

TESTIMONY:
DEATH OF A GUATEMALAN VILLAGE

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PRELUDE

Tzalalá is a remote village in the northwest of Huehuetenango Department in Guatemala, Central America. There are no movie houses nor theaters, television, electric light, drinking water or highways. The only access to this community is by narrow twisting roads that cross streams and deep gullies as they climb high into the craggy uplands.

The thatched roofs of the village begin to emit smoke at four in the morning, when the women rise to prepare the *nixtamal* and tortillas for their men, who very early make their way to the fields they have worked since the time of their earliest ancestors.

The women remain behind to weave their meager dreams of subsistence on their looms, and after nightfall they lie on their mats to ruminate in Mayan about their poverty and plan their yearly journeys to work as migrants on the coastal plantations.

That is how life has been and still goes on in this community, whose only hope is the *milpas* or cornfields they are able to scratch out of the rocky hillsides.

In the ten years since I'd arrived in the village as schoolmaster, time in the village had flown by, as the children I had the first years in my classroom grew into youths who sought marriage and made dates by the well, where the young women in their lovely native dress go to fetch water in their clay jars.

Very few of the villagers finish their sixth grade of schooling, as the great majority abandon classes after their third or fourth grades - not because they do not like schoolwork but because they must accompany their parents on their migration to the distant coastal plantations. This is the community's way of life. The native

peoples know how to live in peace and harmony, which normally is only broken during the elections.

One such occasion was a Friday in February 1978, when several politicians arrived in the village, rabble rousing and pretending concern for the villagers' most urgent needs, beginning with the roads, which were in miserable condition. The leader of the delegation spoke his pledge in a booming voice:

"WHEN WE GAIN THE PRESIDENCY, SAN JOSE, TZALALA WILL HAVE ITS HIGHWAY, AND AS A GUARANTEE OF THIS YOU ARE TO MAKE AN X OVER THE SYMBOL OF OUR PARTY."

The villagers went to the voting booth with the hope that with their ballots they would win the promised assistance in completing the road they themselves had begun some months back with pickaxes, shovels and hoes.

After the voting, the politicians who gained good posts in the government rapidly forgot their promises.

Three years later the politicians insisted the project would be completed before long if the villagers voted again for their official candidate in the next election, so the new government could carry out the offers the previous one did not.

The community gave up expecting any results from politicians.

But what most worried the community was the formation of "civil patrols" in July of 1982.

One Sunday the military commander summoned all the head men of the surrounding villages, and there he set forth his intention to form the so-called civil defense patrols.

The entire community protested this unexpected measure, insisting they had no desire to bear arms, as this was the army's function.

The commander grew angry and declared that everyone in the village had to unite and defend

themselves against subversion. The people responded that they preferred to organize a labor team to carry out a project of communal benefit, such as the roads that were needed in the village and its surrounding hamlets.

The commander realized he could not convince the villagers and accepted their proposal to form a work detachment.

That is how the village and its hamlets formed into separate work groups. Once they were formed, however, the commander again summoned the heads of each group and advised them that since they were already organized into civilian detachments, they would have to go on military patrol. Those who protested this deceit by the commander were threatened with prison and were told that to oppose these measures was to be an enemy of the government.

That is how all these communities became subject to the will of the military and liable to sanctions or punishment if they disobeyed orders.

From that time on, civil patrols were in operation in Tzalalá, and they included youths of fourteen as well as old men of seventy. Under the constant pressure from the army, all the neighbors had to carry their clubs or garrotes in place of rifles and were under orders to attack any foreign elements that entered the community.

That is the background of the terrible events of September 9, 1982, when the civil patrol of Tzalalá mistook an army detachment dressed in olive fatigues for guerrillas.

THE ATTACK

Friday the 9th of September dawned bright and clear. The air was crystalline after a week of heavy rains. I rose very early that day and unhurriedly gathered a few things in the *mortal* which I used because rucksacks of any color were too dangerous to carry around. Only the army was considered to have the right to use them, and their counterparts, the guerrillas, also carried them. I wrapped a week's used clothing in a plastic bag, next to a few bananas I'd bought from an Indian woman who travels from village to village.

Every Friday, when I returned to town, my children looked into my *mortal* first thing to discover what presents I brought them. For that reason I always carry some sweets and something else for my wife and children, who always awaited my return near the outskirts of town.

I put away my cot and prepared my breakfast. I began eating at seven and by seven-fifteen I set out for the schoolhouse to begin the day's teaching. Friday has always been a happy day for me, full of the anticipation of reuniting with my family in the town, several kilometers from the village.

After our morning hygiene exercises and a quick benediction I began classes as usual. For the past several days I'd been helping the upper grades prepare some observances for Independence Day ceremonies, to be celebrated the following week. Manuelito, the most mischievous boy in the class, asked me to sing the ditty of the "Indito" or little Indian, which goes like this:

A little Indian I saw
as he danced the trot
how well he moved his feet

touching his own heart.
I asked, How do you do it?
Do tell me please
And he said, you just dance
the same as I do.

I realized the song was discriminatory because the questioner uses the familiar "vos" (in a vulgar sense) and the little Indian replies in a respectful USTED. For the rural child all songs taught in school are equally discriminatory, or at least alienating, because their true intention is to condition them to the requirements of the *patrón* or boss, and thereby to perpetuate the Indian's inferior status.

Manuelito insisted on singing the song, so I corrected the usages to make them the same. In the middle of our exercise the head of the civil patrol of the village burst in out of breath and gave the alarm at the top of his voice:

"The guerrillas are approaching the village. Everyone get ready!"

While he continued to shout, another member of the patrol began to ring the bell of the chapel, which signalled imminent danger.

Out of curiosity I stepped to the door and saw the villagers, or rather the first company of the civil patrol, take up their clubs, stones, slingshots and machetes and run to the aid of the front lines which guarded the entrance to the village.

The mobilization was carried out rapidly to the uninterrupted tolling of the bronze bell of the Catholic chapel.

I consulted my watch and saw it was eleven in the morning. At almost the same instant I heard the first shot fired. Behind it came a volley of machinegun fire. The peaceful community broke into confusion. The women wept and prayed to God to protect their husbands

and older sons who had been forced to join the civil patrol.

I ordered the students to stretch out on the floor and barred the door and windows with old broomsticks. The invaders had encircled the village and the hills echoed the furious explosions of grenades and the sputter of bullets that whistled past the corrugated tin roof of the schoolhouse.

"Don't make a sound," I ordered my children. Some began to weep and others trembled with fear. Their fathers were in the midst of that gunfire, armed only with sticks, stones and slingshots and the children were fully aware of the danger they were in.

"Pray - pray for your fathers and don't raise your heads - " I insisted. It was twelve noon and the thunderous blasts of the rifles and submachineguns continued without a pause. From time to time we heard the voice of a patrol leader who shouted in Mayan: "Keep on, *compañeros*, don't be afraid of the sons of ditches. They'll soon run out of ammunition . . . Attack!"

The voice of the patrol leader was heard on the eastern side of the schoolhouse, toward the windows. Flattened against the wall I peered under the slits of the window to locate the patrols or the attackers, but my vision was blocked and I could not see beyond a few meters. I squinted to look in all directions but could see nothing. The coffee arbor and the trees back of the school impeded my vision.

My pupils were growing restless and stretched to exercise their limbs, but I forbade them to move.

"Flatten yourselves against the floor," I ordered again as the blasts of the machineguns came closer and closer. The students obeyed and remained quiet under their desks, and I threw myself down on the floor beside them.

Immediately afterward I heard footsteps in the school patio, coming toward the door. It was a woman who began to shout for her son.

"Pascual, Pascualito my son, where are you? Pascual my son, come home with me."

I approached the barred door and shouted at the woman, "Your son is safe here, return to your home please and look after your other children without endangering yourself."

The woman grew angry and shouted at me: "If something happens to my son I will hold you responsible."

I paid no heed to the woman and told her son Pascual to lie down on the floor - his mother's cries had made him rise to his feet and expose himself to gunfire.

Another hour went by. It was one in the afternoon and the gunblasts were closer and louder. I began to suspect that the patrol members may have committed a grave mistake. After the mother returned to her home, I once again heard running steps in the patio. I peered through the keyhole and saw several older men running toward their homes. They too were reluctant members of the civil patrol. A military officer had forced them to join and had threatened to kill them if they refused. This officer was the same lieutenant who ordered the execution of two villagers apprehended by the patrol and who warned that anyone who refused to join the civil patrol would be considered an enemy of the government. On August 30th, exactly ten days before, the patrol had been forced to club the two men to death. The lieutenant's voice was still fresh in the minds of the villagers: "You must all look after yourselves and stop being sissies. Don't let the communist bandits into your village. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Commander," the neighbors had shouted in unison.

"We shall see now if it's true. Kill these two motherfuckers that you yourselves apprehended."

"No," the villagers replied. "We are not accustomed to killing."

"Well, then, you will now become accustomed to it. Do it at once, or I will do it for you."

On August 30th the villagers had carried out their first execution.

It should not surprise anyone that even the old men and adolescents joined the patrol to escape the lieutenant's grave threats.

The old men I saw running away were in charge of guarding the school and fled for their lives when the gunfire got too close. The school and the chapel are located in the village plaza, and between them is a basketball court with an earthen floor.

I looked at my watch and saw it was 2 p.m. I felt sorry for the children stretched out on the floor. They were praying because it was all that they could do.

Fifteen minutes passed, and I was startled to hear the frantic ringing of the bell in the chapel of the village's patron saint, directly across from the school.

I peered through the keyhole once again and felt a shiver on seeing a man in olive green leading twelve patrol members with their hands tied behind them. Two other men similarly dressed pointed rifles at them. I recognized at once that the rifles they bore were Galils, of Israeli manufacture. I knew these rifles by name because the military detachment had used them in my hometown to cut down innocent people who were accused of being guerrillas.

Although the bell rang, no one approached the chapel. On other occasions the ringing of the bell would bring all the men of the village to the plaza, carrying clubs in their callused hands, and stones in their pouches for their rubber slingshots. As no one heeded the bell, the civil defender who rang it was ordered by the armed man to call at the top of his lungs and summon the villagers to gather in the school patio.

The defender filled his lungs and shouted in his own language to the villagers:

"Come close, brothers, don't be afraid. It is the army that is among us. Come quickly."

The women who had hidden in neighbors' homes when the shooting began were the first to approach. They were anxious to see if their husbands or sons were among the bound captives.

The hail of gunfire had finally ceased, and I instructed my students to rise from the floor. They sat on their desks while I opened the door and went out to the corridor to find out what was happening.

Doña Elena, who was waiting for me, approached as I left the school and began to plead with me. "I beg of you, inquire about my husband so they will release him; I don't speak Spanish and I'm afraid to speak with them."

When I saw her crying, I too felt a desire to weep, but I did not allow my tears to flow. I girded myself up and slowly approached the armed men who held the patrol members captive. I greeted them cordially and identified myself as the village schoolmaster.

The sergeant who led the captives responded in poor Spanish. By his torturous manner of speaking I deduced he was also an Indian, a native of Sololá or Totonicapán. With an expression smeared with rage he stared at me and replied:

"Well, look here you, these bastards attacked us. We're army men and I think all these people are guerrillas."

I confirmed at first sight that they were indeed soldiers. I had begun to suspect as much when I heard the sound of their weapons. It was the same coughing noise of Galil rifles I remembered hearing when they massacred two communities on the northern trunk road, not far from the village of Tz'alalá. It was the same familiar gunblasts heard when they carry out their counter-insurgency operations and sow panic in the communities they invade.

I again attempted to reason with the man, although I was aware that I was playing with fire.

"Gentlemen, these men you have bound with ropes belong to the civil patrol. They have strict orders to finish off any guerrillas that show themselves here, and that is what they mistook you for."

"Then why didn't they take notice of our rifles?"

"No doubt they failed to take notice of them, but their worst error was over the olive green uniforms you are wearing. The patrol is more familiar with the speckled camouflage fatigues commonly worn by the army."

"Wait for the lieutenant, and he will decide what to do with all of you." Saying this, the man turned his back on me.

I returned to the school and ordered my students to head directly for their homes. More soldiers leading other bound captives were arriving. Some of the patrol members were bleeding; the rest were sweating and disoriented.

When I dismissed the class and told them to go home, each of them fled like a deer out the door and raced to find his parents.

I shut the door of the school and once again I approached the civil defenders, as their women continued to weep. I felt pity for all of them, but there was very little to be done under the circumstances.

More members of the patrol arrived with their uniformed captors. They looked as if they had fled from an insane asylum. Some had broken arms from the bullets, and others had their ribs crushed from the blows of rifle butts and repeated falls. The defenders suffered in silence, without letting go the clubs they clutched in trembling hands, while the soldiers spat out curses as they shoved and kicked the villagers and rounded them all up in the patio.

WHITE FLAGS AND RESCUE

The people gathered slowly and fearfully.

"Come forward without fear; these are soldiers, they are friends," the chief civil defender shouted.

A poor peasant woman named Malcal approached me, saying, "Oh, schoolmaster, my child is dead. They have killed little Sebastián!"

Sebastián was a boy of fourteen who was enrolled in the sixth grade but had stopped attending classes because he had to accompany his parents to the fields. Since he stopped attending school, he had been forced to take part in the civil patrol.

It is painful to see a mother weep in agony for her dead son. This was the first death we had news of since the army began its attack on the civil patrol. Sticks are no match for the Galil rifles, and after four hours of intense combat the *kaibiles* had almost certainly emptied their cartridges on other defenseless patrol members.

At that moment I thought of leaving that devastated place, but I soon reconsidered. After ten years of teaching in that village, I thought it would be cowardice to abandon this community that was now suffering so horribly.

Another village woman approached me and pointed toward the ridge below. "Down there they have tied up many more men, and it looks as if they plan to execute them. Please find someone to help them."

"I will see what I can do," I said, and walked up to the sergeant, a dark-skinned veteran or "rehooked one," one of the soulless, unscrupulous former foot-soldiers that President Rios Montt recruited and sent to the Indian villages during the "Offensive against Subversion."

I said to the man, "I would like to go below and speak for the men they are holding captive, and I would like a soldier to accompany me, please."

The man made a gesture of disgust but finally consented. A soldier accompanied me as I headed toward the place the woman had pointed to, about a hundred yards from the village center.

As a sign of my peaceful intention, I snatched a white flag that fluttered from the roof of a thatched hut. The white flags flew from all the huts and homes of the villages and towns in the Department of Huehuetenango, by order of the Commander of the local military detachment. The officer had announced that all those who neglected to put up the white flags would have their homes bombed by the helicopters, just as they had previously bombed the Indian community of *Coyá*.

I walked on with that little flag in my hands, and I don't know how I found the courage to try to save these endangered people. At a distance of several yards I saw the civil defenders bound together with a thick rope. They were guarded by several mean-faced soldiers.

I approached unhesitatingly. One of them looked furious as he came to meet me with his rifle butt ready.

I did not give him the chance to hit me. From afar I greeted him with courtesy and brandished my white flag.

"Step forward - what do you want?"

"I wish to speak with the commanding officer."

"He's over there, take care not to upset him."

I walked toward the commander, who was seated on the threshold of a little adobe house. His shirt was unbuttoned. His bulky stomach glistened with sweat and grease.

When he saw me, he set aside some yellowed documents he was looking at and stared at me.

I recognized him as a lieutenant who during the past month had been commander of my town, but I could not recall his name. Without his asking me, I approached

him and leaned the white flag against the wall of the house.

"Good afternoon, my lieutenant," I said respectfully.

He turned his thick face toward me and studied me from head to foot. He was fat and short, and had a dark complexion, like the rest of his men. They were all low-ranking career soldiers.

"What do you want, you - " he snapped.

"I am the schoolmaster in this village and have come to let you know that the people you're holding captive are members of the civil patrol. By accident they mistook you for guerrillas."

"Don't come to me with those stories. These sons of bitches are guerrillas. That's why they attacked us, and I am going to execute every damn one of them."

I went on, unperturbed, "Up there by the chapel the rest of the men are waiting to clear up the situation for you."

"With me you have nothing to clear up. Everything is already clear. They've wounded one of my soldiers, and all of you will have to pay for it. What more do you want to know?"

"I beseech my lieutenant to forgive these people. All the men are members of the patrol and guard the village day and night, as you have verified for yourself. What a pity they mistook you, because of your olive green uniforms."

The commander made no reply, but went on inspecting the boxes and chests of the house. "This radio interests me. Take it along," he called out.

All the soldiers who had scattered throughout the village returned with radios and tape recorders and other objects of value they found in the houses. Clearly they had planned to sack the community, as they carried long cloth bags instead of their usual rucksacks, and they stuffed them with their spoils.

The captives were sitting in the middle of the road, their heads exposed to the blazing sun since they had lost their hats during the combat.

After the commanding officer was done inspecting the boxes and chests the soldiers brought him, he stood with an air of boredom and glared at me. "All right, so the people are all gathered up there, is that right?"

"Yes, they have gathered and await your arrival," I told him.

The commander buttoned his green shirt, checked the cartridge clip on his Galil and ordered his soldiers to call the others who were still sacking the more distant houses.

When they gathered in front of him the commander scolded them:

"What happened to you, you shitheads? Why didn't you obey my orders and encircle the area as I told you?"

"It's just that the guerrillas were firing at us with too much insistence. Lieutenant sir, that is why we took the other way."

"And what fucking right do you have to follow your own orders? For myself, I dragged myself to the place where these guerrillas were firing their .30 caliber; and you should have seen the bullets fly over my head, but I kept going. And you turds might as well have gone to hell. Cowards."

"No, commander sir, we didn't flee. We faced up to these cocksuckers who were shooting at us from left and right."

I laughed within me to hear them brag. The ".30 caliber" they mentioned were the stones the patrol had flung at them. The soldiers had fired at one another when they broke rank in disarray to surround the supposed guerrillas.

Only one man in the civil patrol carried an old rusty rifle the army had authorized him to use. He was a poor *campesino* inclined to do battle with the guerrillas. He

had shot at the army and wounded one of them. As you seek, so shall you find, said a drunkard in prison, and that is apparently what happened to the fellow, who never had a chance to reload his rifle when a hail of bullets splintered his skull. I found this out later, for I did not witness how they gathered the corpses that night.

That single bullet had made the army quake, scattering them in all directions, and that is why the commander scolded the soldiers for disobeying his orders. After the dressing down, he placed them in single file behind the captives and ordered me to walk ahead with the white flag in my hand.

We had not gone far when a young woman raced toward us, pursued by a soldier who clutched at her dress. She was pregnant, but that made no difference to the soldier, who wanted to rape her. When she saw me at the head of the captives, she stopped to ask me for help in her native language, which the soldiers did not understand. She trembled with fear but still fought back bravely with nails and teeth against the warped intentions of the soldier.

The commander caught on and rebuked the soldier, who brazenly protested he was after her only because she was concealing something. The officer laughed aloud and told us to keep marching.

I went ahead with my little plastic flag, and the captives followed behind me, their hands tied with a single rope.

We could not walk fast because one of the bound captives was an old man whose right foot was wounded, and he left bloody prints on the ground with each step. The commander became impatient and shouted at the old man in a fury:

"Hurry up you old fucker. That's what you get for playing at guerrillas."

The old man replied in the Spanish he had learned as a soldier in the time of Jorge Ubico:

"Go easy on me, chief. I am old already and know something about the army. The only reason I'm here is because they forced me to join the patrol. At my age I should be relaxing under the shade of my little hut."

The commander cut him off and shoved the old man so he fell on the ground, bringing down the others who were bound with the same rope.

"You old turd, if you open your mouth again I'll fill you full of lead right here. An old bastard like you has no right to live."

"Do with me what you please, brother, since even a woman with a rifle in hand could do the same."

The old man paid for his retort with a fist in the face that loosened his few remaining teeth. I didn't dare say anything because I saw the soldiers were furious and there was no sense in suffering blows for nothing.

We finally reached the basketball court in front of the school, where the villagers were gathered, while nearly all the patrol members were tied to the oaken posts that held up the hoops. I planted the white flag at the school entrance and sat down sorrowfully to see what would happen next.

I WATCHED MY SON DIE

Before going down to rescue the captives I had learned of the death of one patrol member: the boy of fourteen who had been in my class at the start of the year. When I returned to the village center the wailing and weeping of the women had grown louder. As the defenders joined the gathering, each gave his account of the *compañeros* that had fallen in combat.

It was now two-thirty, and the day had begun to cloud over. The bullet-riddled bodies of the dead civil defenders remained where they had fallen. No one, not even the widows, dared to leave the group to weep over the bodies of their husbands.

The only corpse with a roof over it was that of the fourteen-year-old son of the woman who had spoken to me, Doña Malcal.

"I saw it all," she told me. "My son had just arrived with a bundle of firewood when the shooting broke out. He dropped the load without untying it and ran down the hill where we live to look for his father.

"No, Sebastián, stay here and hide!" I said to him, but he would not heed me. He kept on running down the hill while the bullets whistled and struck the adobe wall of our house. He was my only son, and because I knew the risk he was taking, I went after him. I could hardly run as I was carrying my small daughter at my hip, and by the time I got below, my son was crouched behind some large rocks with another defender I was unable to identify.

"The noise made by the firearms of the attackers was like that of firecrackers at a festival, only much louder, and it gave us a terrible fright. Even so, I ignored the bullets that flew past and knelt down where my son was. I pulled at his shirt and shouted so he could hear me. 'Let's go home, I'm afraid of your being here. Come, my son,

let's go home.' He turned abruptly and said, 'Mother, why have you followed me? Don't you see you're running a risk for yourself and the little one? Go on home and hide, and don't worry about me.'

"Since I could not persuade my son, I crouched low and ran back. Before I reached the door of our hut I heard a scream behind me and turned to see my son crumpled behind the rock. I ran down again and called out, 'Sebastián, what has happened my son?' He lifted his face toward me and said, 'They've hit me, Mother, but don't worry; go on back to the house before they get you too.'

"I saw at once that his face had grown pale. Blood began to cover his shirt, and the color had started to fade from his eyes.

"Oh my son, Sebastiáncito, they've wounded you!' I cried aloud, and hugged him to my breast.

"Leave me, Mother, don't grieve over me, leave me here and go back home to protect yourself and the little one.'

"No my son, I don't want to leave you. I want to stay here and die with you because you are my only male child.'

"Sebastián looked into my eyes and smiled. He was very white and began to lose his strength. I unbuttoned his shirt and was horrified to see the bullet hole in his back, just above the lungs. My eyes clouded and I held him to myself with all my strength. 'Does it hurt much, my son?' I asked, and he replied:

"No, not much. I only feel something warm flowing through my body.' And he began to vomit up blood. I did not wait any longer, but shifted my daughter to the front and lifted him across my back. I ran frenziedly toward the house, with the bullets flying all around and dodged between the houses as I fled with my son up the hill.

"I pushed the door open with my foot and lay my son down on the wooden pallet. I quickly gathered up some eggs laid by the black hen and made a broth to staunch

my son's wound. But with every sip he took he vomited up more blood and could not keep it down. I lifted his head onto my chest and caressed it tenderly, as I had when he was little.

"Oh my son, you should never have left the house! Last night I had bad dreams and felt a danger for you.'

"Sebastián looked sadly into my eyes and replied with difficulty. 'Don't weep for me, one never knows what's going to happen. Don't weep, Mother, these fourteen years I've lived with you count for something.'

"His last words were spoken slowly, torturously, and a dark shadow came over the whites of his eyes. 'Don't die my son! Please don't die . . . Oh my God!' I gathered him in my arms and kissed him again and again, bathing his pale face with my tears. Then I ran outside and began shouting from the hilltop with all my strength for my husband so he could come and see our dying son. My voice was trembling, and my calls probably did not reach very far. The gunfire had grown louder, and I saw several men withdrawing from their positions as the enemy approached. I returned inside the house and sat down next to my dying son. I began to weep aloud, until the women next door came over to see what happened.

"The first one to come was Sebastián's grandmother, and the other two were my sisters-in-law. They had not been aware of what happened to Sebastián because they had been lying motionless on the floor of their house and had not dared go out for fear of getting shot. I was grateful they arrived when I needed them most. With them there, I felt more secure and was able to grieve openly. The grandmother lifted up Sebastián in her wrinkled arms and began to weep aloud as she kissed his face.

"But my son no longer felt anything. His breathing was torturous and short. Again I tried to spoon-feed him an egg beaten with orange juice to give him strength, but it was useless because his jaw was growing rigid. I pried open his mouth with both fingers and struggled to make

him swallow a little of the potion. But his agonizing moans frightened me and I put the glass aside.

"It was no use, my son had to die, and I could do nothing but weep. We boarded up the door and all wept together to see my dear son dying little by little, painfully.

"His grandmother began to curse the authors of this calamity, but as a mother I did not wish to do so. I resigned myself. I realized that just as God had given me my son, so he was gathering him up. It is not that I do not love my son, but that I love him the same as all mothers love their sons. I gain nothing by cursing. I placed everything in the hands of God because I know He will mete out justice for all the good as well as the evil that is done.

"There was a loud banging on the door, and we threw ourselves down on the wooden cot where my son lay in agony.

"Open up or I'll set fire to the house!" shouted the man who pounded on the door. This frightened my mother-in-law because if he set fire to our straw roof, the entire house would go up in a blaze, with us inside it. She rose slowly and, hunched as she was with age, she removed the bolt from the door. At that moment the man kicked the door in, and she was flung against the open fireplace.

"Let's see how many guerrillas you are hiding here!" said the man, who wore leather army boots and carried a regulation rifle. This awakened my doubts, and I realized that he indeed was a soldier by the way he carried himself. The guerrillas had passed through the village now and then, and those who had seen them said they wear rubber boots and cause no harm to anyone. That is how I realized the invaders of our village were army soldiers - by their rough manner and the harm they were causing us.

"The man approached my dying son and began to lift him to his feet, but I threw myself on top of Sebastián to prevent the man from causing him further harm.

"Don't touch him, he is my son and he is dying. There are no guerrillas here, only civil defenders. You forced them to form into patrols, and now you yourselves are killing them."

"He seized me by the hair and pulled me to my feet, shouting furiously. These lousy motherfuckers attacked us, and I want to see the face of this bastard to make him tell me where he hid his weapon and his uniform."

"No, señor," I replied, weeping bitterly. "We are Christians here, poor peasants who know nothing of such things."

"As I spoke, the man began to search our small hut, flinging the clothes hanging from the line onto the floor and spilling the baskets of corn and beans we kept in storage. He even grabbed the hen that was laying eggs in one corner and flung her onto the patho.

"Well, it's you poor campesinos who get mixed up in the bullshit," the man replied. His words made me angry, for I felt certain this villain was as poor as we are, but he acted like one of the rich. Much as I wanted to throw this up in his face, it was not the time to make accusations. My husband, who has some learning, had said, "With the soldiers words are useless, because they are brutes, and brutes only know how to use force."

"The man went on ransacking the house until he found the small box where I kept some silver earrings my husband had given me for a wedding present. The soldier did not ask for the key; he placed the box on the ground and splintered it with the butt of his rifle. The few objects of value we kept inside flew out of the crushed box, and the soldier dropped them in the sack he carried on his back. He even took some colored ribbons I had labored many hours to weave.

"Please, ' I pleaded, 'don't take my earrings,' but he stepped toward me furiously as if ready to strike me.

"I don't want any arguments from you, you old cunt. If you open your mouth one more time, I'll split it open with one blow.'

"The soldier barefacedly continued to stuff his sack, until there was nothing left that interested him. He ordered us: 'Now you will join the other shitheads of this village out by the chapel.'

"No señor, I am staying here with my dying son. I cannot leave him alone, in his condition. Please take pity on us.'

"Leave him here to rot,' the villain replied, 'and you go on where I ordered you. Now, quickly.'

"He pushed us out of the house, and I had to leave my son behind. That is why I am here now like a ghost, while my heart remains with my son, who by now is almost certainly dead."

This is what the woman told me in Mayan language, while I watched with my own eyes the soldiers searching all the houses of the community, like hungry dogs. Small groups of women and children were marched to the chapel by their captors, and the murmurs of the assembled grew louder, as the women and children wept openly. The men remained deathly still. In the faces of each of the civil defenders I could see fear. They seemed dazed and unable to grasp their situation. Or perhaps they understood and regretted their mistakes. They had gone out determined to wipe out an unknown enemy and had met the very men who had professed to be their friends and protectors. Even the dimmer ones had occasion to reflect on their actions.

THE BLACKLIST

As soon as the soldiers and villagers had gathered next to the chapel, the commanding officer gave the order for the women and children to be taken inside.

When the women and children were inside the chapel, the soldiers stood guard as the men remained still, standing or sitting on the school steps, awaiting the next deployment with dazed expressions.

The lieutenant ordered the villagers to form according to the squad they belonged to, "And have in your hands your civil patrol identity card."

He then pulled out a sheet of paper from his pocket, which he unfolded with an impatient flourish. He smoothed the paper against his thigh and warned the troops to keep a sharp eye and not let anyone move from their place.

The soldiers encircled the group at once and released the safety catches of their Galils, pointing them with lizard eyes at the villagers, ready to shoot the first one to make a move.

"You will pass in front of me with your identity card in your hand," the lieutenant barked, fixing eyes brimming with malice on the villagers, to study their reactions.

The villagers understood that the lieutenant had a list in his possession, which made their situation that much more precarious. Several soldiers behind the commander prepared ropes to tie up those to be singled out. As the first defenders passed before the lieutenant, the tension steadily mounted.

In that climate, anyone can condemn to death his own neighbor with the slightest accusation or rumor. It has become conveniently easy to get rid of a person for

reasons of revenge or other personal differences, simply by denouncing him to the army as a leftist sympathizer.

The fear became evident in the villagers' faces, as they marched with their cards in hand before the lieutenant and his list.

"God save us," some of them whispered. "It is easier to defend yourself from a dagger or a bullet than from a false accusation."

About ten of the patrol members had filed past when the first of them fell into the army's hands. The lieutenant read his card and matched his name to one he had on the list. He made a signal with his head, and two soldiers immediately grabbed the youth and tied him to the basketball post. They tied him fast, with his hands in back, and beat him furiously on the face and stomach.

More men filed past, and then another was pulled out of the line. "Take this one too, his name is on the list," the commander snapped, and the soldiers carted him off with the other, like devils leading the souls of the condemned to hell.

Several more of the villagers passed inspection, as the soldiers untied their ropes and showed them in line to show their identity papers. By this time, five had been picked out, but the commander was annoyed that he had not yet found the one he was looking for. Glaring at those he had inspected he remarked: "I still don't have the son of a bitch who trained these guerrillas. They say he is a *kaibil* who only recently left the service. Do any of you know him? Where is he?"

I stepped forward to answer in the name of the others. "My commander, we don't know who that may be. Possibly he is not among us."

I said this to prevent someone from becoming an accomplice to the scoundrel who had presented the list and condemned these men to be slaughtered.

About five minutes later the ex-soldier they were looking for showed up, returning from the front lines of defense farthest from the village.

"Follow that one," the lieutenant ordered, as the young man passed us on his way to find his wife, whom he had only recently married, among the women inside the chapel.

"I didn't bring my identity card," he told his wife, who tried to leave the group of women under custody so she could fetch it from their house. But the soldiers who were sent after him did not let her go.

"Come here, you," they said, taking the young man by the arm. "The commander wants a word with you."

The ex-*kaibil*, who still wore the close-cut hair style of the special forces, walked toward the commander with a proud bearing.

He remained stiffly erect as the commander questioned him:

"What is your name?"

"Antonio."

"Your full name, turdi!"

"Antonio M. López."

"Aha, so we got you, motherfucking traitor!"

As he said this, the commander kicked him in the testicles and shoved his rifle butt against his face, flinging him to the ground. The other soldiers kicked him until he bled, then stood him up and tied his hands behind his back with tight knots.

The youth remained silent, with his head held high.

It was three fifteen, and the defenders who belonged to the second shift began returning from the fields. The agreement was that the two companies took turns guarding the village and working the fields, spelling one another.

The new arrivals were not allowed to return to their homes, but were forced to line up and present their credentials, the same as the others. At the head was a

young man of seventeen, who unloaded his burro in the school patio and then presented his birth certificate. They checked his name against the list, and unfortunately it appeared there, so they bound him up with the others.

To speed up the inspection the soldiers gathered the identity cards in several hats and took them to the lieutenant. For some reason, he returned them to their owners without having inspected them all.

After consulting his watch the lieutenant ordered his sergeant to pick out the tallest among the listed captives and lead him inside the school.

"What for?" the sergeant asked.

"What for, you blockhead! Take him in so he can tell you some jokes."

The "jokes" meant he would be tortured until he "confessed," even if it was all lies.

They took the youth inside and barred the door. The lieutenant who sat in the patio radioed his superiors and asked for a helicopter to take out the wounded soldier. A part of his code was easily decipherable.

"Potato calling here. Combat with guerrillas in zones P . . . and M Several captured. Over."

When he finished, he ordered the villagers to cut down the basketball posts, so the helicopter could land on the court. The neighbors ran to fetch their axes, and without having to be told twice, began chopping at the two posts.

Until recently the only entertainment in the village had been drinking the local rotgut, and so a few of us had planned the basketball court, and with the aid of several youngsters had cut down two oak trees and carved out the posts. It had not been easy to build this court because everything made in our village we did with our own hands, without any help from the authorities. Still, in the present circumstances it was too risky to defy the commander, who stood smiling with satisfaction, his

black Gail pointed at us as he surveyed the scene of destruction.

Several of us supported the posts so they would not crash to the ground and splinter the backboards to which the hoops had been screwed. We prevented the destruction of what had cost so much sacrifice to complete and planned to replace the posts as soon as the invaders left the village.

Until that moment I had been sitting quietly next to some friends and near the lieutenant, who paced impatiently among his soldiers, flaunting his list.

I thought of those whose names were on the list. Some of them had seen the danger coming and had hidden out somewhere a few days earlier; the incautious ones now had ropes tied around their necks. I wondered too about the cowardly villain who had anonymously presented the list. How craven to betray a neighbor in that way - far worse than killing him with weapon in hand.

At first I thought some of the captives would attempt to flee, but it did not turn out that way. They all remained silent, unmoving; only their faces expressed their confusion. Those poor young men had fallen into the hands of criminal soldiers, who acted without waiting to verify the source or the motive behind the lists they held in their hands.

The army officers know they will rise in rank in accordance with the number of unfortunates they execute. It is a sort of rivalry encouraged among these officers who behave with such cruelty and savagery and destroy entire Indian communities without remorse.

ACCUSATIONS

I remained seated under the eaves of the chapel, watching in consternation the captives who gazed vacantly at some undefined point in the horizon. Very close by, the commander scratched his buttocks with his nails, trying to loosen the trousers that pinched his overblown body.

The sergeant appeared with a soldier, holding in his hand a scrap of paper I recognized as a matchbook cover. He presented it to the commander with a show of gravity.

"What happened?" the lieutenant asked him.

"Well, he confessed."

"What did he say?"

"He gave a name. Here it is."

The sergeant handed him the matchbook cover and whispered in his ear, too softly for me to hear. The commander turned on me a fixed glare. I suspected nothing, but as he stood over me I had the sense that something bad was about to happen.

"You're the prof here, is that right?" the commander asked.

"*Si mi comandante*, what can I do for you?"

My forthright reply set him aback. Without further commentary, he snapped at me: "Follow these men."

The sergeant and the soldier escorted me to my classroom, where they had taken the tall dark youth a while back so he would "tell some jokes."

They opened the door and pushed me inside, then closed it shut, leaving me entirely at their mercy.

Manuel lay face down on the floor, in a pool of blood, with his hands tied behind his back. His face looked grotesquely disfigured.

I sat down on one of the old desks of the classroom, showing neither fear nor nervousness. I knew that if I

betrayed weakness I would lose any advantage I would have during the interrogation. I gathered up my strength and would not humble myself before these men, who regarded me like hungry wolves. I focussed my mind so I would not stumble over my own words or fall into the traps they were setting for me.

Six soldiers stood over me, pointing their black Galis at my head with malicious smiles on their lips. I turned aside to avoid their twisted scowls, with which they tried to intimidate me. A soldier approached from behind, ready to place a noose around my neck to choke me. I rose from my seat at once. If I allowed them to strike me at the outset without defending myself, I would lose my hard-won confidence. I stood up before he had a chance to collar me and looked into their eyes.

"Señores," I said in a firm voice, "I am no criminal for you to be assaulting me without reason. I ask to know what I am accused of, as I consider myself innocent."

"As innocent as the great whore," the sergeant called out. "Here is your accuser. You are a guerrilla, the same as your companion."

He addressed the tortured youth, shouting, "All right, you fucker - tell your companion what you confessed to us. Go on, wretch."

As he said this the sergeant began to kick him in the face, the head and the stomach. I almost broke down seeing the blows he gave Manuel. I've never been able to tolerate the sight of a suffering fellow being. Whenever my mother slaughters a hen for dinner or a fiesta I always turn aside so I won't have to see its neck twisted. Now that I beheld a human being tortured and bloodied, I felt a great heaviness and fear.

Despite his wretched state, Manuel turned his head toward me with difficulty and spoke with hatred, spitting out blood on the floor.

"Look brother, I heard your voice one night when two men came to threaten me, calling me a loudmouth

reactionary, and I am certain that you were one of them. I am sure I heard your voice."

As he finished speaking a soldier reached out one hand and punched me in the midsection, causing me to double over with pain. To avoid another blow, I sat down quickly on the old desk, as the sergeant said to me with gloating disdain:

"Now we have you and you can't get out of this one. You heard your own companion accuse you."

"That accusation has no validity," I said, with strained dignity. "Many people in this world have the same or similar voices, and this man who accused me falsely, is lying. I would never oppose the government - I am a schoolteacher and my salary is paid by the State. Let this young man tell you when he has seen me break any law. If he can accuse me of acting illegally and prove it, I am ready to pay the consequences; but if he can't, I plead with you to let me go because I assure you that I know nothing of these matters."

They began pummelling Manuel once again, shouting: "Speak up, shit-face, what else do you know about this two-bit schoolmaster?"

"I know nothing more," the beaten youth replied. "I only know that he accompanied the one who threatened me that night, and that he is a guerrilla."

I turned to Manuel and said, "Look, Manuel, don't accuse me falsely. It's better if you resign yourself. Better to die alone and without remorse than to drag others to their death. What will you gain by killing me?"

He replied with great effort, "Well, I want them to kill you, too. We can die together."

Manuel had been an easy-going sort, with a cheerful disposition. When we met in the streets he always greeted me, and we played soccer together now and then. He had the reputation in the village of being a loudmouth, which is why he may have been threatened by one of the men he mistook me for.

Disregarding his words, I entreated with him softly, while I prayed inside me for him to take back his accusation. And so that the soldiers would ask me no more questions, I hastily pointed out:

"You see, señores, he can prove nothing against me. And as a Christian, I know perfectly well it does no good to kill one another."

The sergeant stepped toward me in a rage. "Look, little schoolmaster son of *la chingada*, don't you come off giving us any orders." And he struck me in the face with the knotted rope. But I remained unmoved, looking him directly in the eyes.

One of the soldiers who sat at a corner table got up and tried to calm down his fellows. "That's enough, boys. Stop behaving like such shits."

The sergeant dismissed him with a withering look and stood on top of Manuel, who remained face down on the floor, and began jumping up and down, coming down hard on his lungs and chest. Not satisfied with this, he kicked him once more on the left cheek until more blood flowed from his nose and mouth. The sergeant shouted like one demented:

"There will be no pity for these motherfuckers. They deserve to be kicked to death like this. Did you hear me, turd?" He went on taunting Manuel. "Where are your companions? And what else do you know about this little schoolmaster?"

Manuel did not utter another word, but could only whimper each time the sergeant kicked him savagely in the side.

The commander walked in just then, and ordered the sergeant to take us out and place us with the other captives. They quickly picked up the bloodied Manuel, who could hardly stand, and pushed him out the door. I did not wait but walked directly behind the commander.

It was like emerging from a tunnel. I looked up with gratitude at the open sky, but my spirits fell on hearing

the screams of the women who were shut up inside the chapel.

While I was being interrogated in the school, the lieutenant had ordered the beating of the other captives, and I saw they all had cracked lips and teeth stained with blood.

The commander kept on shouting and insisting they point out their companions, whose names did not appear on the list. The younger ones all kept quiet, even as they were beaten and screamed at. Their silence provoked the fury of the commander, who began firing his rifle crazily into the air.

The screams of the women in the chapel grew louder. Several of them, particularly the mothers of the captives, tried to get outside, but the guards threatened to crack their skulls open.

The commander kept up his inquisitorial questioning, but no one said a word. It was clear they did not know anything.

"Whichever of you speaks up will be spared," the commander said, and one of the bound captives opened his mouth to speak. They grabbed him by the hair and lifted him to his feet.

"Finally, we have one willing to talk. Speak up, wretch," the commander roared furiously. "Who are your accomplices?"

The dazed man looked around him, as if in a trance. He looked over the entire group, not knowing where to rest his eyes. Finally, he pointed somebody out. "That one - " he said, jabbing his finger at one of the civil defenders who still held his polished *garrote* in one hand. The defender began to shake, as two soldiers pulled him out of the group.

"No señores, I'm not anything," the man blubbered. "You are mistaken - "

His neighbors stepped forward to defend him.

"No, *señor comandante*. This man is one of the civil defenders who most incites us to battle the guerrillas. And he is one of the richest men in the community."

The lieutenant released the defender, who returned to his place looking white as a sheet.

I had not given much thought to my own situation until then. Only when they released the defender did I become aware that I had a rope around my neck. I stood in the center of the plaza like a thief or a murderer, exposed to the stares of the entire community, whose intentions toward me at the moment I could not tell. I felt like one condemned.

When one of the villagers I considered a friend walked past me, I addressed him in a soft voice. "Look, friend, do me the favor of speaking to the headman, so they will intercede for me. Let them say they know me as the schoolmaster of the village, and they have not seen me engage in any subversive activities."

But this friend stepped backward as if it were the very devil speaking to him. All he said was, "I am afraid."

A while later one of the headmen who had spoken up for the defender came near, and I signalled to him to aid me in the same way, but he only replied with hand signals, opening his palm as though to say, "Wait."

I knew that answer was equivalent to a "No," and so I decided to remain quiet. I had no other recourse but to gaze up at the sky and go on praying for my captive friends, for my family and for myself.

It was now four in the afternoon. Every Friday by this time I would be with my family, playing with my children. But now I had fallen into the hands of these tyrants, and I feared I would never see my children again.

I did not want anyone to see my tears, and turned my face up toward the sky, which had clouded over. I called to mind my brother, who had been killed by the *kaibiles* - he was the first innocent to have been cut down in my town by the machinegun bursts of the special army units.

The idea took hold in my head that he was sitting in the clouds and looking down at me with a reassuring smile. I thought also about my parents, and of the other brothers who were some distance away, unaware of what had befallen me.

I turned my back to the plaza and could not recognize the faces of my acquaintances. My vision was blurred by the tears that had sprung from my eyes; I looked at everyone as though in a dream. Wherever I looked, the men crouched and avoided my eyes, turning to one side.

THE HELICOPTER

About half an hour after the commander had radioed, we heard the distant sound of the helicopter. All the defenders turned toward the source of the droning sound, beyond the hills. As the noise grew louder, panic spread among the neighbors, and then the helicopter appeared, all at once above the summit of the nearest hill. It was one of the new models, blue and white and heavily armored. It circled the village several times before it began its descent.

The lieutenant gave the order to clear the basketball court whose posts had already been removed. The "whirlybird," as the children of our region called it, descended slowly, veering carefully to avoid the corrugated tin roofs of the chapel and the school. Everyone covered their mouths to keep from breathing in the dust and leaves picked up by the propellers, which stirred up a gale that sucked out our breath.

The helicopter could not land in the cleared basketball court so it rose again, reversing its pattern of descent.

The consternation was immense, particularly among the women who set up a din in the chapel which allowed some of them to slip out to the patio to look for their men.

The commander approached me and said, "You seem to know a good deal. You'll get on the helicopter together with the *ex-kaibil*, trainer of guerrillas, so you can be dealt with by the specialists at the base."

The helicopter had landed in the soccer field, about 400 meters from the village center. They tied me more securely, and the sergeant pulled me by the rope tied to my neck so I had to run behind him.

Antonio, the other captive, also had to jog along as they kicked him and shoved him toward the helicopter, which was kicking up a whirlwind of dust and dry grass from the neglected soccer field.

"You'd better walk on in front of me, you shit-face," the sergeant said in his primitive Spanish, acquired without schooling. He tugged hard at the end of the rope, causing me to trip and fall. I went on, half running and stumbling, down the slope toward the helicopter, whose propellers continued to whip the air and lift debris into the sky.

As we crossed a stream about thirty meters from the field, the commander went ahead to speak with the two officers who had come in the helicopter. The wind raised by the propellers lashed at my face, and I feared the blades would slice off my head. Antonio also remained immobile, blinking repeatedly to prevent the dust from stinging his eyes.

I felt a dreadful depression at that moment and turned for a last look at the hillsides behind the village, convinced that I would never see them again. Against the clouded sky, four or five swallows dipped and darted, announcing rain.

The commander had to shout into the officers' ears to be heard above the deafening racket of the helicopter. When he was finished, the lieutenant stepped aside and ordered me to climb into the craft, at the same time that the soldier wounded by the civil patrol was taken aboard on the other side. I lowered my head and placed a foot inside. The floor of the helicopter was covered with Galil rifles, some hand grenades and several boxes of ammunition. When one of the officers became aware of my presence, he shouted:

"Get him out, get him out, tie him up hand and foot. Can't you see there are guns in here?"

The sergeant who was still holding me, gave a hard tug at the rope and I fell to the ground on my back. I got up immediately to deny them the opportunity to strike me. Just as I stood up, the doors of the helicopter closed and it lifted at once, taking only the wounded soldier.

The lieutenant cursed at the sky as the helicopter took off without us. He flung his weapon to the ground and grabbed the soldier with the radio on his back.

"Come back, come back, take the two captives!" he shouted furiously, spitting into the tiny microphone of the radio transmitter.

His shouts filled me with despair, but they melted into the air as the helicopter continued its flight to Huehuetenango.

When the helicopter finally disappeared behind the hill, I felt a twinge of relief in my chest. I still was not free, but at least I was on home soil. If they killed me, it was far better for my body to lie on my native soil, where I had been raised since childhood, than to be flung from on high into a river, a mountain slope or the crater of a volcano.

The sergeant who had bound me tight, undid the rope around my neck. I had been tied back to back with Antonio, lashed into a single bundle that would have been easier to dispose of.

It seemed a miracle to me that we had not been flown away, and I thanked the Virgin inwardly for Her favors.

"Let's get back up!" the commander shouted, and we got back on the trail to the village, as I became aware for the first time of the depredations of the soldiers, who had burned the straw and adobe huts of the poorest families.

"Burn that other one," the commander ordered, and three soldiers poured gasoline over the posts of an adobe hut and set it ablaze. One by one they destroyed several houses in the community.

We walked on, followed by the lieutenant, who kept on spitting out curses and kicking loose stones along the trail.

I stopped to catch my breath when we reached the small bridge that fords the stream just before the climb back to the village center. I decided to try to speak with the commander once more, and as he approached from behind, I said:

"*Mi comandante*, I beseech you to understand my situation. I know nothing of what I am accused of."

"Shut up, you piece of shit -" the sergeant cut me off.

"I'm not speaking to you, I was addressing the commander," I said in a firm voice. The commander had heard me, and replied, "You have nothing to ask of me. If I wanted to, I could shoot you on the spot - but I consider it more important to take you to Huehue to the G-2 agents."

I had no choice but to stay silent. Ahead of me walked Antonio, with his hands bound tight and a loaded rucksack on his back. Despite the weight, and the rope chafing at his neck, he walked rigidly erect, refusing to bend for anyone. When they struck him, he didn't say a word.

As we approached the patio where everyone was gathered, the men stretched their necks out for a look at us - they thought the helicopter had taken us away. But fate decreed that we look once again on the frightened faces of the villagers. Among them, almost certainly, was the villain who had brazenly submitted the anonymous list to the army, sentencing his brothers to death.

I looked around me and spat on the ground. I felt a terrible thirst and hoped someone would bring me water to drink. Thirst was the only thing I felt. Although I had not eaten lunch, I had not the slightest desire for food.

In the midst of the confusion in the patio, I once again heard the sound of a helicopter. At first it sounded like the grinder of our *nixtamales*, but I soon

distinguished the peculiar drone of the dreaded whirlybird.

"This time you won't get off," the commander taunted me. "The helicopter is coming back."

Once more the sergeant took the end of the rope and ordered me to move quickly toward the helicopter, which was circling above the field.

I felt the heaviness return. Once again my wife and children filled my thoughts:

"My children, I will not see you again. How I longed to see you grow up, and always be at your side; but now my hopes are vanishing. I will not know what becomes of you. Goodbye, my children."

"Let's go, shit-face," the sergeant yelled.

Without heeding him, I walked at my own pace. We crossed the small bridge that fords the stream in the outskirts of the village, and passed once more the burnt huts, whose straw roofs had turned to ashes.

From afar I saw the helicopter hover above the soccer field, with its motor roaring and its propeller blades slicing the air with invisible strokes.

"Hurry up, you piece of shit!" the sergeant shouted, as he dragged me like an animal to slaughter, a step behind the commander, who leaped over the stream that skirts the sports field.

At that moment the sound of the helicopter changed in pitch, and before I could ford the stream, the craft lifted and headed west, in the direction of the Mexican border.

The commander let loose a curse. Again he grabbed hold of the soldier carrying the radio transmitter on his back, and screamed into it, in repeated bursts: "Come back. Turn around and pick up the captives."

But the pilot made no response, and the helicopter kept going until it vanished in the horizon.

The first time I approached the helicopter I had noticed that the officers occupying it belonged to the so-

called elite or privileged officer class - bourgeois army men who differed in every way from the commander and his foot soldiers; these last were all of dark complexion and ill-educated - alienated Indians who like rabid dogs had been sent by their ranking officers to the villages to finish off their own people.

I felt a wave of relief on realizing that danger once again seemed to recede. The first time, I had set foot inside the helicopter before I was pushed away, and this time I did not even get as far as the soccer field. I thanked God once again that I had been given a few added moments of life.

On this second scramble to chase after the helicopter, Antonio was no longer beside me. He had remained behind with the others in the school patio.

The commander turned to me angrily. "Well, little schoolmaster, now it looks like you've remained in our hands. Let's go back up to join your companions. And you - birdshit soldiers - let's see you stretch a leg and fetch that box of ammunition left by the helicopter. Don't fall asleep on me, fuckfaces, or I'll knock your wind out with a single blow."

He went on haranguing the soldiers, who reacted like automatons. Two of them hurried to follow orders and lifted the metal box containing the ammunition.

We then climbed back up toward the village center. I looked at my watch. It was 4:30. I had not even noticed it was late afternoon.

THE EXECUTION

Once again we came to the large patio that separated the school from the chapel, where the villagers all stood silent, with heads lowered. The only voices to be heard were those of the soldiers, as they bullied and shoved people about.

I was bothered by the knotted rope around my neck and stuck my fingers repeatedly under the noose to prevent it from choking me. My dignity as a schoolmaster, I said to myself. These bastards are making a display of me, as if I were an assassin, a thief or a common criminal. I spat my darkest unspoken thoughts on the ground. What President Lucas Garcia had left undone during his brutal term in office was now being completed by his successor Efraín Ríos Montt. In all my thirty years I had not known darker days than the present ones.

The last time I had been to the provincial capital of Huehuetenango, the only place where you can keep abreast of national and international developments, I had read in a newspaper the astute Ríos Montt's proclamations: "I belong to a religious congregation in which we give thanks to God, keep faith with the word of God, and practice the word of God."

I smiled inwardly. What cynicism. What a shameless liar. I had never thought the coup that overthrew Lucas Garcia would in any way improve conditions in the country. So long as the same army officers who weave and manipulate the political offal remain in power, the situation would remain unchanged, because whatever puppet they install in the presidency would be incapable of controlling the abuses of his military chiefs, who are the real bosses of the government and of the country.

"All of you, form a semicircle to witness the execution of these filthy guerrillas." The villagers responded sluggishly to the commander's order until they formed a large semicircle. About four hundred civil defenders gathered with their heads lowered, polished clubs still clutched in their hands, ready to witness another feat of the military commander, who was certain to be promoted in rank for killing so many "guerrillas."

Two more villagers appeared with bales of corn on their back, poor farmers returning from their milpas. When their names turned up on the list, they were immediately set upon by the soldiers and placed with the other captives. They were not given time to tie their burros to the posts outside the school or to remove the ragged cloth they used for a saddle, which betrayed their humble peasant origins. For the commander, this alone would have been proof enough of their complicity, for in his eyes, to be a *campesino*, to be poor, was to be a guerrilla.

"Tie those cowards to the posts," yelled the commander. Soldiers were quick to obey his orders. They seized the first six youths and bound them to the pillars of the unpainted adobe municipal building, in full view of the villagers. Once again the hoarse and odious voice of the commander rose above the silent witnesses - men, women and children.

"Señores, we are now going to demonstrate to you that we do not fear the guerrillas. Open your eyes wide, all of you, so you can see how we deal with the enemies of our government. We have been given orders to kill, and that is what we intend to do. So keep in mind that if there are any more guerrillas among you, like these motherfuckers, we will dispatch them in the same way."

The villagers lowered their eyes. None of them wanted to see or hear anything more from this monster who had plunged the entire community into mourning.

The five condemned men turned to one another, incomprehending. They set their eyes above the heads of the *kaibiles* who were lining up to discharge their weapons into their hearts. No one spoke. The hapless captives gazed toward the horizon, as though to bid farewell to the hills that had nurtured them. The *campesino* feels he is a part of nature. He spends all his life bound to it like a bud or an unseverable and timeless offshoot.

I have become familiar with what a man thinks about in the moments before his death. Nothing! At that instant the mind clouds, the eyes grow vague and heavy and the body lightens. But then, all at once like electric charges the most marvelous and forgotten landscapes return to his mind's eye. Afterward come his wife and children, his parents, and finally, the infinite. This is the last frame the mind projects in one's final moments of existence.

Antonio, the ex-military, was bound to one of the pillars to await the execution order. He held to his grave and silent demeanor, as his wife and parents wept aloud. The only one unaware of what was about to befall him was his eighteen-month-old daughter, who laughed and played with her mother's earrings.

The women who had taken refuge could no longer withstand their confinement and rushed outside, screaming, although a few chose to remain in the chapel and pray aloud to the Holy Father to summon his justice and prevent the spilling of innocent blood in these Indian fields. Meanwhile, the commander had lined up the firing squad, and raised his voice:

"RRRReady . . . !"

The parents and relatives of the condemned attempted to throw themselves on their sons to shield their bodies, but they were savagely repelled with rifle butts by the foot soldiers, who openly bragged of their

disdain for the parents and of their scathing contempt for their "fucking" children.

As the commander prepared to give the fatal order, the condemned turned instinctively for a last look at their loved ones. Their hands were tied behind their back so they could give vent to their feelings only with strained smiles and bitter tears.

"FIRE . . . !" The cavernous voice of the commander rang out, and the Galils exploded with thunderous fury.

The women raised a deafening howl. Dazed with grief, they tried to fling themselves on the bullet-riddled bodies of their beloved ones, but once again the *kaibiles* forced them to draw back by threatening to shoot them point blank.

The victims slumped and hung from the pillars as the warm, copious blood drenched their shirts.

"Stay clear - keep back or I'll shoot all of you - " the commander shouted. "There's no reason to weep for these cowards!"

His threats stilled the clamor of the villagers until José, one of the youths hanging from the pillars, whose vital organs had not been hit by the firing squad, lifted his head and stared at his assassins. He spat out a thick ball of blood and cried out with all his waning strength:

"Assassins . . . cowards . . . *maricones*. Faggot soldiers."

The sergeant, whose coarse face was covered with boils and blackheads, flushed with rage; he flipped the safety catch from his black Galil and aimed it at the youth. From a distance of eight meters he failed to hit the young man, who regarded him with a contemptuous smile as the bullets, like drops of turpentine on water, became encrusted against the adobe wall of the municipality.

Still smiling, the youth shouted again, "Faggot soldiers . . . cowards!"

The commander scolded the sergeant: "Don't be an ass. Go stick it into the motherfucker's heart and shut him up once and for all."

Livid with hatred, the sergeant took out his double edged bayonet and sank it coldbloodedly into the youth's heaving chest, exactly on a level with his heart. Blood gushed instantly from his wound and sprayed the sergeant's face. The young man began to vomit up mouthfuls of bright red blood, writhing against the pillar like a mortally wounded jaguar.

Not satisfied, the enraged sergeant placed the barrel of his Galil against the man's temple and fired another blast.

"That's enough, get away!" shouted the commander, who had watched unflinchingly the demonic fury of his sergeant.

The perspiring executioner wiped the blade of his bayonet on the youth's pants and backed away from the lifeless body with a look of stone. He stood next to me and reclaimed from a soldier the end of the rope that hung around my neck. I felt the tremors pass through the rope and into my body, as the assassin's hand would not stop shaking.

The sergeant then suggested that I be disposed of as soon as possible.

"*Mi comandante*, do we get rid of this one, too?"

"Yes, but hold on, I want to make sure the others are dead." He approached the bodies hanging from the pillars, and lifted each one's head by his hair to verify with his own eyes that the "*guerrillas*" were indeed lifeless corpses.

After a careful examination, he stepped back and coolly crossed their names from the list: Antonio, Gaspar, José, Matias, Manuel, Ruperto.

One of the chiefs of the civil defense patrol approached the commander. "Forgive the intrusion, *mi comandante*, I would like to request that the families of

the six dead civilian defenders be allowed to withdraw to their homes to mourn their dead - "

"Which civilian defenders?"

"The ones who fell in the outskirts of the village."

"How many were there?"

"So far, we know of six who are still lying where they fell; there are several others who have still not appeared."

"Only the women can go," he replied dryly.

In truth, it seemed a miracle that more defenders had not been killed in that surprise encounter between the army and the civil patrol.

The commander had started toward me when the soldier bearing the radio transmitter called him to say that the head of another military detachment wanted to speak with him.

After consulting his watch - it was five o'clock - the lieutenant turned back to answer the call. Since I was standing nearby I could hear the exchange, and I realized that one of the detachments based in my home town was calling in. I did not know what to think and had no idea how I would be disposed of when this other group of soldiers arrived on the scene.

Some of the leaders of the civil patrol who had fled when the shooting began had mistakenly informed the military at the base that the village was under attack from the guerrillas - so they had set out in search of them. That explained the imminent arrival of another military patrol to that ill-fated village.

As I looked around me I sensed the villagers' confusion as the women prayed aloud for the Lord's protection, and cried out in Mayan their grief and pain.

THE SECOND ARMY PATROL

The soldiers from town arrived shortly after. They wore a lighter shade of speckled green than the ones taken for guerrillas by the civil defenders. At their head was a young officer, short and light-skinned, and his soldiers also looked younger than the unshaven career veterans who had shattered the peace of our community.

The two officers met and exchanged impressions.

"The hell with you all," said the older commander.

"You were supposed to have covered this zone and cleared it of subversives. Look over there how many guerrillas we caught and disposed of today."

"And why not?" replied the younger lieutenant. "We already covered this village on August 30th, and executed two guerrillas."

"That's bull. You guys sit around the barracks and drink all day, and when you're called up to fight subversives, you stay put with your arms crossed. I was sent here to kill guerrillas, and that's just what I'm doing. You have to go look for the meat."

"That's just why we were here ten days ago," the other insisted, "and wasted two of the bastards. Isn't that so, *señores*?" he addressed the civil defenders closest to him.

"*Si, mi comandante*," they replied instantly.

"All right then," said the older commander, "so that you can see for yourselves how it's done. Look at how we finished off those cowards."

Had others witnessed this scene, they might have had the same impression I did, that this demented officer killed only for the sake of killing, without the slightest understanding of what he was doing.

The younger officer and his soldiers still had some inkling of the value of life, and tried to avoid situations like this one so as not to stain their hands with innocent

blood. After all, they still had many years ahead of them to consider the consequences of their actions.

All military conscripts are trained to kill - only to kill - although not all of them follow orders with the same blind disregard for human life.

I'd had the opportunity to witness the young officer's conduct on August 30th, when he had ordered the execution of two residents of the village.

On that occasion, a number of civil defenders had acted overzealously in ferreting out suspects from among their own neighbors. Under orders from their leaders, they prowled the vicinity like a pack of wolves after a scent, in search of subversives. Although most of the defenders participated out of fear, a few did it with the full intention of wiping out "the ones from the mountains."

"Communism is bad; they will take away our lands. We have to fight to protect our lands." This was said by a wretched youth who had no land of his own to cultivate, and whose only livelihood was to fetch water or gravel from the river bank. All the Indians of this area share their lands communally, in the traditional manner. The only landowners are outsiders who laid claims to tracts of land and took out documents. The vast majority live as their ancestors did, without private land ownership of any kind.

So it was with the civil defenders who apprehended two of their neighbors living in the outskirts of the village and took them, bound up with ropes, to the military base in town. One of the two captives kept a revolver hidden in a mound of trash in the patio of his house, and the other was seized for a similar suspicion.

One of them pleaded in his native tongue and insisted that he was innocent of any subversion. "My brothers, we are your own neighbors, why do you want to kill us? Look at my five children - have you no regrets at leaving them

orphaned? We have caused you no harm. Please understand."

"No, we promised not to release anyone who fell into our hands," replied one of the chiefs of the civil patrol. "Not even if it's our own father or brother."

This was the first time the civil defenders had begun speaking in these terms. How sad it is when a man loses his own identity and is easily indoctrinated! The defender was repeating to his own neighbor what the military had drummed into his head: Destroy, kill, even if it includes your own family. This military doctrine had gradually undermined the foundations of an indigenous culture, causing the Indian to act against his own will and best interests and destroying what is most sacred in his ancient Mayan legacy: love and respect for one's own neighbor, which translates into a policy of mutual support.

Despite all the pleas of the two captives and their wives, they were tied up and marched off toward the military base at about eleven in the morning on that August 30th, 1982.

About half-way to the town, one of the two managed to untie his hands and attempted to flee but the forty defenders caught up with him, beat him with their clubs, and then tied both of them up more firmly. They were determined to deliver them to the base.

The military officers congratulated the defenders for the capture, and set upon the two men, interrogating and kicking them brutally.

"So you were the ones causing trouble over there? Are you ready to show us where the real ones are hiding out?"

To avoid further torture, the captives said yes. A patrol of *kaibiles* immediately set out with the two men and the civil defenders.

The villagers were surprised to see the two neighbors arrive in the plaza, followed by the civil defenders and

the platoon of *kaibiles*, who were armed to the teeth with high-caliber rifles and submachineguns.

It was about five in the afternoon when they passed through the village and began climbing up one of the steeper hills. The captives led them to a small cave that was completely empty.

The young officer who headed the platoon became furious and gathered all the villagers in the school patio.

"These two motherfuckers tried to pull a fast one on us. Instead of taking us to their cohorts, as they had promised, they led us to a cave where even a rat couldn't hide out. Now, they will pay the price for their deceit."

The two had evidently thought up the deception to gain time, but they had no chance to attempt an escape with so many defenders and soldiers on top of them.

The moon shone calmly as the defenders gathered in a circle around the two captives, as the officer instructed them to. He then yanked the younger of the two - Jesús by name - and yelled in his face: "All right, you. Tell us now, who are your *compañeros*? Speak up, shitface."

He did not reply. Jesús fixed both eyes on the ground, bit his lips and remained silent.

"All right, fucker. Since you won't answer, this is where you will die." The officer kicked him and ordered him to kneel, yanking on the end of the rope tied around his neck to force him to his knees.

He tried to stand up, but the officer kicked him in the gut, and he collapsed without uttering a sound. The villagers looked on at this scene as at something foreign to them. They all breathed heavily, causing them to sigh constantly.

"Now, recite the *pater noster*," the officer ordered. Jesús stammered the prayer.

"Louder, I can't hear."

Jesús ignored the officer's shrill tone of voice.

"Are you done?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now, señores defenders, I want you to execute these two subversives yourselves. You captured them, and now you must finish them off."

The villagers-turned-civil-defenders recoiled at following that unexpected order. Frightened, they looked at one another and drew back together.

"All right, you spineless scum. Why do you refuse to kill these two turds?"

One of the defenders spoke up: "Because we are not used to killing. We are Christians."

"Christians like the great whore's mother. You will now get used to killing or I will finish you off myself. Do you understand me?"

"Yes!"

"Or is it that you are the henchmen of these motherfuckers - is that why you won't kill them?"

"No!"

"All right, then, get it done!" The officer aimed his weapon at the vacillating patrol members.

A veteran civil defender, the most callous among them, stepped forward first and aimed a telling blow on the head of the first kneeling captive, Jesús. He was joined by the villagers who had planned the capture, and then by the others who formed the circle. They began to pummel the condemned villager with their polished clubs. He tried to scream, but all that came out was a horrendous gurgling of the blood in his chest.

The villagers stepped aside when their arms grew tired. The officer verified that the body lying in a pool of blood was still twitching, its chest heaving to take in air - and he repeated the order:

"You men feel sorry for this scum, and that's why he won't die. Once more, all of you go to it and get it done right."

The defenders returned to their macabre homicidal task, their assorted clubs and sticks dripping warm blood. The sounds produced by the blows that fell on the

luckless man's head and body were like those made by a cracked coconut. When the skull was beaten to a pulp and the face disfigured beyond recognition, the participants in the sinister drama stepped back once again to contemplate the horror.

But it was still not over. Mauled as he was, Jesus' body continued its contractions, as if his lungs were struggling to take in whatever oxygen was left in that dense atmosphere.

"This fucker doesn't want to die," the officer said drily. A soldier took out his knife and sank it casually in Jesus' throat, as he writhed in his death throes. The blood flowed in spurts as the soldier sawed at his trachea with the knife, already coated with thick, coagulated blood.

"Now it's done," the officer said, satisfied. He grabbed the other captive by the hair and paraded him before the men.

"All right, now you can amuse yourselves with this one."

Goyo, who was known in the community as a humble and servile type of person, looked frightened out of his wits by the circle of men, each standing with his blood-stained *garrote*.

The officer asked, "Do you know this man?"

"Yes, we know him, but he has lived among us only a short time. He is an outsider."

"I already gave the order to finish him, what are you waiting for?"

The defenders wasted no time in throwing themselves on the newcomer and beating him without respite. I suspect the first solid blow killed him, as he did not utter a single moan after the strangled "Ay!" that escaped his lips when the first blow dropped him to his knees.

When the executioners backed off, the officer verified that they had completed their work and nodded his approval.

From that day I knew the attitude of this new officer who had washed his hands of the crime, so that he could claim that the army does not kill, that it is the Indian defenders who are doing the butchering . . . How astute of him!

The defenders for their part showed their first pangs of remorse.

"I don't want either of these scum taken to the cemetery," the officer had said. "They deserve to be thrown to the vultures."

Some of the more compassionate villagers dug a shallow ditch next to the chapel and threw in the unwrapped bodies like dead dogs, then covered them with a few shovelfuls of earth. The events of that day were indelibly imprinted in the memory of the community, which feared that the spilling of blood would attract further calamities.

All of this had happened just ten days earlier, on August 30th.

The commander looked at me with disdain as he announced to the young officer, "And here is the little schoolmaster who has also been mixed up in trouble-making. We planned to drag him with us, but now that you've come, you may as well take him with you and dump him wherever you please. We will do the same to this other motherfucker that we will drag with us."

They referred to Matyax, the other villager whom they executed a few days later in the cemetery of a different municipio, to show the people there how they deal with enemies of the government.

The commander handed me over to the patrol, whose camouflage fatigues were of a lighter shade of green. I felt a glimmer of relief and hope because I knew the attitude of the younger officer to be somewhat calmer. There was also the possibility they would take me into town, where

my family could find out about me and try to intercede with the military.

The time had flown. It was nearly six. The soldiers under the command of the ruthless older lieutenant flung their bulky sacks over their shoulders and prepared to evacuate. Their occupation of the village had been profitable as they had looted everything of value from the houses they searched.

One of the soldiers who had not taken part in the looting explained himself to me just before he left: "You should know that we have our own wives and children to feed, and so we were deceived into joining the army. It was against our wills that they armed us and sent us to the mountains to combat the guerrillas. The fifty dollars they pay us a month is not enough to support our families with. That's why they allow us to loot and steal, so we can supplement our meager wages. We were tricked into coming here. The officers tell us we Indians must do away with our own people because the Indians are enabling the guerrillas to carry out the revolution."

This was how the soldier explained their inhuman behavior in our community.

The *kaibiles* headed south, in the same direction from which they had come, without turning even once to look on the devastation they left behind or on the families they had damaged irreparably.

MARCHING IN THE DARK

The patrol in charge of me also prepared to depart for the military base. There were only twenty soldiers in the patrol, as opposed to eighty in the first group.

Several of the civil defenders were also readying to take two of their companions wounded in battle to the town hospital. They put on rubber boots and set off on the trail with their battery lamps.

September is the season of rains. I realized that the laces of my shoes would not withstand the heavy mud on the road, so I asked four acquaintances who were nearby if they would bring me some cord to secure the top of my shoes with. When they brought me the cord I asked them:

"Please, could you pick up my shoulder bag, which I already packed, and take it to town with you?"

"We'll take it with us, rest easy about that."

"And could you please let my wife know that I am being held captive. Maybe she can speak with someone in authority so they'll set me free. . . ."

"Don't worry, we'll let her know as soon as we arrive, and may God be with you, brother." They set out ahead of the others.

The night spread relentlessly over mountain, roads and hillsides.

A soldier loosened the rope around my neck so the knot would not chafe. It was a few minutes past six. The sky was darkening, and it grew cold. The mist rose out of nowhere, and soon it began to drizzle.

An old friend approached me. "Is there anything I can do for you? I didn't dare speak with you because they would have beaten me."

"Don't worry about me, friend, and thank you for thinking of me."

"Have they taken some of your things already?"

"Yes, some other friends are doing it."