jalacte.
I've never walked through Punta Gorda with a Mayan family. A Mayan family strolling through town at night is a strange enough sight, since villagers usually visited town for morning market and then left on the noon bus. But a Mayan family walking around at night with a gringo makes for an even rarer sight.

We pass by Hustlers, a bar next to the Ice Cream Parlor on Main Street. Hustlers, all scraped paint, rotting wood and rusty tin, sat like a beggar next to the bright florescent cleaniness and colorful new umbrellas and tables of the Ice Cream parlor.

Slim Jackson, an old Garifuna man paying rent at Hustlers, recognizes me. A few weeks earlier, as I hurried to the bank, weaving through the four foot sea of St. Peter Claver students in their green and white uniforms on their way home to lunch, my checkbook dropped out of my bag. I waited in line for twenty minutes at the bank, then realized my loss, and headed out of the packed bank embarrassed.

I retraced my steps to and from the bank several times, until I heard a voice shout out from the darkness of Hustler's. A skinny Garifuna man waved my checkbook at me and hailed me over to join him and his friends in a game of dominos. I had to deposit our food money before the bank closed, so I didn't have time for dominos, but I bought a round for Slim and his friends. Since then, if he was in Hustler's, Slim always gave me a friendly wave.

As I walk by with Mateo and his family, Slim tilts his head and stares at us. I wave, wondering what he thinks. He hitches up his pants on his gaunt frame and scratches his head.

"You gone native, my boy!" he shouts at me. Laughter filters through the darkness and smoke of the bar behind him.

We take up an entire picnic table at the parlor, and the waitress hands us our menus. Mateo translates to Matilda, and they choose rice and beans and chicken for the family. The meal arrives with potato salad, which no one likes, I
think because of the mayonnaise. Matilda dutifully creates extra room on her plate and piles the family’s potato salad there, an impressive mound. She finishes her meal first, and piles everyone’s bones on her plate as well, then collects everyone’s plate as they finish. She moves precisely and methodically, the same familiar confidence she exudes when she makes tortillas.

We all finish our meals, except for the heap of potato salad on Matilda’s plate. The children shoot nervous glances at the monstrous pile, and I have the urge to devour it, just to see their reaction, but I hold myself back. The Acks seem stunned enough when I eat my own modest portion of potato salad.

A Nicaraguan family, the Marencos, owns the parlor. The husband a doctor running a clinic next door, while the wife manages the restaurant. Mrs. Marenco, a kind lady and tireless worker, does not hide her amazement that Mateo and his family finished their plates.

"You people never clear your food!" she remarks.

I stifle a comment, irked that she would generalize in such a way. But Mateo smiles and explains the food tasted very good, and I notice that Mrs. Marenco smiles and only jokes as Belizeans constantly do. I’m glad I kept my mouth shut and stayed out of the way of two Belizeans talking.

We order ice cream, imported from Guatemala. Mateo says his children have never tasted ice cream before. Concepciona and Arnulfo hold the ice cream in front of their eyes for a few seconds, and I fear they think I want them to eat cold potato salad on a cone. But after one nervous lick, they devour the cones. I think of my first memory of ice cream, at Braum’s Ice Cream in Dallas, Texas. The sight of Arnulfo and Concepciona pointing out on each other’s cones the colorful trickle of melting ice cream that needed a good licking before sticking a hand reminded me of playing the same game with my brothers.
We arrive home, and the Acks prepare for bed. The family lays several blankets out on my living room floor in order to sleep side by side. They light candles around their bedding.

"Good night," I say quietly.

"Mr. Tom?"

"Yes, Mateo?"

The whole family sits on the floor, a sea breeze from a window flickering the candles in their faces. Mateo looks me in the eye and smiles.

"Thank you for bringing us to your home."

I smile back. I wonder if I finally did unto Mateo as he did unto me.