Mayeros
A YUCATEC MAYA FAMILY

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To my children,
Lisa, Gina, Thomas, Isabel, Marina, Pablo,
con todo mi cariño

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One of the earliest words I learned was chichi, the Maya word for grandmother. My mother would tell me of my chichi who lived in Mexico, but I got to know her only through the letters she sent on my birthdays. It wasn't until I graduated from high school and traveled to Yucatán that I met her and discovered the warmth, humor, and dignity of the Maya people.

My return to Yucatán to do this book has been a journey of rediscovery. The stories, foods, music, and jokes of my childhood home in Brooklyn, New York, were also present in the tiny town of Tabo. Visiting with the family of Armando and Gabor was like returning to my childhood.

Doña Saludina, their mother, served panche, the same chicken stew my mother served for Sunday dinners. I remembered my mother scrubbing clothes when I photographed Saludina doing the laundry in a baña. The dancers at the fiesta brought back memories of my parents dancing the jarana in our living room. So allow me to share with you my visit to the land of my ancestors, the land of the Yucatecan Maya.

George Aranza, Santa Fe, N.M.
The sounds of hammering echo in the plaza of Teabo, a small town on the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico. Armando and his little brother, Gaspar, scampers over an unfinished building, playing hide-and-seek with their friends. Their father, don Victor, and the other men of the village are building the bulding for next week's fiesta to honor the town's patron saint.

A few blocks from the plaza is the house where Armando and Gaspar live with their parents and baby sister, Maria Rosa. Their thirteen-year-old sister, Lida, has gone off to work as a nanny in the city of Mérida. The house is oval, with a thatched roof, just like the house that is carved over the entrance to a temple in the ruins of Uxmal. Uxmal is one of the great stone cities that were abandoned by the ancient Maya. Armando and his family call themselves Mayeros, the people who speak the Mayan language.
In the morning, Armancio’s mother, doña Satulina, makes breakfast for the family. She prepares a hot, frothy chocolate drink by boiling a cacao-and-cinnamon tablet together with hot water in a wooden beater called a boladora. The ancient Maya offered this drink to the Spanish when they arrived on the Yucatán Peninsula in 1527.

On weekdays after breakfast, don Victor rides his bicycle to work on the milpa, the field where he grows their food. With clean shirts and combed hair, the boys go off to school. And doña Satulina begins her chores. First she hauls water from the well behind the house. Since there are no freshwater rivers in Yucatán, natural underground pools called cenotes provide the water they need. Doña Satulina washes clothes in a flat wooden tub called a batea. While the men are working on their milpas, many women earn money by sewing and embroidering huipiles, the traditional Mayan dress, and by weaving hammocks.
For centuries, Mayan women have used the same kind of stone metate to grind their corn and spices. Nowadays, though, they take their cooked maize to the mill by the plaza, where they chat and gossip while waiting their turn to grind their maize into dough for tortillas.

Maize is considered both a food and a spiritual source by the Maya. Legends say that the gods made the Mayan people from dough made from maize.
By midday, doña Satulina and her niece Adela are busy making tortillas for the family lunch, the almuerzo, which is the main meal of the day. Many Mexicans use the flat tortilla as both bread and as a spoon to scoop up their food.

At about two o’clock, don Víctor, Armando, and Gaspár come home to eat. The Maya are very hospitable, and anyone who drops by is usually invited to stay for the meal.
After the almuerzo, hammocks are pulled down from the roof beams for everyone to rest and escape the midday heat. Since Yucatán is very hot, people find it cooler to sleep in the colorful string hammocks than in beds. Visitors are invited to spend the hot afternoon swaying, chatting, and napping.

When Spanish explorers arrived on the islands of the West Indies, they discovered that the native people slept in hammocks. Years later, when they landed on the shores of Yucatán, they introduced hammocks to the Maya.
In the late afternoon, when the heat of the day is over, the hammocks are put away and the town begins to stir again. Stores reopen and people go back to work.

Don Victor heads for the plaza. Every afternoon until the fiesta, he will be working on the balcony.

Using a tumpline, Armando fetches firewood. The ancient Maya did not have wheels or beasts of burden, so they used tumplines to carry goods over great distances.

Satilina and her sister-in-law Berta hire a young man with a tricycle to run errands around the town. Since school is over for the day, Gaspar goes along with them to get a haircut.
As evening approaches, the family returns home. Gaspár has been out playing and killed a *tusa*, a molelike animal. Tía Beria cooks it by burring and scraping off the fur, wrapping it in a banana leaf, and burying it under the coals of the kitchen fire until it is baked. The *tusa* is a delicacy they will eat for supper.

While doña Saturina makes tortillas, don Victor turns on the radio and the boys dance with Rosa. Only a few families in town have television.

After eating a light meal, the boys go to sleep. Their parents may weave, sew, or stroll over to the plaza to sit and chat with friends in the coolness of the evening. Gradually the hammocks fill the one-room house as each member of the family curls up for the night.
On Sunday, doña Satulina, tía Berta, and the children trek out to the family ranch and milpa to visit and bring fresh food back to town. Don Victor stays behind to work on the building, but they are joined by Leidi, who has been given time off from her job to return to Teapa for the fiesta.

They start early in the day. Shafts of sunlight pierce the canopy of leaves. Birds sing and insects buzz. Armando, Gaspar, and their cousin Jaime run ahead. The women follow, their babies on their hips.

Tía Berta stops to make a turnover of her shawl, her rebozo, which makes it easier to carry her baby, Alberto. But when her elder son, Luis, meets them on the path, Alberto gets a bike ride. Luis lives in town with his wife and baby but works on the ranch.
The ranch is a cluster of houses near a huge ceiba tree. Leidi hides behind it to surprise the cousins. When she pops out, they all shout, “La Xtabay! La Xtabay!” This is the name of the beautiful spirit woman who, according to legend, sits in the branches of the ceiba combing her hair and lures milperos to their death.

Armando and Gaspar’s grandparents live on the ranch with other aunts, uncles, and cousins. The people who work or live on the ranch are isolated and speak only Maya among themselves. The women and children who stay in town all day speak mostly Spanish. Don Victor feels bad that Leidi no longer understands him.
The ancient Maya hunted deer, tapir, monkeys, and wild turkey for meat. The Spanish introduced horses, cattle, pigs, and chickens to the New World. On the ranch, the family raises cattle for meat and milk. Armando gets on a horse to help lasso a steer for branding. The boys whoop and holler, and soon the steer is roped and on the ground. Luis burns a brand into the animal's hide.

The ancient Maya also cultivated bees in hollow logs for honey and wax. Today Yucatán is famous for its honey, which is exported to other countries. From a distance, the boys watch as Luis blows smoke into a hive to calm the bees so he can remove the honey.
Armando visits with his chichi, his grandmother, who fell recently and hurt her wrist. Since she cannot walk to town, she is being treated at home by the family. Then his grandfather, his abuelito, shows him the old way of getting sisal hemp from a leaf of the henequen plant.

He uses a wooden rasp to crush out the pulp and juice until only the strands of sisal hemp remain. Abuelito will use these fibers to weave rope and twine. Before the invention of synthetic fibers, rope and twine were woven from sisal hemp, and Yucatán exported much of the world's supply.
The Mayan farmer believes that he borrows the land from the spirits of the forest. He will use the land for two years, and then return it to the forest and the creatures who live there.

Months ago, at the beginning of the dry season, the men cut a clearing in the forest to make a new milpa. They took the wood they needed for cooking and building and left the brush to dry. Now that the dry season is ending, the men and boys set fire to the brush. When the fire dies down, the ashes that are left will fertilize the thin layer of topsoil. The Maya have used this slash-and-burn method of farming for more than four thousand years.

In a few weeks, when the rains begin, don Elias will plant maize in the new milpa in the same way his ancestors did. With a pointed stick, he will poke a hole into the blackened earth. Then he will drop in a few kernels of maize and cover the seeds with his foot. He will also plant beans, squash, potatoes, pumpkins, chilies, melons, and spices among the maize.

Armando and Gaspar help their uncle Elias pick some maize and vegetables from the old milpa to bring back to the ranch.
When they return to the ranch, the boys are put to work rubbing dry kernels off ears of maize. Then the kernels are soaked and cooked to soften them so that Sautina and Adela can grind them to make atole, a cool drink of cornmeal and water.

By now it is time to eat. The women serve an almuerzo of puchero, a tasty chicken stew. In ancient times, a wild turkey would have been used instead of the chicken. Three generations of men sit down to eat together. At the ranch, the women and younger children follow tradition and eat apart from them.

After the almuerzo, the children gather around Abuelito for a story. Then it is time to go. The boys kiss their grandparents and uncles good-bye and the family walks back to town, laden with fresh fruits and vegetables.
For the next few days, excitement over the upcoming fiesta rises. Amusement rides and food stalls are set up in the plaza. At last the bullring is finished and the decorations are complete.

On the first day of the fiesta, doña Saludina leads a procession of señoritas, the married women of the town. They carry flowers and candles to the church to place at the feet of their patron saint.

Men walk alongside them, shooting off rockets to announce that the fiesta has begun. For the next six days, there will be bullfights and dancing that will attract many people from nearby villages and towns.
That evening, the entire family dresses in their best clothes and goes to the plaza. Musicians have come to town to play for the traditional dances called *jaranas*. The dances go on late into the night while fireworks light up the sky. Armando and Gaspár ride the carousel and roam among the crowds.

The next day, Friday, splendidly dressed dancers assemble under the portico of the town hall. Women and girls dress in beautifully embroidered white *huipiles* with *rebozos*. They wear flowers and ribbons in their hair and gold filigree earrings and necklaces. The men and boys wear white shirts called *guayaberas*, white pants, sandals, and straw hats. Men, women, boys, and girls all dance with one another.
The next four days are for the bullfights. Vaqueros lead the roped bulls through the streets to the bullring. The bullfightlers come from the city to match their skill and bravery with those of the bulls. The crowds cheer and jeer both bulls and torcadores.

If a bull is brave and fights, the torcador kills him with a sword. The dead bull is butchered and the fresh meat is sold to the crowds outside the bullring.

Each night, Armando and Gaspar try to stay awake as long as possible to watch the dancers, games, and rides. But eventually the boys return home. Soon the hammocks rock in the quiet house and the family sleeps as the last strains of the jarana echo in the night.
On Wednesday, life returns to its everyday rhythms. The fiesta is over. Grown-ups return to work; children go back to school. Armando and Gaspar’s teachers are preparing them for the future by teaching them Spanish and the skills they will need to succeed in a fast-changing world. Working alongside their father, they will continue to speak Maya and may grow up to be milperos too, but they will also speak Spanish. Armando and Gaspar are the future Maya, a people with a rich heritage who are making a greater place for themselves in the fast-changing world.
Glossary of Spanish and Yucatec Words

abuela (ah-bway-LAY-soh): little grandmother, an endearment like granddaughter
almafrecio (ahl-MAH-FAH-see-oh): lunch
acelo (ah-TOH-tay): a drink prepared with cornmeal
baste (bah-TAH-two): a vinegar, a flat-bottomed bowl
batidora (bah-tee-DOR-oh): a wooden beater
canoan (kah-NOH-two): natural underground reservoir
chichi (cheech-CHI): Mayan word for grandmother
cornal (coh-MAH-ahl): flat, earthenware pan; frying pan
cu mucho cariño (kuh MOW-coh-choh kah-CHAH-EN-yoh): affectionately
doe (DOH): a man's title of respect
dora (DOH-NAH-yoh): a woman's title of respect
fiesta (fye-AHR-two): feast, party, holiday
gracias (GRAH-SYAYS-yoh): thank you
guayabera (go-way-ya-BAY-ruh-eh): loose-fitting man's shirt
hacienda (ah-HAH-DEH-nah): a farm or ranch
huipil (wee-PEEL): a loosely fitted dress
jarana (jah-RAH-nah): dance, typical Yucatec dance
jicara (hee-CAH-rah): a bowl made from the calabash gourd
Mérida (MAY-reh-dah): capital city of the state of Yucatan
mestizo (may-TEH-soh): a person of mixed race
netate (neh-TAH-two): a stone used for grinding
milpa (MEE-PAH-yoh): a field where food is grown
milpecho (mee-FAY-roh): a farmer who works on a milpa
muchas gracias (Moo-CHAH-SEH-nee-naas GRAH-MEE-soh): thank you very much
parche (pah-CHAH-rah): a meal and vegetable stew
rebozo (ray-BOH-yoh): a shawl
señor (say-NEH-NOR): gentleman, sir, master
señora (say-NEH-NOR-ah): lady, wife, mistress
tio (TEH-oh): uncle
tio (TEH-oh): uncle
tortilla (tor-TAH-yoh): unleavened cornmeal pancake
tusa (TOO-soh): a mole-like animal
Uxmal (oo-SHMAL): one of the Mayan ruins in Yucatan
vaquero (bah-KAH-roh): cowboy
Xtabay (shah-BAH): female character in Yucatec legend