

Miguel Aju

Margaret B. Young

DUST-WHITENED SANDALS KICKED DIRT into Miguel Aju's mouth as he lay by the side of the road. He spat it out and groped for his bottle. Clutching it to him, he closed his eyes and drifted.

He saw Tomas — gentle, serious, tender, but with an unweathered face and eyes that seemed too eager to have lived long. Tomas: wise and educated, able to read. He had attended two years of school. Often, after the work was done, he read to Miguel or, before the work began, read alone under a tree by misty dawnlight. Often he sat quietly with a closed book on his lap. Thinking. To Miguel it seemed his brother had always been a thinking man.

When Tomas married Rosa, Miguel stood by him. Rosa's eyes were both clear. (It would be many years before the disease would take her right eye, blacken its lid, and put warts in place of eyelashes.) She was pretty, radiant.

As a wedding gift, Miguel carved a violin from the wood of a gum tree. Tomas plucked the strings and chanted notes with a sometimes resonant, sometimes strained voice. He sang the song of their brotherhood. Miguel could not think of Tomas without hearing the music of the violin.

The notes faded, and Miguel moved through the years from childhood to manhood, and finally to his own wife, when she was young. He spoke her name and saw her. Her bronze cheeks glowed, her teeth were white and strong, her eyes sparkled. Her hand moved to cover her eyes, and she lowered her head as she walked towards him wearing white bridal shoes and socks. A veil covered her face and made her look misty and elusive. He blinked as he had blinked then (but then it had been from nervousness) and found the dirt road again.

He felt his tears but made no effort to keep them from trickling down his face. He closed his eyes quickly and his wife was there again, this time bulging at the belly.

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The moon was full. She was restless next to him, her breaths uneven and strained. She turned and sighed, then groaned. Her forehead was wet and cold, and when he touched it with trembling hands, she breathed, "Ya."

It was too soon for the baby to come.

He was sweating as he put on his trousers. His lungs burned as he ran for the aged midwife, who was solemn and foreboding when she answered his frantic knock and recognized him. She said nothing, only looked at the circle moon.

He understood. Neither spoke as they hurried back to Miguel's hut.

He waited outside as the groans of his wife became louder and deeper. A scream cut through the night like an arrow. Miguel jumped to his feet. He heard a moan and weak sobbing. The midwife was speaking but he could not understand her words. She began singing a low and reverent dirge. When the sobbing ebbed, the door opened. The midwife walked towards him. "Ca'i," she murmured. "There were two babies." She looked up at the cloud-webbed pearl in the sky. "The moon," she whispered.

"My wife?" His voice quivered.

"Asleep." The old woman drew her shawl over her silver hair and walked away.

He would buy a coffin in the morning, one large enough for both babies.

He entered the room which held the dead and the sleeping. The evidence of life which had swollen his wife's stomach was wrapped in a blanket. Trembling, he unfolded the cover and looked at his children: a son and a daughter. Wet, shiny, lifeless. He wrapped the tiny bodies again and lay next to his wife.

The next day, the weight of the little coffin pressed on his shoulders like too many pieces of *leña*. The Indian men removed their hats and nodded to Miguel as the funeral procession passed them. His wife, supported by her mother, moaned and chanted while the gates to the tombs were opened.

That was the first day he had tasted liquor.

He turned and tears trickled across his nose. He knew that he was crying audibly now, but he did not care. A bare foot on his stomach jarred him. "Quiet, old man. You're dreaming."

Miguel forced his eyes up to see a man standing above him. "Let it be so," he murmured and closed his eyes. The tears began again. "Let it be so." The brown foot dug suddenly, brutally into his belly. Sand sprayed into his face and mouth, sticking to his wet cheeks and lips. He choked and spit and reached for the bottle beside him. It was nearly empty. He gulped the last bit, then closed his eyes, and waited.

The corn was just appearing in dots of green over the field as his wife appeared. She put her hands on her stomach, and he knew she was with child again. She blossomed with the corn. But this time the moon made a cradle for the child. The baby boy came right, and his birth cries summoned Miguel's first real prayer.

To whom he prayed, he was not sure. Perhaps to the god who was celebrated in processions of bloody statues, perhaps to the god to whom great towers were built anciently, perhaps to his own god. Perhaps they were all one. But long, formal sentences of thanks came to him, and he knelt as he spoke them.

Estevan, his son, was born. Praise God.

The little hands, like delicate, brown seashells, curved around Miguel's thumb and held tight. The half-open eyes fought for focus. The tiny, pink mouth moved in tentative sucking. A son.

Within three months of the birth, Estevan was laughing and squealing delight. "He will be a happy boy," said Miguel, "a great man."

And he grew well. He became strong and quiet, like Tomas. His legs became slender and muscular after he was weaned. When he was just four years old, he could haul a small, tumplined load of *leña* from the forest to the village. So Miguel took him wherever he went: to the forest, to the market, to the city.

The daughter Miguel's wife bore him two years later was a joy also. She would serve her husband well when she was grown.

But Estevan was Miguel's hope.

The boy's muscles stretched and strained and hardened as his load of wood grew heavier. The two of them, father and son, smiled, sweating, as they climbed the hill from the forest after chopping wood.

How good it felt to enter their gate, thrust the loads to the ground with great jerks of their backs, and walk unburdened into their kitchen hut! Estevan imitated his father's motions exactly.

And there, in the firelight, was Miguel's wife, her skin glowing, her plaited black hair shining in the orange glow, her night-dilated eyes fixed on the flame as she blew on it. She slapped the *masa* from one hand to the other and placed the tortillas on the ceramic plate which rested over the fire. Their daughter patted out tiny tortillas like her mother. When one stuck to her finger, she ate it with delight and they all laughed at her.

Estevan laughed hardest, then grew quiet and serious, like Tomas, as he ate. Miguel's wife poured coffee and turned tortillas on the *comal*. She spoke. Miguel heard not so much the words as the rhythm of the Cakchiquel sounds. And he ate the thick tortillas, soothed by the music of her voice.

How beautiful she was.

Had been.

He opened his eyes. He could see much from the road.

To the south was the forest, its trees taunting machetes with laughing leaves and waving strings of moss. Birds nested in those green towers, flying above the reach of the gum trees and the cones of the pines. Crowing and chirping, they dared the wind and beat it, teased the rain and hid from it, challenged the predators and escaped them with a flutter of wings, and hovered, laughing, over man, whose muscles were tired from too many days of wrestling the wind and fighting the rain and avoiding the killers and thieves.

To the east was the village of San José. All that was necessary was there: the green cornfields alongside each smoking hut, the corn *masa* inside, the women, and the men. Each hut breathed the life of the people.

To the west was the land of the sun, hidden by jagged, blue-cliffed mountains. The sun would descend behind the mountains soon tonight, and with his fiery majesty say, "You may watch where I go, but you may not enter my land."

To the north was the church. Just a small building. Only a metal signpost identified it as *La Iglesia de Jesucristo de los Santos de los Ultimos Dias*.

The church. The missionaries. (How shyly his wife had greeted Elder Carson and Elder Stevens. How tall and pale they were.)

Miguel stared up the road. The church had been rebuilt after the destructions. It appeared unchanged, as many of the houses and stores surrounding it appeared unchanged. Only those who knew could tell the brick was new. Oh yes, the church was still there. With his people, the Indians, with visions of sacred lands, with promises of freedom beyond the birds', as it had been before.

He closed his eyes.

Elder Carson was the taller of the two missionaries. He smiled more than Elder Stevens and spoke *gringo* Spanish slowly and with great concentration. They showed Miguel bright and colorful pictures and told him good stories.

"Will you read the Book of Mormon?" Elder Carson asked.

Miguel looked down. "I cannot read." He felt Elder Stevens's nervous eyes on him, met his stare, and tried to laugh. "My brother Tomas can read," he apologized and looked at Elder Stevens. "But I never went to school."

"Could your brother read it to you?" asked Elder Carson.

"Yes."

Elder Stevens relaxed a little.

"Will you pray?" Elder Carson asked.

"I don't know how —" he began, but Elder Carson told him the words to say, and Miguel prayed.

"My brother, Tomas, can read the book to me," he repeated as Elder Stevens shook his hand. "Tomas, my brother."

"*Mi hermano*," he said aloud, and practiced again the sound of his brother's name. He had said the words clearly then, and the missionaries had understood him. He had not been drunk, then.

The wife and children of Tomas joined Miguel and his family to listen to the scripture stories. Tomas put on thick glasses and read the Spanish slowly, translating it afterwards into Cakchiquel.

Miguel remembered best the night Tomas read about Jesus.

The two families and the *gringos* first sang Spanish hymns the missionaries had taught them. *En el Pueblo de Zion* and *Santos Venid*. Then Tomas played his violin, plucking the strings, chanting the song, straining for the high notes, whispering the low ones.

After Tomas began his music, Elder Carson took a marvelous machine from his bag: a shiny, black box upon which two transparent wheels spun.

Miguel watched the wheels. Elder Carson held a stick-like piece of the machine close to Tomas's mouth as the song came, high notes dropping to low, low notes leaping to high, loud, soft, full, thin notes. When the music ended, Elder Carson turned a knob and the two wheels spun more rapidly. He turned another knob and — magic! The music of Tomas began again, but Tomas was not singing it. It had been captured in the machine!

They all listened in awe. When the music faded, exactly as it had faded on Tomas's lips moments before, they laughed. Elder Carson played the music once more. Then he put his machine with Tomas's music back into his bag. Tomas put the violin on a shelf and put on his glasses. He read by the light of two candles.

Miguel's daughter was at her mother's breast. Estevan's head rested on Miguel's lap. Tomas's children leaned their tired heads against their mother's shoulders.

Tomas read the words: "*He aqui, yo soy Jesu Cristo,*" and the beauty of Jesus, who had never been more than a bloody statue or a threatening, unseen force that could turn bread to flesh and wine to blood, began to touch Miguel. He remembered the prayer he had spoken on the day Estevan was born. All the gods he had heard of merged into God Jesus.

God Jesus had wept and had ached and had loved. God Jesus had blessed the babies.

Miguel looked down at Estevan and touched the boy's head. Soft, black hair, warm brows. Beloved son.

God Jesus was all the yearnings Miguel had no words for, all the feelings that sometimes made the earth so glorious and his wife so beautiful. God Jesus was all the peace that Tomas embodied in those childhood, misty mornings. When Tomas read the scriptures, Miguel felt all of this within himself. Jesus God.

Miguel's eyes were wet.

When Tomas finished the chapters and closed the book, there was silence. No wind to move the leaves, no words to disturb the reverence. One could have heard the gentle flutter of a bird's wings. Outside the hut's open door, stars stretched their patterns across the black sky.

"They were your fathers," Elder Carson whispered, "your fathers who saw Jesus and touched his wounds. This is the land where he came."

Miguel touched the earth.

Elder Stevens's head was bowed. He said nothing, did not even look up.

Both families agreed to be baptized. The following day, Tomas, Rosa, their son Humberto, and Miguel and his wife dressed in white and went with the missionaries to the river.

Miguel's wife looked angelic stepping into the little waves. The sunlit water sparkled over her as Elder Carson immersed her. She came up smiling, weeping, her tears mixing with the river water on her cheeks. Miguel helped her onto the bank, looked into her eyes, squeezed her fingers in his. Then he stepped into the river himself.

It was cold around his knees, hips, chest, as he descended. Elder Carson prayed and lowered him into the water. The first thing he saw when he emerged was his wife, like a vision, and Estevan beside her, grinning.

It was he, Miguel, who took Estevan into the river a year later and baptized him. "*Habiendo sido comisionado por Jesucristo, yo te bautizo en el nombre de. . .*" It was he who spoke the confirmation blessing on him, and hugged him afterwards, pulled him to his chest, whispering, "My son, my son." Estevan.

Miguel's eyes opened quickly.

The mix of market sounds and greetings jumbled his thoughts. He strained to understand the words. He could not. He stared at the sun, right into the forbidden face. When he shut his eyes, the darkness was burnt red and scarred by a picture of that center light, which grew brighter and whiter as he tightened his eyelids. He crossed his arms over his face and let himself drift in the murmur of market sounds.

Tomas was dying even when he was baptized, though they did not know it then. Only a month after his baptism, he collapsed in the fields and was carried inside the hut, still, pale, moaning. The villagers said he was being punished for joining the devil's church. Miguel did not understand his brother's disease. The missionaries did not understand it either, but came often to see him, bless him, pray over him. They were with him when he was ready to die.

A bed had been moved into the tiny hut. There Tomas lay, unmoving. Rosa knelt on the mat below the bed, her arms stoically folded. (The sickness had started on her eye already. It was swollen shut.)

Tomas asked for another blessing. The missionaries placed their hands on his head. Elder Stevens anointed him with oil. Elder Carson spoke the blessing: "You will live one or two more days, as the Lord desires."

Then Elder Stevens whispered hoarsely, "Brother Tomas, my mother is where you are going. Will you tell her please that I love her and I'm fine?" The young missionary wept outright.

Tomas nodded.

Elder Carson took the magic machine from his black case then and turned the knob. The music of Tomas came once more. The notes jumped from one to the next, the chanted notes, the twang of the violin strings, the song of Tomas Aju.

The dying man's smile quivered. Tears slid from his eyes. Miguel sobbed with the women and Estevan as he listened to his brother's music. The song was as it had been. It stopped again as it had stopped before. Elder Carson clicked the machine off.

"*Hermano,*" Elder Stevens said, "do you wish to bear your testimony?" Tomas nodded.

Miguel lifted him to a sitting position and held him as he spoke.

"I know this church is true," sighed Tomas Aju. "Oh, my beloved ones, my brother and his family, my wife and my children. . . ." The Cakchiquel sounds were hoarse and faint. His words faded as his breaths ran out. He swallowed, breathed again, and continued with diminishing strength. "Stay loyal to the truth. I know I will go directly into the presence of Jesus. Come to me clean and pure." He moaned, "Ay, Jesus!" and Miguel lowered him back to his bed.

He died the next day.

There were the pine needles strewn over the floor, the black cloth, the coffin, the lifeless face, the stiff, still body. And there was Estevan, staring at death.

"This is how dead men are?" asked the boy. "Do all dead men look like this?"

Miguel nodded, and Estevan began to cry softly, and then to wail. Miguel held him and watched his own tears spill onto his son's head. Estevan shook with sobs, shook and shook, and Miguel could not stop his shaking. "Shhh," he said. "Shhh. Be brave. Be a man. Let me wipe your tears. Everyone dies." Estevan still shook. But his cries quieted to whimpers.

"His spirit is alive," said Miguel fervently. "Do you remember he promised us he would live? With Jesus! He promised we would live with Jesus. And do you remember that Elder Carson has Tomas's music in that black box? His spirit, Estevan, will never die."

The boy nodded and inhaled a braked breath.

"Stop shaking," Miguel said. "Stop shaking."

And his words had power. Estevan let his shoulders fall and his back relax, and stopped shaking.

The funeral was small. The missionaries brought corn to the widow of Tomas and some to Miguel also, after the rituals of death.

"*Hermano*," came a voice.

Miguel spat into the road and pushed himself into a sitting position. Smiling, Manuel Poro approached. He wrapped his arms around Miguel in drunken greeting and asked if he had more liquor.

Miguel took the empty bottle and turned it upside down. A single drop fell from the bottle's mouth. Manuel took the bottle, loudly kissed its rim and hugged Miguel again. "To be drunk is to be free," Manuel said.

Quietly, seriously, involuntarily, Miguel replied, "like the birds." His words were not directed at Manuel. They were not directed at anyone.

Manuel took Miguel's head firmly in his hands and leaned towards him. "We fly together," he whispered. "And we will die together, no? With a bottle between us! To fly from our graves." He kissed Miguel's cheek.

Miguel shuddered and stood. His legs were numb. He knew his steps were not straight. But he could walk away from Manuel. He staggered to his hut, where his daughter, suddenly grown and beautiful, greeted him. "*Hola*," she said, smiling. But he saw sadness in her eyes. She was her mother again.