



# QUICHÉ LESSONS

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esab'al wachaj

On Saturday, S'is visited Maximon and gave him a cigar, a pint of liquor—Quetzalteco—and a tart of blackberries. The cigar and Quetzalteco were Maximon's usual gifts, but berry tart was not. The tart was his wife's idea. On the way to the shrine, S'is had carried the tart on his lap, the filling jiggling like the bottom of a woman. The bus was crowded, and he had to stand, clutching the tin with two hands while the old vehicle lurched and shifted and grew so full of passengers, so hot, that the purple filling began to melt and run down the sides of the tin, onto his fingers. More passengers ascended. "*Pase adelante,*" yelled the driver, "but careful of the little man's pudding." There was laughter in the bus, from the *ladinos* but also from

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peasants like S'is, the women holding chickens on their laps and the men on their way up the mountain, carrying machetes instead of tart. It embarrassed S'is because it drew attention to him, carrying this "pudding" like some woman, and he silently cursed his wife, K'ek, for her greed and superstition.

K'ek had gotten it into her head that she wanted a camera. At first he'd tried to argue with her. It was expensive, he said. And impossible. He would have to go all the way into the old city to buy one, and even then he could never get all the money it took. It would be all of their pay for six months.

"But you never know when children will get sick," K'ek said, "or have an accident. B'ek had the boy who died when the chicken bus went off the road. That was only a year ago, and now B'ek doesn't remember what he looked like. The same goes for Qu'atzuuk and Naniiq, whose sons got diarrhea. Then Rij had the five-year-old in front of her while she rode horseback. Remember? A bird came from behind a tree and frightened the horse. Up in the blue sky went Rij, with her son out in front of her, and . . ." Here K'ek had lurched forward dramatically, clasping her hands together in the air and gasping.

"Enough!" said S'is. "It's not the same for us. We have no sons."

She folded her skinny brown arms and scowled at him.

"Anyway," he said, "our daughters won't die."

But how did he know? Only three children, and the doctor told K'ek there would be no more. In his own family there had been twelve, and three had died.

"You can get penicillin now," he told her, "from the clinic."

"And all over there are horses to throw you off and cars to hit you and motorcycles . . ." S'is' brother had died last year in a motorcycle accident in Guatemala City. All that S'is had left of him was a photograph, taken of the two of them in Nahuala. He kept it covered, in an urn, to keep it from the children's fingerprints. It was true, he thought, that he had nothing of his brother but this picture. For the others, a sister gone for twelve years now, a brother gone for ten, and for his parents, too, he had nothing. He could not remember their faces.

S'is looked at K'ek and at his daughters and felt a deep ache. He wanted his older brother to return; he wanted his girls to live. And he, too, wanted a camera.

But he did not know how to get one. He knew only that his brother had owned one. His brother's widow, Mariana, was a ladina.

"I will ask Mariana," he told K'ek. "She could come to take a picture of them."

"Just one picture." K'ek frowned. "It is not enough."

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Now in their village it was what their grandfathers had called the second month of soft and slippery soil. Every afternoon the clouds swelled darkly and the rains came heavy and hard. S'is would stand under trees or sometimes find shelter under a wrecked car at the side of the road, waiting the rain out so he could continue down the pass. When he arrived home, K'ek and the girls helped to hang his clothes and make him a bath for his feet with water they brought from the hot spring.

When, five years ago, it had become clear that K'ek would never have a son, or any more children, S'is changed toward the girls. He let himself be tender with them. He held the baby for K'ek and sang into her fuzzy skull. Now that they had grown, he sat right down in the yard to play marbles with them. It was a woman's world, he knew, but he was not ashamed. In fact, he pitied anyone who didn't know what it was to have such a thing: he knew the smell of their hair and their dark breath when they woke. But Friday, when S'is came home from the fields, K'ek and the girls were nowhere to be found, and there was not even a plate laid for his supper, only a pile of husks on the table and the smell of ground corn. Her tub was gone, too: they were out picking berries.

The next morning, the tart was ready. K'ek made S'is take it to Maximon, along with the usual gifts. "First put the dessert at his feet; then tell him I made the tart just for him."

"Then I ask for the camera?" said S'is. Her family was not modern and held all sorts of superstitions that his did not.

"No," said K'ek. "It is not for us to ask directly. It is for him, Maximon, to decide what we need. So you must talk around it," she said, making her hand circle her wrist. "Then, if he wants you to have the camera, he will send it."

"And how will he know?" S'is asked.

She was stubborn and repeated, "Don't say 'camera.' Don't even say 'picture.'"

And this was how S'is had gotten himself to this place, carrying the melted tart to the shrine of Maximon, in the house of the old maid, Tijobal. When Tijobal saw S'is bringing the tart she threw up her wobbly arms and laughed. "The little *tat* is bringing you a pudding, Rij Laj," she called inside the house. "He must want something special, eh?"

"It's not a pudding," S'is said quickly. "It's a tart that melted, on the bus." When he looked down at the sweet dessert in its flowered dish with the tiny bees buzzing around it, he felt an embarrassed heat in his face.

The line to the shrine curved all the way around the edge of the hut. The first in line had brought a goat for Maximon, and when the priest began to slit its

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S'is remembered his grandmother telling him about the beginning of the world, when all men had been as still as Maximon, made of a sort of wood. They could eat but had no hunger, could bleed but were never in danger of death. They had no breath or thought or memory.

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throat, the animal turned so that the cut went in the wrong direction. The goat fell into the mud and struggled forward and ran, bleating, and bleeding onto its white fur. Then there was a big commotion: the priest swore at the animal, and everyone in line dropped their offerings and ran to help catch the goat and hold him down so the priest could finish the job.

This commotion left S'is alone with Tijobal; she averted her eyes and laughed softly as he ducked into the hut. She'd grown so old that her laugh was low and shocking, like a man's. S'is snuck to the corner, where pine needles covered the dirt floor of the shrine. Here, on a throne of three stacked milk crates, sat Maximon, the wicked saint. He was life-sized, a block of carved wood dressed in Western clothes: blue jeans and a button-down shirt and cowboy hat. A cigar hung from a hole in the wooden face. As S'is approached, he smelled a sickening sweetness of overripe fruit and liquor and smoke. At Maximon's feet were two rotten mangoes, guava, two bottles of Guatemalan beer, *Gallo*, three small, bladder-shaped plastic bags of Coca-Cola, cigars half used and unused, flowers, fresh and dried, sticks of incense still smoking in long caterpillars of ash, and hundreds of tiny lit candles, each one representing a request.

S'is placed his bottle and tart at Maximon's feet, lit a bucket of incense and began to wave it in the air, chanting thanks in Quiché to the creators and then, for good measure, to Jesus Christ. At the end of the chant he said the simple sentence he had composed in his head on the bus: "My wife wants to remember our children."

Maximon sat blankly, of course, and S'is stood staring back at him. The cement floor gave off a coolness, and a skinny dog came in, thunked down upon it and began to pant. S'is remembered his grandmother telling him about the beginning of the world, when all men had been as still as Maximon, made of

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a sort of wood. They could eat but had no hunger, could bleed but were never in danger of death. They had no breath or thought or memory. So they were not in fear of their creators. At some point the creators realized that this was a mistake. They tried over again and made man as he is today. But if all this were so, Maximon was less than human, and not more. He was as the man before man. S'is stopped himself and rubbed his head. He had not meant to think any doubting thoughts, at least not until he was back on the bus.

The people who had been in the line were filing back toward the hut, and some men entered. They smelled like dung and were wet with blood on their clothes and faces. The priest, too, was soaked in blood and looked unhappy as his chanting tapered off. S'is turned from where he knelt and looked at the procession quizzically, so that no one would fault him for not helping with the goat. He nodded on the way out at Tijobal, sewing at her table. She looked up from her *huipile* and smiled at him. A piece of the bright-orange thread hung from her lip, as if she'd been cleaning gristle from her teeth.

"Good-bye, *tat*," she said. "I hope your pudding pleases Maximon."

"So?" the eldest daughter asked when S'is arrived home. "So?" said the middle one. "So?" said the youngest one. K'ek just stared as S'is sat down. He would not smile. Slowly, soberly, he took his shoes off and wiggled his toes. One daughter brought a bowl, and one brought water, and one brought a towel, and he sat while they washed his feet.

"Did Maximon like our tart?" said K'ek, looking on with folded arms.

He studied the backs of his hands, sadly. "I had a little problem," he said. "I got hungry."

"You didn't!" said the youngest.

"I couldn't help it."

The middle daughter splashed S'is with the dirty water of his footbath. He stood and ran, but not so fast that they couldn't catch him. The eldest grabbed his arm, then twisted the skin of his stomach in her dry fingers. The little one took his other arm, pulled her knees up and swung there as if she were hanging from a tree. The middle tickled his ribs. "You're teasing us," they said, again and again.

"You're teasing them," K'ek repeated with a grave face. She was very serious about lying. You had to confess very quickly. Otherwise it could bring bad luck.

"Of course," said S'is, laughing, "I gave him the tart."

The girls let go and looked up at him.

"And," K'ek said, "you didn't ask for the thing by name?"

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“Not exactly,” he said.

“Not by name,” she said.

“Not by name,” he repeated.

“And did he accept the tart?”

“He did not reject it,” S’is said with a shrug. He would not ask what form a rejection would take. He had journeyed; he had tried. He wanted the camera as much as she did now, but he didn’t know how he would possibly get it.

Two days later, Mariana arrived by chicken bus from the old city. She wore a white cotton dress that looked like a fancy undergarment that had grown several sizes too small. The skirt came just to the tops of her knees, and with the sun behind her you could see the outline of her heavy legs. Below them her calves, her bare ankles, were as beautiful and thick as fat beef.

“Did you receive a message about us?” K’ek asked anxiously.

“In a way,” said Mariana. K’ek was eyeing her open purse. There was a small brown bag inside, which didn’t look big enough to hold a camera.

They all went into the house. Mariana, emptying the bag, gave each of the girls a white doll with hair that could be pulled from the crown of the head into a long ponytail. It was synthetic hair, as light and soft as corn silks. Then K’ek shushed the girls and sent them to the kitchen to add sugar to the *altol*.

“I’m coming to offer S’is a job,” Mariana said. Then she explained: in the school where she taught, in the old city, there was an American who wanted to learn Quiché. If S’is could find his way there, he might have work for as long as six weeks. The pay was three times what he made hauling bundles of wood on his back up the mountain. He would wear a clean shirt and sit all day on his bottom, at a clean table, and have all the coffee he wanted for no charge, and free soft wiping paper when he had the urge. At this last part there was giggling from the kitchen, and K’ek covered her mouth, and S’is yelled sharply to the girls to keep quiet. But Mariana said it all without embarrassment.

“S’is has been to see Maximon,” said K’ek proudly. “It was Maximon who sent you here, Mariana.”

Poor K’ek, with that stye puffing angrily under her left eyelid. Next to Mariana, her skin was as brown and tough as nuts. And her accent! She held her mouth nearly closed as she spoke. *Está bien* came out *ay sta been*.

Of course, S’is had the same accent, but he could at least hear the difference, and, when he spoke to certain people, tried to correct it. His brother had been even better at this, a natural mimic. When he’d started working for *ladinos*, he’d come home speaking Spanish like a stranger. At that time he was only thirteen

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and still growing, and this had changed everything for him: his whole body took notice. He'd grown a head taller than the rest of them.

Poor K'ek did not even realize what Mariana would think of her—that was how simple she was—and when S'is saw her smile like that, widely, as if she still had all of her teeth in front, he felt simple himself for having chosen her. He had been to school. He'd learned to write in Spanish, and he was teaching his daughters to do the same. He read Spanish better than any of his neighbors, and they took him their letters from the government. Two of the townspeople had sons who'd made it to America. When the sons sent home radios and blenders, S'is read them the directions.

K'ek called the girls, who served them each a cup of the warm *altol*, thick with rice instead of corn this time, with plenty of sugar and the last of the milk. K'ek and S'is took clay cups, and Mariana had the special blue plastic, and they sat and drank together, toasting his good fortune.

"Be careful, *hermano*," said Mariana. "If the American decides your language is too hard to learn, he might switch to Spanish, instead."

"S'is talks a good Spanish," said K'ek, beaming. "He can teach that, too."

"No," S'is said quickly.

But Mariana just shrugged her fat shoulders. "If they want to learn Quiché," she laughed, "who knows what crazy thing they'll do next?" Then, because the news she'd brought was happy, they all laughed together, Mariana and S'is and K'ek. Even the new dollies, who were peeking out of the kitchen, spying.

As Mariana left, S'is lit a firecracker, a leftover from Semana Santa. When he did, the girls screamed and jumped up and down, and Mariana turned and waved her arm from the lane, and bald Xwaan came from his house, wondering: What good news?

S'is told bald Xwaan about the job with an American who wanted to learn Quiché.

"That is strange," said Xwaan. "Why would he want to learn Quiché? There won't be anyone to practice with in the old city."

"That's not true," said S'is. "My brother lived in the old city, for example."

Xwaan laughed. "Your brother couldn't speak Quiché, either, by the end," he said.

"Yes," said S'is. "Well. K'ek believes this has all happened because I made offerings to Maximon so that he would give us a camera. But I'm not sure. I don't really believe in offerings."



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“No,” said Xwaan thoughtfully. “Mostly they’re a waste of good liquor. But you never know. Did you ask for the camera directly?”

“No, said S’is. “But even if I keep the job the whole six weeks, it will not be enough to buy a camera. Not half of an old one. What do you make of that?”

Xwaan put a hand on his shiny head, as if it might help him think. “The American will have one,” he said. “He will give it to you. For him, it costs almost nothing.”

S’is had not been to the old city for many years, and when the bus stopped at the edge of a market, he saw a huge white man with a large stomach and a beard and a purse-belt, and he asked this man in Spanish if he was the one who wanted to study Quiché. The man shook his head—*No comprendo*—and then S’is saw another man behind him, but before he could ask that one if they should walk together to the school, he could see that the market was filled with white people. They walked in among the *ladinos* on the street, and along the street among the *indígenas*—Cachiquel, Mam, Tzutujil, Ixil, Aguatemala—who were squatting or sitting on the sidewalk, hawking their wares on blankets—*huipiles* or fried broad beans or quilts or embroidery. At every blanket there were more white people, and S’is realized he would not find the student until he came to the school itself, and he set out to find it.

The director of the school was a *ladino* with greased hair and a short neck with a fold in back, so that his head seemed to be sitting on top of his shoulders, like a pumpkin. He gave off a smell of perfume, and the skin of his face was as smooth as a woman’s.

He assigned S’is a room number and gave him a pencil and a blanket.

“Afternoon lessons begin in an hour,” he said. “Your student will come to this classroom. And the students finish at four. You can sleep in your room, but it wouldn’t do for the students to see you sitting around the halls after classes. Come back at nine. The cleaners will let you in; lock up the doors after them.” Then he gave S’is five quetzals and showed him to his room.

“By the way,” said the director, “you won’t be able to translate very much: his Spanish is terrible.”

“Oh,” said S’is, relieved but clucking his tongue in disapproval, “*qué lástima*.”

Then the director flashed S’is his little white teeth, spun around and disappeared down the hall.

Except for a similar perfumed smell, the student was the director’s opposite. S’is found his appearance disappointing. He was tall and white, with some brown cow-spots on his skin, and long, red hair like a woman’s. The hair looked

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wet, maybe with the oil of the perfume. On his back hung a blue nylon purse, and he wore a clean shirt with holes in it and blue jeans with the knees worn open. With his worn clothes and his perfumed smell and his shoes like high, shiny pillows under his feet, he looked like a rich widower with no wife or sister to mend for him.

"Do you have a camera?" asked S'is in Spanish. The student squinted at him. "Camera," S'is repeated, pretending to take a picture of the student.

"Sí," said the student, nodding vigorously.

He took the purse from his back and laid it on the table and pulled back the zipper. Out came a small silver box, not even as long or wide as his hand.

S'is was a little disappointed in the appearance of the camera, too—he had pictured something heavy and imposing, with a plastic flash tower on the right corner, as he'd seen in the store in Nauhaula, big enough so that when he boarded the bus to return or walked the *legua* home from the bus, everyone would see him, and stop him to admire it.

"Does it work?" S'is asked, picking it up gently and turning it over. On the back was a small dial with tiny pictures drawn in white: a man, a man running, a woman, a man with a star over his head.

The student repeated after him, and S'is growled, miming the circling motion of a motor.

"Ah, *sí, sí,*" the student said. He turned the dial so it pointed to the picture of a man. With a hum, a series of silver rings projected themselves from the smooth body of the camera. It reminded S'is of the erection of a bull.

"Oh," said S'is, "it's very wonderful." He clapped a little, in case the student did not understand that he would accept this camera, that he liked and appreciated it.

But the student didn't understand. He took the camera to his eye and pointed it toward S'is to take his picture.

"No," said S'is, waving his hand in front of his face. "I would like to have it. For my wife."

The student laughed.

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S'is laughed, too. Happily. His business was almost settled. And it had been very quick. He could go now, if he had to. But he would stay, just for the extra money. He could think of things to do with that! He wondered how much the student's shiny shoes cost. He would not be able to walk well in this particular pair, even if the student wanted to give them to him. They were twice his size. But at the market they might be selling such things to Americans and rich *ladinos*. Or maybe he could find another, smaller student who wanted to study and would give him his shoes. He imagined walking up the mountain with them, pillows under his feet.

But no matter what went on from here, he felt a relief. If something did happen, if he didn't teach well and the director fired him, he would still be okay. He had gotten what he'd come for. Then again, he was not sure if the student had understood him because he had still not handed over the camera; he had lowered it but was now leaning forward and squinting as if he didn't understand. So S'is gently lifted the camera from the student's hand, pointed to himself and said, very clearly, "*Regalo!*"

"*Regalo,*" repeated the student, flipping through his tiny dictionary, and then he looked up with an "Ah! No!"

The student stood, snatched the camera from S'is and said, "*No, no regalo. No regalo.*" Then he stopped talking. He was not laughing anymore, and his long, spotted hands wrapped tightly around the camera. He pressed a button, and the lens receded with a little zip. The air was quiet between them.

"Ah!" said the student finally, lifting his finger. "*Lo siento.*" He smiled a little at S'is, as if these words had been very difficult for him to remember, and then, when S'is said nothing, he gave a little cough.

"*Está bien,*" said S'is, but it was not okay; he pushed himself back in the chair and looked down at his feet, swinging inches above the floor, like a child's. All at once he remembered that he had been awake long before the sun, that he had been first walking nearly a *legua* and then standing in the lurching bus from dark until the sun had come up, that even when he'd gotten to sit he had not rested because the woman next to him had large hips which pressed stubbornly into the space where he sat, and this fat woman and her friend began complaining in high voices. They had each carried hens in blue mesh bags, and the hens began complaining in similar high voices as if they were really parrots and not hens at all. Though none of this would have kept him from sleeping if he hadn't been nervous about finding the school and the director and the student, or not finding them and missing his chance. Really, he felt he'd been awake several days; his back was worn from holding itself straight, and his mind was thick and foggy.

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“Begin,” said the student in Spanish, pointing to himself, to his own torn shirt. “Quiché lessons.”

“Very good,” S’is replied.

They sat for a moment, the student nervously adjusting the band on his hair.

“Give me your camera,” said S’is.

The student grabbed his nylon purse from the table and clutched it to his chest.

S’is laughed. “*No regalo*,” he said. “For pictures. Let me show you.”

Then the student reluctantly opened the bag and drew out the camera.

S’is gave the student the Quiché word for each picture on the little dial of the camera. He pointed to the man. *Tat*, he said. The student repeated. For the man running, he said, *Tat c’ate’ anim*. He pointed to the woman’s face. *Nan*, he said. The flower. *Quizijj*. The man under the star. *Chak’ab*, he said. Night.

S’is set the camera gently on the edge of the butcher paper. Then he pointed to everything they could see in the room: the table, the paper, the window, the little basket with the pencils shorter than his fingers. He wrote the words on the butcher paper, and the student leaned over to read them. The student repeated the words, but his tongue could not click properly, so S’is drew a picture of the mouth and tongue on the butcher paper and showed the student where the tongue should strike, up and far back in the mouth. Even after they practiced, the student sounded no better, and still his tongue could not find its place, and he sounded as if he had wet cornmeal in his mouth.

The little classroom was so spare that soon S’is had given the words for everything inside it, and as he ran out of words, he became aware of his head hurting and his stomach hurting and even his tooth, which had been coming loose for a month now, and so, because he could think of nothing better, he gave the student the word for hurting, *k’ax*, and the words to go with it: *K’ax, nu holoom*, he said, holding his head. The student held his head, and repeated. *K’ax, nu pam*, S’is said, and the student held his stomach and repeated. *K’ax nuware*, he said, holding his jaw, *El diente me duele*.

Then S’is invented a little conversation for the student to memorize, translating into Spanish so the student might understand it:

*Hello, nan.*

*Hello, tat.*

*Are your children living?*

*I have lost one son and one daughter.*

*It is too bad.*

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And you?  
No, I have not lost any children.  
God is good to you.  
What would you like to buy?  
How much are they, those pigs?  
Thirty quetzals.  
It's too expensive. Twenty-five?  
Very well.  
Good day, nan.  
Good day, tat.

They practiced this for a long time, but when the student closed his notebook, he could not seem to recognize one sentence from the other. For example, when S'is would ask him, "How much are they, those pigs?" he would answer, "It's too bad. And you?"

Then the bell sounded for afternoon break, and all of the students came into the courtyard, where there were vendors selling the maize dumplings they called *chucitos*, and tamales and guacamole for the Americans. The student went to buy some, and he stood by two other tall boys and girls. Together they all began speaking and laughing very loudly, gesturing as if they were putting on a pageant and wanted to be seen in the back row of the church.

There were other *ladinos* there in the halls, but no sign of Mariana. When S'is checked the door of the director's room, he found her, standing inside with a group of other teachers. He entered and stood there at the edge of the circle, just behind Mariana. There were two men there, too, in shirts with buttons and neckties, but nobody moved aside for him to join the group. Some had not seen him, but others seemed to be looking at him curiously, with the corners of their mouths turned up, the way you look at a funny man even before he's said something funny.

He was the only one in the room of ordinary height, although he also knew that all of the other teachers would not see it this way. It was as if he were watching the parade at Semana Santa, the dance of the *gigantes*, when the huge men on stilts represented the Spaniards as they'd looked to the *indígenas*. In the parade, the Spaniards had large papier-mâché heads with huge lips and bulging eyes, and this made their height ridiculous. Now, he knew, he was the ridiculous one.

"Mariana," said S'is. Then Mariana turned to him, smiled and faced back into the circle without introducing him. He did not want to hover on the edge when

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he had not been invited, and he did not want to walk away and make it obvious that she had not welcomed him, and he stood there not knowing what to do with his body. He felt his chin begin to lower, and he raised it, but not too high, not high enough so that he looked as if he were trying to hold it up, and his arms hung awkwardly. He wished he could leave the room without having to do so in his own body. He turned and watched one of the other teachers get coffee from the machine by pushing down on the small black pedal, and he did the same for himself, just to have something to do. Though he felt nervous: maybe the coffee was only for the Spanish instructors. The director had not told him he could have some. But Mariana had said so. Free coffee, was what she had said.

Carrying the clean little white cup, he walked back to the courtyard, where there was a pretty fountain and a stone wall with bright red bougainvillea blooming all around the edge of it. He thought that when he got the camera, he would have someone take a picture of him here, so his girls would see for themselves what a soft life he'd had. He took a seat on the edge of the fountain and sipped the hot coffee and watched the students. Many of them looked like the gringos that had come to his village until an American girl had picked up an *indígena's* baby on the street, trying to steal it, and some of the townspeople had caught her and stoned her to death. That was more than five years ago now, he guessed, and after that you never saw a gringo in town. And when you heard about them, there were often bad stories attached. People said they weren't to be trusted. One man in town knew someone who knew someone in Nauhuala who had been given a drink and who passed out and woke up with a scar where his kidney had been. After that story had gone around, another gringo had gotten stoned while he was bargaining for a *huipile*. There had been even fewer since then, sometimes a white man or two walking together, and once, he remembered, some Chinese. Everyone had stopped to look at those Chinese. A big crowd had gathered, though nobody talked to them. People took their children from the fields and lined them up along the street, as they did for the parade of the *gigantes*.

S'is had forgotten what the white women looked like, how their feet seemed as long as a man's shin, and their skin as white as rabbits' tails, and their hair like the factory-made corn silk of the dolls Mariana had brought to his daughters. Actually, he had forgotten that not all had light hair; some were a little darker and looked almost like *ladinos*. They were all very beautiful in a way, but so big that they reminded him of milking cows, with their big, sharp bones and flesh draped or stretched over it. The best ones were fatter, like Mariana, with jiggly arms and bottoms.

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When S'is returned to the room at the end of the break, he found that the student had laid out a small feast on the table. There were two *chiustos* and three little tacos with pork and two glasses of *agua con gas*.

"*K'ax nu pam?*" the student said, rubbing his stomach. He grinned, pleased with himself for remembering.

The expression was normally used to warn others that you might throw up, but S'is was very hungry, and he didn't bother to correct it and ate quickly with his head down.

"Good?" asked the student, smiling. His skin flushed a pretty pink color that almost matched his hair.

"Yes," said S'is. Then, because the student seemed to be in a generous mood, he decided to try his request again. "The food is fine," he said, "but what I really want is a camera. It's what I came for. My wife wants it, especially."

The student coughed and took out a piece of paper from his pocket with some Spanish written on it. "I need . . . for . . . photos of my vacation," he said.

"Oh," said S'is. He thought a moment. "There is a camera store on the plaza," he said. "You can buy a new one there."

The student stared at him.

"*Entiende? Tienda de cámara fotográfica. Parque Central,*" S'is said. He took the student's dictionary and found *tienda* for him, and then *comprar*.

"Yes," said the student. "*Voy a comprar otro cámara, pero, no ahora. No puedo comprar aquí. Necesito . . . digital? Para computadora. Parque Central no tengo.*"

"Oh!" S'is let himself speak more quickly. "You could keep this little one here and buy another for me. I would not mind having a bigger one, for example, because some of the ones at the stores are much bigger. But this one is very nice, too, because of the *mmmmnnn*," he said, imitating the hum of the erecting lens while pointing his finger forward.

The student sat soberly, his brow furrowed. "*El problema . . . es que . . .*" he started, and then he trailed off, circling his bony hands in the air.

"No problem," said S'is. He pointed to the student. "You are very rich. It will cost nothing for you." He rubbed the tips of his thumb with two fingers. "*Rico*," he said. "Understand?"

S'is had intended this as a compliment, but the student's eyes became large, and he sat up in the chair and laughed with his hands over his mouth. "*Rico? No. No es verdad.*"

S'is surveyed the shirt with holes and the scruffy face.

"*Yo no tengo dinero, aquí,*" said the student, looking down at his paper. "*Dinero, USA. Ahora, aquí . . . solamente es . . . por comida. Y escuela.*"



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“You can still buy food and go to school. Have your wife send you money, with a wire,” said S’is, looking up the word again for the student and showing him. He felt proud of himself for thinking of this so quickly.

“No *esposa*,” said the student, displaying his bare fingers.

“Are your parents dead?”

“*Padres?*” The student began looking for this word in his book, then stopped, as if he had understood but did not want to answer. He cleared the food off the table, brow furrowed, and dumped it into the trash basket, muttering something in English under his breath.

When the lesson was over it was four o’clock, and the afternoon rain of *invierno* came. The students all ran out onto the streets with their umbrellas or their long yellow or blue slickers, talking and laughing loudly. S’is felt like running into the rain himself, but he did not have a plastic coat or umbrella or any women to help dry him once he got wet, so he stood in the doorway looking out at the plaza. The doorway was a thing of beauty and reminded him of the church in Nahuala: a tall, Spanish arch with two heavy wooden doors, leading out from the courtyard into the street. He could pass through it on the *gigantes’* stilts and never scrape the top.

The rain ended as quickly as it had come, and the sun came out. S’is wandered the streets and passed the ruins of an old church, behind which were some beautiful gardens. There were some Mam women, chattering and dipping their clothes in the cement washing troughs. Some naked boys ran in a puddle in the middle of the square. You might think, walking here, that it was any city, like Quetzaltenango, like Tonicapan, like Nahuala—every beautiful building there was Spanish, too. Only here there had been the earthquake, and its beautiful churches lay in ruins, and with the white people on the streets you almost felt that a war had come and someone else had invaded and made even the *ladinos* disappear. There could be another dance of the *gigantes* here, he thought, only now the white American men would be the ones on stilts, and the *ladinos* would be the little ones.

When he got to the Parque Central, he found the camera store and looked in the window, but there were no prices on the models there. He walked in, and a bell tinkled; the salesman wore a baseball cap and a red shirt with a black cow on it and American letters. S’is approached the counter, which was level with his shoulders, and whistled. The man looked up from his polishing and raised his eyebrows.

“Hello,” S’is said in careful Spanish. “Is your family in good health?”



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There was no answer, and the man resumed his polishing.

"Have any children died before you?"

"No," said the man, his hands still busy.

"God is good," S'is continued. The *ladino* looked up at S'is and put his cloth on the glass counter. "You want to buy a camera?" he said.

S'is swallowed, embarrassed at the man's frankness. "I don't know," he answered. Then he felt that though he could speak Spanish, the words he knew were not appropriate here, and the way he used them would reveal things to the *ladino*, not about his true self, but one that the *ladino* had already decided he was, and he felt a pain of shyness and said, "No, no," and he turned and walked quickly from the store.

Once he was out in the square he found a bench and sat there, watching some little Cachiquel girls braiding the hair of one of the gringa women he'd seen earlier that day in the school. The Cachiquel girls' Spanish was not good, but they could also say things in what he knew was English: "Okay, okay," "dollar," "candy". When they spoke, the gringa and her friends laughed loudly, and when they finished braiding, the women gave the girl who had done the braiding a twenty-quetzal note, and the girl went on to the next American. Her friend was not braiding, only pressing up against another American girl and stroking her cheek and then her big white legs, and that girl was laughing and closing her eyes with pleasure, and when they got up to leave, that Cachiquel girl got money, too, twenty quetzals, though she hadn't braided anyone's hair.

He thought about his own girls and how they climbed on him and tickled him, and the warmth of holding them, especially when they had been very small. It occurred to him that this might be worth money to someone, too. But clearly these little girls had mothers who took them to market, and the mothers hadn't heard what terrible things could happen if you left your child with Americans.

Night was coming on. Some musicians wandered into the square, a band with flutes and strange accents, maybe from some country to the south, and they wore just what the Americans did, jeans, but their shirts were nicer and cleaner looking, and their hair was long and plaited. Their mysterious song seemed to cue everyone that another day had ended here in the old city: when the flute began to play, the little girls ran out to their mothers, who had packed their goods in blankets and had suddenly appeared at the edge of the park. S'is remembered that his mother had played a song on a little flute when it was time to come in from the field for dinner, and it made him think of how long ago that was, and how he had thought, during that time, that he would be very young

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Then he felt that though he could speak Spanish, the words he knew were not appropriate here, and the way he used them would reveal things to the ladino, not about his true self, but one that the ladino had already decided he was.

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forever and that his mother would be alive forever, and his father, and all of his brothers and sisters.

All around the square packed up their *huipiles* in bright colors, and others came selling tamales or corn with lime. S'is bought an ear of corn and sat squeezing lime over it and ate it on the left side because on the right his gum was swollen and tender, and he didn't want a tooth to come out while he was here in the old city. Then he went back to school, let himself in, and settled down for the night on the floor of the little classroom.

That night he dreamed that while visiting Maximon, he had taken a drink of the Quetzalteco. Then the scene changed; the drink had made him pass out, and there was the student, cutting out his kidney and packing it in ice. The kidney was living, though, and it thumped as if it were a heart. Then the organ became his brother's heart, stopping in his chest as he lay on the sidewalk in Guatemala City, and S'is, watching at a distance, called out for help but nobody came, and gringos lined the streets, watching curiously, and the cars and traffic were coming toward him, too, and he knew they both would die. When he woke he was sweating, and there was a pain in his back, but there was nobody around; he was safe in the little classroom.

His second dream involved the student, who had come back with some medical people to take him away. The student peered into the little room, and S'is saw his face and his long hair and shivered and tried to say, "No," but no sound came, and the door squeaked shut.

When it happened again he could see that he was not dreaming. It was morning, and the student was standing at the open door of the classroom, staring at him.

"*Buenos días,*" S'is said, pulling himself to a squat, and wrapping the blanket around him.

"Oh!" said the student. "*Lo siento.*"

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S'is quickly gathered the blanket to his chest and tossed it in the corner of the room. "Sorry, sorry," he said. "I didn't sleep well."

The student looked puzzled. "Tú?" he said, pointing to the floor of the room and the blanket and then leaning his head on his folded hands with a little snore.

S'is remembered that the director had said "it wouldn't do" and quickly said, "I was only resting while I waited for you."

The student lifted up his finger and left the room.

He was gone a long time. S'is folded the blanket and put it neatly out of sight under his own chair. Even though the lessons hadn't gone well yesterday, he reasoned, it wasn't enough time for the student to decide that the language was too hard, although, as bald Xwann had said, it was a mystery why he wanted to learn it—where or when he would ever speak it. He peeked through the open door into the little courtyard, where more little tables, also covered in butcher paper, ringed the fountain. At each table sat a *ladino* instructor with an American. He could hear the steady drum of a man with a low voice conjugating, "*haría, harías, haría, haríamos, haríais, harían.*"

Finally the director came into the room, offered his hand and gestured to the chair. S'is sat down.

The director sat across from him and held out a piece of paper. "This is the address of one of the families who house Americans for us. You can stay there."

S'is turned to look at his blanket. "Not here?" he asked, puzzled.

"The student will pay for you to stay in a pension. Here is the address, and here is the card with the student's name on it. You give it to the family, and your bill will be covered by the student."

S'is did not understand, and he did not know if the student had complained about his sleeping when he arrived, and so he said nothing and nodded.

Then the student reappeared. His face was red, and he was smiling. "Okay?" he asked, in English.

S'is nodded and repeated in English, "Okay."

"Hotel," the student said. "Okay?"

"*Gracias,*" said S'is, gloomily.

The student smiled. "*De nada,*" he said, proudly.

"A pension," said S'is.

"Y . . . uh, *comida,*" the student added, smiling.

Food, and a hotel. He asked: "How much does it cost?"

"Don't worry," said the student, waving his hand. "It's okay."

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"I don't worry," answered S'is, "But I would like just the camera. That's what I came for, and when I go home it won't matter where I slept."

The student stopped smiling.

"If you want," S'is said, "you could just give me the money. For the pension. *Y comida.*"

"Begin," said the student, pointing to the books. "Quiché lessons." But S'is could not begin, not when the money for the pension had been offered and when that money might buy him a camera. *Why* should the student not agree? What did he want of him? His terms were as strange as Maximon's. "It is not for for us to decide what we need," K'ek had told him. "It is for Maximon."

S'is doubted the power of Maximon. Bald Xwann even doubted it. But the power of the student was no superstition: it was real, and nobody could doubt it. The student would look, and the student would judge, not Maximon. But here he was, ready to stop talking of money or gifts. His notebook was open, and he had his pencil poised above the page. The lesson would start, and the opportunity would close, and he would return without the camera. They would have no pictures. One daughter would die, and her death would be final. He was close to it; he could feel that he was, and he thought that if it wasn't working to ask for the camera, it might work for something else he might trade for a camera, and he tried again.

"I would like a television," S'is said.

"What?" asked the student. "*What?*" He stood up and clutched his purse to his chest and said something in English in a high, choking voice: something something *television? Television?*

A ladina instructor peeked around the corner from the classroom next to them, covering her mouth.

"Yes," said S'is, standing, because the student had stood. "Please buy me a television, then, if you won't give me your camera."

Then, because it seemed the best thing to do, S'is began to compliment the student with the best things one could say about a man: "You are rich, and I am poor, and it would be so easy for you to help me," he said, but the student shook his head and threw his small, stubby pencil toward the basket—it missed and flew onto the floor with a small tick. The missing could have been funny. But it was not funny because the student was unhappy, and the student would decide everything.

"*Está bien,*" said S'is, holding up his hands, and he felt he was failing, but because of that, also, that he needed to continue, to try to make it right: "Give me your shoes, then, and your backpack. That will be enough." But as soon as he said

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In any case, all he had wanted was a simple camera, a very small and modest one, really, not the kind for a computer, even, but a thing that cost nothing to the student . . .

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it, he knew it wasn't true. He could sell these things, but it wouldn't be enough. He added quickly, "If you can wear the short pants you had on yesterday and give me many blue jeans, my wife can mend them and sell them at market."

The student stared, his eyes glassy and intent, like a cat who has spied something moving in the grass, and S'is felt the danger of this expression, but also the danger of all of it ending, of the student leaving.

"Just two hundred quetzals, then," added S'is. "I can find a way for the rest." But the student opened the door to the little room and slammed it behind him, though the door only bumped against the frame and flew open again, drawing the attention of the students and instructors from the room next door. Then another ladina instructor walked by with her student, and they whispered something to one another, smiled and went back to their study.

He felt scared and anxious, but excited, too. Anger sometimes came after one had given in to a request; it was not necessary when one refused it. S'is sat down on the chair again and observed his hands. They looked softer to him—a few days without work and he could imagine them just like the director's, plump and smooth. If he did get the TV, perhaps he wouldn't have to sell it at first. It would be difficult to carry, but he could wait in the square until Bald Xwann finished deliveries, and Bald Xwann could drive it. And while he waited there, everyone would see: S'is and his TV. The only television in their little village was in the grocery store. Now he would have the second one.

Then the director appeared and summoned him to his office. "The student has decided to discontinue his lessons," he said sadly.

S'is nodded. He could hear K'ek saying, "Ask him for another student. Tell him your Spanish is good." But he swallowed instead, and his throat felt sore and swollen. He could tell the director about the television, and that he hadn't really been serious. In any case, all he had wanted was a simple camera, a very small and modest one, really, not the kind for a computer, even, but a thing that cost nothing to the student, almost nothing at all, as far as some of his educated friends, some of the wiser ones, had made him understand. *Asking for the televi-*

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sion was my wife's suggestion, he would say. She's superstitious, and it was how she was raised to do these things, to ask only indirectly. But none of these words came, and instead he cleared his throat and said that he understood.

"Here is your pay for three days, less the two hours this afternoon," said the director. "It should be enough for the bus. And a little to eat from the market, before you go."

"Yes," said S'is quietly. "If you speak to Mariana, please tell her that my wife needed me at home."

The director smiled at him. "It's not your fault. Yours is a difficult language," he said gently. "Sometimes they figure out it's more trouble than it's worth."

Then he leaned toward S'is with his elbows on the little table and chuckled. "Yes," said S'is, who, disappointed as he was, felt grateful to the director for making it seem that S'is was one just like him, that he had been doing such a soft job all his life and was used to being spoken to like this. Here he was, sitting across a desk from a *ladino* the way his brother must have done. He might be like his brother, then, in the end, and he wanted to tell his brother about it all, but of course he could not. His brother was dead and would never know. The photo in the urn would not help this.

He made his way to the edge of town before the rain came and into the bus as the sky darkened, and he could picture the student and the skinny white girls and Mariana and all the *ladinas* unlatching the door and running out through the rain. A woman came to sit next to him; she handed him a pig's head in a plastic bag. Its heft reminded him instantly of an infant: it was that size and had the same fleshy, warm weight. There was no blood anywhere, and the skin was rubbery yellow; the clear plastic made it look like the pig had suffocated right there in the bag. Its eyes were closed peacefully, and the lashes were long and pretty, and as he moved toward the window and handed the head back to the woman, he felt a deep sadness. There would be no more children. And even if this were not so, growing itself was a death of a kind, and this was what K'ek was afraid of. He would explain to her that a picture would not help: a picture would remind them that the small baby was gone, and a girl had taken her place. A picture would remind them that the girl was gone, and a woman had taken her place.

Another woman joined them in the seat, and he was pressed into the side of the bus, so that when it started his ribs felt the edge of it every time it lurched, and he studied the English at the front of the bus and tried to memorize it: MAX CAP 220 and KENNEDY ELEMENTARY CUSD 64. He had taken short pencils from the basket and had torn a few pieces of the butcher paper and put them in his pocket in case he had to blow his nose, and he took them out and

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used a pencil to write the English words on one of the pieces of paper, which he folded carefully and stuck back into his pocket. He could teach the words to his daughters. He felt like he understood them a little, even though he didn't read English, and could picture the student years ago, as a little boy, maybe riding this same bus to a big skyscraper school, maybe with an expensive floor of tile or even carpets.

When he watched his face reflected in the window of the bus, it seemed that the eyes looking out at him were not quite all his own, and he addressed them. *Brother, he said, things are fine. Our parents have died, as you know, but I can still count what I have and run out of fingers: twenty-two good teeth, four broken bones that have healed, heart, lungs, liver. Spanish, not like you, but the best in the village. A wife who thinks I am smarter than I am. All my children living: girls, but very nice.* He thought a little more. *I'm alive, of course,* he added. *And I remember you.*

The bus climbed, was stopped and searched by police; the police were paid off by the bus driver; the bus wound up the mountain for another hour and blew a tire, and two hours passed at the roadside waiting for another to come and take them on from there. By the side of the road was a tall tree with white leaves and white stems, and as S'is watched a man stuck a knife in the tree, and it began to weep a red liquid, which he collected in his gourd. This was the tree of the ancients, whose sap, they said, ran like blood and hardened in the shape of a heart.

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# MEET THE AUTHOR

## Molly McNett



“About ten years ago I spent the summer in Antigua, Guatemala. I went with my husband, who was studying Spanish there in one of the language schools that are all over the city, but I decided to try to learn a Mayan language instead. This story started with my teacher, who came from somewhere across the country to teach me.

“The language was very difficult. I never did learn it. I took a little tape recorder to my classes to record the sounds and try to practice them at night. My teacher

was a tiny man and maybe came up to my shoulder (I’m 5’ 4”). He once asked me what size my feet were in a sort of hush, as if I were some kind of grotesque.

“He wanted my tape recorder. He would ask me for it every day, and sometimes I felt guilty and sometimes irritated. ‘It’s a very nice *grabadora*. . . . It would be easier if I had your *grabadora*. . . . Well,’ (sigh) ‘without a *grabadora*. . . .’ and so on. Actually, he asked for money a few times, too, and I gave it to him—though the school paid him directly, not me. But I did not want to give up the tape recorder. I needed it for the lessons, I explained. So he suggested shops in town where I might replace it. Then I was really annoyed.

“Why was I willing to give my teacher money but not my recorder? Why was I so irritated with his requests? I thought a lot about these things, and it was clear that I had too much power in the situation. I could choose when to be generous: for example, when he had asked in a way I deemed polite. And of course I didn’t deserve this power. It was an accident of birth, but I couldn’t change it any more than I could change the size of my ‘enormous’ feet and limbs.

“This is probably why I took my teacher’s point of view in the story. I wanted at least to try to imagine how it might seem to him. And I did give him the recorder in the end.”

Molly McNett’s first published story appeared in *The Missouri Review* in 1997. Others have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Other Voices*, *Crazyhorse*, *New Letters* and *The Best American Non-Required Reading*.