With Young Men of Highland Chiapas: a view from the place of origin

To tag along to their game at a basketball tournament in another nearby Maya town I have to pay the taxi fare. Edgar drives it. He's one of the super-abundance of low paid taxi drivers in the town near his parents' milpa. There on any noon two rows of taxis line the entire town square and nobody wants to go to San Cristobal. As we drive I ask them about heading for El Norte.

Edgar: I cleaned office buildings in D.F. [Mexico City]. Hard work, all night, and you can't save any money. Sure, I'd like to go to the US. But my parents say it's bad there.

Cristóbal: Some come back aand buy a car to drive as a taxi or they build a cement house, but some come back dead or we never hear from them again.

A year later I return to Chiapas and find that Edgar has gone. But 10 days and still no word from him. His mother cries as she tells me. Towards the middle of my six weeks stay Cristobal too has gone, but has returned, caught by the Migra in Arizona. He talks of the phantasmagoric experience of walking the night desert: "This guy is suddenly walking alongside…asks me where I'm going. The coyote yells "Everyone run!" Lights go on and we are surrounded by Migra. But", he assures me, "I didn't cry" Which tells me that he probably did, as he does now.

Meanwhile Edgar calls home. He's with his uncle in Vermont working on a dairy farm.

Six months later I'm back again. I look for Cristobal, but only his young wife, Guadalupe, and their child are at the house on his parents' land. She has a bruised cheek and she says he's left to work in Cancun as a bricklayers assistant to pay off his debt to the coyote. Others tell me he has been drinking a lot and coming home angry and hitting her. If she hears him come yelling she runs with the child up above to the house of her mother-in-law and father-In-law.

Another eight months. It's the end of January and cold at night in the Highlands. There's no heat in the posada in the Cabecera (the small town which is the civil and religious center of the of the municipio or township/county where I stay.) My friends spread out in the countryside have their cooking fires in the sparate kitchen and a blanket in bed at night in the unheated dirt floor cabin where they sleep. The wood slats nailed up uncured have dried and left half-inch cracks in between some of the wall boards.

Cristóbal is still in Cancun. Guadalupe is living at her parents home an hour away over mostly mud ruts. Edgar's wife is in their cabin near his parents house. She seems kind of distracted and detached and the dirt floor is a mess, but responds eagerly to help me by accompanying me on a drive in a car I've rented for the day to take pictures, stopping along the way and ending up at Polhó the Zapatista autonomous town.

Word from Edgar is that he now works as a busboy at a Chinese restaurant in Atlanta. He left Vermont after he heard that immigration arrested a man from Chiapas who was a leader trying to organize the migrant work force. They immediately shipped him off to a detention center in New York, far from those who would try to get him legal help.

I see Cristobal briefly, back from Cancun. He speaks resentfully about his suffering and seems hostile to me. Because of my unearned privileges, I imagine. Guadalupe keeps in the background, says nothing to inflame him. She is pregnant.

Back in the US I learn that Edgar has moved to work at another Chinese restaurant in a city only an 8 Hour drive from me. I decide to go interview him, and I call him and arrange it. I meet him outside where he lives with some other restaurant workers. He doesn't want me to come in. We drive to my motel and I set up the video to interview him under another name, but he doesn't want to be shown. I arrange him in a back turned silhouette and we begin, but he doesn't really want to talk about his experience working in the US and the kind of treatment he has received. I continue through some empty talk, knowing my documentary will never use any of this. I doubt I would want to reveal much in his situation.

We get take out food and he cons me into taking him to Walmart to buy him some weights he wants to build up his body. He plans to go home soon and to find a wife. He knows he doesn't look like the guys that come back buff after doing heavy farm work or construction.

There's more, of course, to their stories, but this is enough to show you their experience with El Norte. These are young men have no place to go. A kind of lost generation, unskilled and more attracted to the glamorous lifestyles on telenovela's than the hard life of Zapatista autonomy and cooperatives. They are landless and of an period when Mexican Neo-liberal reforms, driven by Mexico's desire to complete the NAFTA agreement in consort with the economics

imposed by the US, have withdrawn all support for the campesinos who farm small plots. The seasonal jobs they took to support their families by wage work at large fincas in the low lands are gone too as U.S. farm exports enter with no tariffs. Many young men feel disrespected and resentful. In this they are like the some of the jobless in the countrysides of the U.S., brothers if they only understood this

Back in Chiapas I get to know Armando, who has gone in a different direction. I missed him on my earliest trips because he was in one of the tourist resorts, working as a bricklayer's assistant. Even those without English language skills can work in some to the spin-off jobs created by tourism. During that time he admits he drank a lot and didn't send money to support his wife and two children. Now he is trying to make it up to them, living a close to traditional life, raising enough corn to last the year, if it is a good year. "My uncle, a catechist, told me that I needed to change, and I have tried. Now they have made me a catechist to work with the children. But I realize I can't teach them unless I change myself. You can't teach the Word of God unless you live it."

A catechist is a lay assistant in the Catholic Church. The Church here has been profoundly modified by the former Archbishop Samuel Ruiz, whose autobiography is the wonderfully entitled "How the Indians Converted Me." He encouraged the social gospel and the preferential treatment of the poor that came out of the Medellin bishop's conference in 1968. When he made his rounds of the communities he stayed in the dirt floor houses of the people rather than in the rectories of the parishes.

My own children have had to come up in a time when greed and exploitation are celebrated. In this context, what can be done to limit the damage that a savage economic system is inflicting on these poorer young men? Hopefully they can unite and become stronger. Hopefully the cooperative autonomy nurtured by the Zapatista movement will spread.

The story of the young Maya women is different but equally hard. Some of it is revealed in *Maya Faces in a Smoking Mirror,* a documentary produced by myself and the anthropologist Christine Eber. This film explores the stories of a number of young Maya women and men responding to their Maya identity in different ways. Christine's novel, **When a Woman Rises,** masterfully explores in depth the women's stories in a near past context.

Everything related in this narrative happened to someone I know from the Highlands of Chiapas. I have melded together stories from several persons to construct "typical" stories and to protect identities.