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Sa'x jolom Chacmut: Rain forest plant used in treatment of madness and headaches; leaves are crushed in cold water, and the liquid is drunk and used to bathe the head

They drove along the Belize highway, a narrow, sun-beaten lane that wound through miles of savanna. The rainy season had just ended, but the lush grasses were already the color of straw. Scattered palmettos drooped listlessly, some of their crowns shriveled like dried tobacco leaves. Even the sky had lost its semitropical brilliance, the blue faded into the dull pewter of an overcast afternoon. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Burns had carefully planned his brief shoot for the shoulder season, when there would be few downpours to interrupt the filming and less of the oppressive, stultifying heat of the dry season.

"How much further to Cayo?" Burns asked as the van bounced over another dry pothole. Burns grabbed the shoulder strap and peered out the window. They were still the only car on the road.

"No to worry," Gilbert said. The driver grinned, his head bobbing

to the reggae music. The same Bob Marley tape had been thumping from the front dash speakers since they had driven off the airport's dirt lot earlier that morning.

"What's that in hours, Gilbert?" Burns wanted to escape this maddening sea of parched grass and chalk it up to a bad dream.

"You smoke some ganja?" Gilbert offered, gesturing to the hand-rolled joint he kept handy just behind his ear.

Burns didn't get high even in normal circumstances. He rarely even drank alcohol, preferring the buzz of strong, sweet coffee.

"Your friends?" Gilbert asked, grinning again. Three crew members dozed shoulder to shoulder in the back seat like frat boys on a road trip. Burns had hired them for enough shoots over the years that he'd come to think of them as family. His cameraman's young son even called him "Uncle" Mike.

"We're all on the clock," Burns answered. "We can party when this is over."

Gilbert shrugged and motioned to the blowers that blasted cool air throughout the van. "We have air-condition. Relax."

Relax. Burns had been told this so many times that the word barely registered anymore. He picked up his bible, a three-ring binder stuffed with contact names, photocopied pages of books and articles, a shot list and a detailed production schedule for the week.

"I tell my wife we make a movie," Gilbert said. "She is very excited. I tell her maybe we stop at our home later. After."

"It's a documentary, not a movie," Burns said. "It's not make-believe."

He distrusted fiction and fantasy. Burns wanted facts and true stories. He sought people and places that really existed and were not merely the creation of someone's overactive imagination. The real world didn't need any embellishment.

Gilbert nodded agreeably, then described his house, which was set just off the highway with its own small milpa, which teemed with healthy stalks of maize and sugar cane.

"Your house is on this road?" Burns asked. He couldn't imagine

anyone living or wanting to live in the middle of this emptiness.

"Si," Gilbert said. "Is very near."

Burns searched the grasslands.

Finally, pale green spikes of palmettos had begun to sprout in the distance like overgrown weeds. But there were no houses, still no sign of traffic on this road that had been grandly named the Western Highway.

"You have boy, girl?" Gilbert asked.

"Kids?" Burns said, surprised by the question. Even marriage was something he hadn't given much thought about. He was devoted to filmmaking. If he wasn't producing a documentary, he was watching one, studying images and techniques for something he might use.

Gilbert appeared puzzled, his wide, cueball eyes narrowing as he squinted through the dirty windshield. Suddenly, he screamed and slammed on the brakes. Burns grabbed the hanging strap and heard his crew tumble forward from the back seat, bouncing into each other and the seat backs.

Without an apology or explanation, Gilbert turned off the engine, cutting off his reggae music, then hopped out the door. The dank, humid air rushed in, sour-smelling, like a sewage drain in the city. Gilbert hurried around to the front of the van and stooped down by the front grill just out of sight.

"We blow a tire?" Vic Colt asked. It was the first time his cameraman or any of his crew had spoken for hours. Burns didn't answer, unsettled by the utter quiet that surrounded them. The empty lane continued far into the distance like the road to nowhere.

Moments later, Gilbert reappeared at the side of the van alongside Burns, wearing a big, scarecrow grin and holding a turtle the size of a hubcap.

"Beautiful, yes?"

"It's big," Burns managed to say, relieved they hadn't broken down after all.

Gilbert shuffled into the dry grass, his narrow shoulders stooped and his skinny legs bowed from the awkward size and weight of the

turtle. He talked to the animal as he set it down, as if he were soothing an old friend. Before he backed away, Gilbert bowed and wished the turtle a safe journey.

"I worry to run over him," Gilbert said, climbing back behind the steering wheel.

"He's not kidding," Vic said. He yawned and slid back into his seat.

Burns knew many of the Maya were devout animists, believing spirits dwelled in everything from a plant leaf to a jaguar. But he'd assumed the Creoles and islanders were more practical and less superstitious.

"No more stop," Gilbert announced as he powered the van back to highway speed.

"Good," Burns said. "We don't have much time as it is."

Five days on location, to be exact. Burns needed weeks, if not months, to get inside the subject, to get to know the people and their world. But this project was filmmaking-on-the-cheap. The budget was so low that Burns felt like he was part of a rapid deployment force. This was fast becoming the business model for all the networks and production companies. In the end, he had jumped at the chance, drawn to the prestige of a foreign story—so rare in television and even the big screen. Burns, like so many of his colleagues, was also hoping to hit "the one," the documentary that would make his name.

"I love to drive," Gilbert said, gazing ahead as if they were speeding through paradise. "Time all mine. That is what I will do when there is enough money. I go to the States and get a job driving a semi coast to coast."

"Well, the roads are better," Burns said. "But you'll have lots of company."

"That's what we do here," Gilbert said. "We get enough money, we leave. Go to New York or Los Angeles."

"You don't want to go to New York."

Burns was only too happy to have escaped the cold, hostile canyons of Manhattan. It was less a home for him than a base from which

to launch trips elsewhere.

“New York has jobs,” Gilbert said. “And money. Many are rich.”

Burns was reminded of his own tiresome struggle to pay the rent on his fifth-story walk-up. It wasn’t the kind of life he had imagined for himself when he was younger. By now, he assumed he would have made it and not be living like a student.

“Not so many are rich,” Burns said. “Not so many as you think.”

“No. But more than Belize.”

Burns had glimpsed the poverty as they drove past the outskirts of the city. There had been that tired group of skeleton-thin black men standing barefoot in puddles that glistened with turgid sewage. Behind them, under the palm trees, were candy-colored shacks perched uneasily on skinny stilts that looked out over mounds of scattered trash. But the image that stayed with him was the toddler playing in a cardboard box, a live toucan perched on the tattered edge like a stuffed toy. At the time, he decided that it was too National Geographic to stop and film. Burns wanted images that were unique and different, that would set his documentary apart.

In his view, filmmaking happened long before the camera was turned on. For this shoot, he had spent days working up a shot sheet, a long list of possible images and scenes they might film. He had scoured photo books, magazines and other films for inspiration. He knew what to expect. Except when it came to the old Mayan healer. There were pictures of bush doctors, village elders and shamans. But not a single curandero. He was believed to be the last surviving curandero in those mountains—what was once the heartland of the Mayan empire.

“You ever go to see a curandero when you’re sick?” Burns asked.

“Brujos,” Gilbert said without hesitation. Witches. “My wife’s sister. She feeling very tired, not happy. Lonely. So she try anything. She go and pay him, and he tell her problem she have no lover.”

“Like a psychiatrist,” Burns said.

“Yes. But this brujo, he is very powerful. He keeps a blanc.”

Gilbert explained that the old curandero was said to have put a

spell on a white American woman who followed him everywhere. It was said they went into the forest together for hours at a time gathering dangerous plants and barks that the curandero used to put a spell on others. The blanc deferred to him like a servant, yet she was married and owned a huge estate near the Macal River that had electricity and clean water.

"The woman is a scientist, an ethnobotanist," Burns said.

"You know her?" Gilbert asked.

"Why do you think you're taking us all the way to Cayo?" Burns was about to explain the research partnership between the blanc woman and the curandero, but given Gilbert's distrust of the curandero and his traditional medicine, he decided it was best to leave the topic alone. Yet he was intrigued by Gilbert's opinion, if only because there were plenty of people in New York and Boston who also believed that the ethnobotanist might be under some kind of spell.

Burns was startled by what seemed to be a massive movement off to the west. At first, he thought it was a flock of birds rising out of the unending savanna. Instead, spinach green hills appeared on the horizon with the suddenness of an apparition. A dense, milky steam drifted languidly above the round, gentle peaks. He felt a quickening sensation, a kind of primal, anticipatory excitement.

"Cayo," Gilbert said.

Burns was about to give an order to stop so they could set up the video camera and get some beauty shots. But the rain started without warning. It dropped in heavy, thick sheets, pounding the roof of the van. Gilbert slowed the van and turned on his lights to try to see through the falling water.

"Rain," Gilbert said. "We have been without for long. Is good."

An hour later, they were churning through mud the color of peanut butter. Black men and women, their skin much lighter than Gilbert's, began appearing alongside the van, trudging through the rain. They walked without apparent concern, as if slogging through this weather were routine. Gilbert blew the van horn. Arms were raised in greeting without anyone's turning around.

"You know them?" Burns asked.

"Neighbors. They come to work in the big sugar cane milpa. As everyone does."

"But not you."

"Me?" Gilbert asked, not smiling. "No. Never."

"You drive."

"Yes," Gilbert grinned with the satisfaction of being understood. "Me drive all the time."

The heavy rains stopped abruptly when they finally reached the concrete bridge that led over the river into San Ignacio. The wet road gleamed under the van's headlights, the reflection offering a glimpse of the weathered, clapboard homes that were slung at the road's edge. They reminded Burns of the Mexican shacks in Baja, where he'd done a shoot a few years earlier. There, too, he'd been struck by the hapless poverty, a place far beyond development schemes.

Gilbert guided the van uphill toward a cluster of weak, flickering lights. The engine whined under the combined weight of the passengers and the television equipment, burning oil as it struggled up the steep slope. Gilbert pointed out the town's electrical generator as they crept by, apologizing in advance for its frequent breakdowns. Burns listened pensively, his attention riveted on the crest of the hill that was still fifty yards away.

"Is no trouble," Gilbert said.

The van was aimed at the starless night sky, inching along like a roller coaster on its final ascent, everyone acutely aware of each painstaking rotation of the tires. Burns peered ahead into the dark with a tense, forced stoicism. If the van lost traction on the wet road, he knew it would slide backwards, down the hill, careening into one of the distant shacks, maybe not even stopping until the black river. But he would not let himself think about this, would only listen to the whine of the engine as if it were a distant sound that demanded intense concentration.

When the front wheels slipped, Burns dug into the hanging strap, his eyes drawn to the ambient light that hovered at the crest of the

hill. He sat on the lip of the seat, breathing faster, his head pounding.

Gilbert let out a small grunt of surprise. His face was taut and serious. The van was at a standstill, the engine shaking violently, threatening to stall. Gilbert gave it more gas and the wheels slid again, moving them sideways, the tires spinning uselessly. He stretched himself further over the steering wheel, muttering incoherently, and peered down at the road as if it were a living thing, threatening their progress.

“Lay off the gas,” Burns warned. “You’re going to lose control.”

Gilbert ignored him, obstinately waiting for the road to cooperate. The crew was unnerved, their fear charging the close air. At once, all three men searched frantically for a door handle, groping over and across one another, desperate to be the first one to safety.

The wheels caught in the midst of the commotion. But the crew continued to scramble until the van began to creep forward once again, climbing toward the light. A squat, oversized bungalow appeared behind it, an American Express sign dangling from a rusted hook near the entrance. The van lurched over the crest of the hill, and the whining engine collapsed into the next gear as they leveled off, the wheels crunching over the gravel driveway of the hotel. Gilbert let the van drift up to the glass doors.

“Hotel San Ignacio,” Gilbert informed them. “Three stars.”

Burns stumbled out of the van, his crew following. The heavy, humid air drifted around them like a vapor, obscuring the outlines of the tin-roofed hotel, making the building seem to float in the gray mist. The air reeked of burnt oil.

Burns let his crew unload the huge anvil cases one at a time. The heavy silver boxes were packed with portable quartz lights and stands, rolls of light gels, screens and scrims, a battery-powered sound mixer, a selection of microphones from a boom to tiny, wireless lavalieres, a new composite tripod with a fluid head, one shrink-wrapped case of raw video stock, and a Beta-cam, complete with backup batteries and remote control.

Gilbert watched grimly as the cases piled up in the lobby, almost

blocking the entrance. By the time the crew was finished, he stood so still and fearful that Burns worried for him. Maybe it was exhaustion.

"What's wrong?" Burns asked, wiping sweat from his forehead. The humidity clung to him like his damp clothes.

"Guns," Gilbert said, his voice low and soft. "It is like the army with all these equipment."

"What army?" Burns asked. There were fewer than six hundred soldiers in the entire Belize Defense Force, a token band of locals set up by Great Britain a few years earlier.

"Rebels," Gilbert said. "They cross the border to steal food, clothes, shoes, anything. Bandits. They shoot anyone."

"Guatemalans?"

Gilbert nodded soberly.

Even if there were wandering bands of soldiers, it hardly mattered. The landscape alone protected his assignment. The research camp and surrounding jungle where they were going was isolated and best reached by boat. Besides, Burns was certain no one was foolish enough to mess around with Americans.

"Well, Gilbert, the only thing inside those cases that can shoot anything is a camera. Nothing to fear."

Gilbert stared at the anvil cases, unconvinced.

"So we'll see you in the morning?" Burns asked. "You'll take us to the river landing?"

Burns was relieved to finally escape to solitude. He sprawled across the clean but musty bed, closing his eyes to the yellowed ceiling, the paint crumpled or peeling from the onslaught of humidity. There was no fan to stir the air, heavy with the ringing of insects that roamed outside in the darkness. The noise would not let him sleep. He tried covering his head, but that only made the thick, humid air more difficult to breathe. Burns finally relented and got out of bed. He tried taking a shower, but the warm water lasted only a few minutes before it abruptly turned cold and made him leap through the vinyl shower curtain.

THE FIVE LOST DAYS

Burns put on his jeans and unlocked the warped screen door that led to the small porch. The pale light of his bedside lamp leaked through, giving a faint definition to the plastic chair that rested against the cement wall. But beyond the porch, there was only a black wall of sound, the starless sky nearly indistinguishable from the land underneath. For a moment, Burns felt that he had truly reached one of the ends of the earth. The still, thick air reeked of decay like a hole filled with compost. A strange, hostile chatter seemed to grow louder as he stood peering out into the darkness, as if all those insects and birds and whatever else foraged through the night were somehow watching him, waiting. Burns yawned nervously and slipped back inside his room, latching the screen door behind him.