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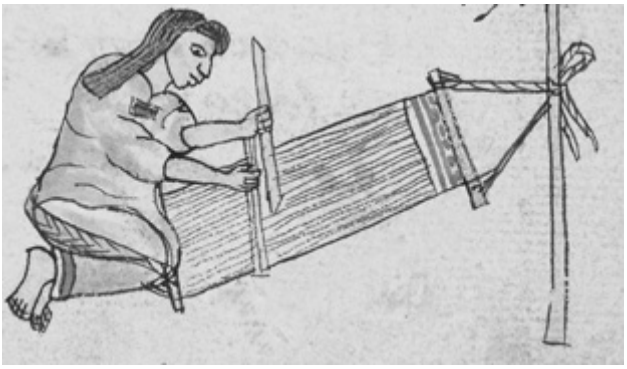
# 4

# *Strangers to Us People Here*

## 1519



A girl learns to weave. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 60r.

The frightened girl and her companions followed the winding path from the Maya town of Potonchan, on the shore of the Gulf, down to the beach where the strangers were encamped. They moved through the shadows, surrounded by gnarled and twisted trees—ceiba, mahogany, rubber—the exposed dirt path glinting silvery-gray wherever the sunlight managed to strike it. Warriors armed with spears walked with them, in case anyone should suddenly try to run. The young women were to be peace offerings to the fearsome newcomers; they could not outrun their fate. As the group came out into the bright sunlight, they saw the giant boats they had heard so much about, with their cloths hung to catch the wind. The bearded ones turned from their smoking camp fires—they were desperately trying to keep the mosquitoes away—to stare brazenly at the offered women.[1]

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WHEN SHE WAS young, the girl would have been called something like Daughter Child. Some girls in her world earned funny, affectionate names—like She's-Not-a-Fish or Little Old Woman—or poetic ones—like Deer Flower—but most were simply called "Elder Daughter," "Middle Child," or "Youngest," at least until their personalities became better known.[2] Living at the fringes of empire, this Daughter Child had no illusions about the agonies of war; she harbored no belief that it was for a greater good. It was simply the way things were. If she allowed herself to have any feelings about the Mexica at all, her sentiment was hatred.

When she was born to a Nahua nobleman of Coatzacoalcos, farther west along the coast—close to today's Veracruz—her mother had undoubtedly buried her umbilical cord near the hearth, as almost all Nahuatl-speaking mothers did. She would have uttered a prayer something like this: "You will be the heart of the home. You will go nowhere. You will not become a wanderer anywhere. You become the banked fire, the

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hearthstones."[3] It was what anyone would have wanted for a beloved daughter. The mother's prayers, however, had been in vain. Although the child's father was a highly ranked nobleman, her mother was no one important, probably a slave. It was such women's children who were most vulnerable in moments of crisis.

And the crisis came. The Coatzacoalcos region was the next target in the Mexicas' perennial expansion. When the Mexica and their allies approached other altepetls to demand their allegiance, it was the children of less powerful mothers who generally found themselves in harm's way. Unless the aggressors happened to be in need of child sacrifices for the annual festival of Tlaloc, no one thought of killing the young. They were far too valuable. They could be raised as loyal household dependents, or sold as slaves. That is what had happened to Daughter Child. Whether her father's people had managed to prevent war with the Mexica by offering a sort of preemptive tribute, or whether they had actually lost a battle and been forced to sue for peace by offering a gift, is unknown. Regardless, the child was ripped from her kin and placed in a canoe with other captives. As the boat pulled away from the shore and sliced rapidly through the water, bearing her in the direction of the rising sun, she had no reason to believe she would ever see her home again.[4]

Daughter Child would have guessed that she was being taken to one of the neutral trading ports that rendered long-distant trade possible in war-ridden Mesoamerica. At the coastal town of Xicallanco, lying not far to the east, where many Nahuatl merchants lived, she was sold to some Maya, either for a certain weight of cacao beans or for bolts of cotton cloth. These were the two kinds of currency in the busy, polyglot town that nestled in a giant blue lagoon. Here, there were no pyramids or stone monuments, just buildings made of mud and sticks of wood. No one had time to construct anything more, for they were there to trade, not to pray. People came from far and wide, and no one attacked the place, for it was too important to all of them. Every kingdom's merchants depended on the existence of such towns.[5]

From Xicallanco the girl was brought back westward to the town of Potonchan, near the mouth of the Tabasco River. It was a leading settlement of the Chontal Maya, the "Phoenicians of Mesoamerica," as they have since been dubbed. These were a powerful people, for their nobles, nearly all of whom were merchants, were extremely wealthy. They used their riches to buy food and favors from the surrounding farmers and to purchase slaves from the long-distance Nahua traders. Those slaves made it possible for them to produce large quantities of beautiful cotton cloth that others were willing to pay a great deal for.[6]

It was the honored wives and daughters of Chontal men who did most of the weaving, not the enslaved women. The creation of cloth, of tapestry, was a holy task, beloved by the gods. But while the honored wives devoted their time to weaving, other women were needed to grind corn, make tortillas, fetch water, and care for young children. A host of other textile-related activities could be assigned to slaves as well. Someone had to sow and harvest the cotton plants. Then the fibers needed to be beaten and carded for many hours to rid them of the dirt and flecks. The fibers then had to be spun into yarn; dyes had to be made out of plants or shellfish and then the yarns repeatedly boiled in them until they reached the desired color. Finally

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the looms needed to be warped in preparation for the actual weaving. Then at last the great lady of the house could begin the sacred task of weaving. As a Nahua girl child, the newly purchased child would have adapted to her assigned chores relatively easily: back home, she would have begun by the age of five to learn to use a little spindle to make yarn, and she would have been taught to cook and clean as well.[7]

Years passed, and Daughter Child had a new name, a slave's name. In her new life, no one claimed her as kin. She was no one's Elder Sister, or Youngest Child. We do not know what the Maya who had purchased her called her. Whether she was coerced into having sexual relations, we will also never know, although that would have been a typical part of an enslaved woman's experience. As the girl grew to early womanhood, not much differentiated one year from another. Then in 1517, the townsfolk heard that some strangers with remarkably hairy faces had landed a very large boat at Champoton, another Chontal town lying to the east. After a skirmish, the outsiders were driven off, with many of their men badly wounded, but they left many Chontal warriors wounded and dying. The strangers were clearly dangerous to the political order—a political order that required the Chontal to appear invulnerable to the surrounding peoples.

The strangers returned the next year. This time, they bypassed the feisty town of Champoton. Messengers on speeding canoes came to say that they had stopped near Xicallanco, but didn't find it, hidden as it was in its lagoon. They kidnapped four young boys who had boarded the boat to trade and then proceeded west. All of Potonchan waited. Within days, the strangers found the mouth of the Rio Tabasco. From where they floated, they could see the town clearly. Hundreds of Chontal warriors gathered along the shore; they made their way out toward the larger boat in dozens of canoes, arrows notched, ready to fly. A huge dog aboard the strangers' boat spotted land, jumped overboard, and began to swim toward the shore. The young Chontal men gave a great shout and showered the creature with arrows. Within moments, something aboard the massive boat seemed to explode, and bits of metal flew everywhere, wounding many. Some slumped over, apparently dead. The Chontal retreated.[8]

All the households buzzed with gossip. The next day, the town's leaders sent a few canoes of men out to try to parley, and the strangers brought forward a young prisoner who spoke their language. He told the Chontal he had been kidnapped years ago near Cozumel. Yes, the warriors said, they had heard rumors that strangers were occasionally appearing along the eastern coast of the Yucatan peninsula, and some even asserted that they governed a huge island six days' sail to the east of Cozumel, but the previous year was the first time they had heard a full and coherent story, from Champoton. The interpreter told them the strangers were indeed dangerous and that they sought gold and food in regular supplies. To the indigenous, this signified that they were demanding tribute; it was not good news. The Chontal asked the interpreter to explain that the Mexica, far to the west, were really the people to seek if they wanted gold and other

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precious goods, but that they would barter what they had, if only the strangers would return the four boys they had kidnapped near Xicallanco. Some goods were brought out and traded, but the boys were not returned. Later that day the winds were right, and the strangers rapidly put up a sail and departed.[9]

No one could tell if they were gone for good. The Chontal leaders built a few stockades and arranged for neighboring peoples to fight at their side if it came to that. The people harvested their corn and cacao and wove their cloth. Many undoubtedly forgot about the incident or put it out of their minds. But if the women had ceased to gossip and speculate about the strangers, the subject nevertheless resurfaced dramatically less than a year later. In 1519 a messenger arrived, saying that no fewer than ten of the big boats were sailing westward from Cozumel.[10]

The ships came straight to Potonchan. In the talks that unfolded between Spaniard and Indian on the very first day—undoubtedly while the women and children were being led out of the city—the Chontal leaders said bluntly that they would kill anyone who entered their land. They offered food and advised the strangers to leave before anything unpleasant happened. The foreigners' leader, a man in his early thirties who called himself "Hernando Cortés," refused to listen. Instead, he made plans to come ashore. He divided his men into two groups. One landed at the mouth of the river on the coast and then moved overland toward the town, and the other sailed upriver, then drew near the settlement in smaller boats and began to wade ashore in a tight formation. Their glinting swords were bared, creating a circle of space around them, and their outer clothing was likewise made of metal, so they could move with relative impunity, as the Indians' stone arrowheads and spear tips shattered against it. Still, it was tough going for them. One of the strangers later described the scene:

> With great bravery the [locals] surrounded us in their canoes, pouring such a shower of arrows on us that they kept us in the water up to our waists. There was so much mud and swamp that we had difficulty getting clear of it; and so many Indians attacked us, hurling their lances and shooting arrows, that it took us a long time to struggle ashore. While Cortés was fighting, he lost a sandal in the mud and could not recover it. So he landed with one bare foot.[11]

As soon as they were ashore, the invaders began to use their crossbows and lances against the indigenous, who were armored only in padded cotton, forcing them to retreat. With their metal weapons, the strangers broke through the wooden stockades that had been constructed, and then the other group of outsiders, who had been making their way overland, arrived. The Indians rapidly withdrew, and the newcomers were left in command of the abandoned center of Potonchan, a square surrounded by empty temples and halls. There they slept, with sentries standing guard. Armed and armored and in a large group, they were relatively invulnerable. But they soon grew hungry. When they sent out foraging parties, the Chontal attacked them guerrilla-style and killed several men.[12]

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Two days later, the strangers, determined to make something happen, moved out in a body onto an open plain. Wave after wave of warriors attacked the group of metal-clad foreigners, perishing before the lethal steel weapons, but wearing them down nevertheless. The battle continued for more than an hour. The Chontal lords thought the strangers would surely tire soon, and then their own greater numbers would carry the day. Then, from behind, there suddenly came thundering over the plain more enemies mounted on huge quadrupeds, twenty times as strong as deer. Under cover of night, the Spaniards had unloaded ten horses from the ships that were still in the mouth of the river. It was a time-consuming and difficult task, requiring pulleys and canvas slings, but the men were protected by darkness and their armor, and whichever Chontal were watching could not possibly have known how significant these actions would turn out to be. The horsemen, who had been struggling through the coastal swamps all morning, came charging over the flat grasslands, cutting down Chontal foot soldiers with wild exhilaration. The warriors had no alternative but to withdraw.

The leaders of Potonchan counted their missing men, whose bodies lay strewn over the field of battle. They had lost over 220 warriors in only a few hours. Nothing comparable had ever occurred in all the histories recorded in stone or legend. They simply could not afford to keep up a fight like that. Even if in the end they could drive these men away, the battle would do them no good, for everyone in their world would learn of it. They would be left weak and defenseless, vulnerable to their enemies, having lost many hundreds of their own.[13] Moreover, it seemed likely that more of these strangers would arrive the following year. So it was that the Chontal sued for peace. One of the enemy, strangely enough, spoke some Yucatec Mayan, a language well known to the Chontal. He had been a prisoner on the peninsula for years. He said that his leader, Cortés, would forgive them if they made amends.

Among many other gifts, the Chontal leaders sent twenty slave girls down to the shore. The young woman from Coatzacoalcos was among them.[14] She watched as a man who was evidently a religious figure approached them in a costume different from that of all the others. He made gestures and murmured prayers of some kind, finally sprinkling water on each new arrival. Daughter Child's new name, she learned, was Marina. Her captors did not ask what her former name had been, nor did she tell them.[15] Almost immediately, she was presented to a confident, even arrogant man whom the others deferred to. She could not yet pronounce his name, but she heard that it was "Alonso Hernández de Puertocarrero."[16] Later she would learn what gave the man his authority among these people: he was first cousin to a nobleman, the Count of Medellín, across the ocean in the place called Spain. Cortés had been so excited to have someone of his stature along that he had given him a sorrel mare as a gift and would now present him with the most beautiful girl in the group. Marina's spiritual baptism, it turned out, had simply been a preliminary to rape.[17]

Marina learned a great deal in the next few days. This wasn't only because she was an astute observer who could hold her feelings in check. She found she could speak easily to the foreigner named Jerónimo de Aguilar, who had been relaying messages to the Chontal.[18] Over eight years earlier, when he was about

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twenty years old, he had been aboard a ship that capsized near Cancun. A good swimmer, he made it to shore. But then he was taken prisoner by the Yucatec Maya and had labored as a slave among them ever since, learning enough of their language to function. When Cortés arrived in the area where he was living and learned of his existence, he ransomed him so that he might serve as an interpreter, one who would be more loyal than any the strangers had ever had. Aguilar did not speak Chontal, but Marina and some of the other women spoke enough Yucatec Mayan that they could communicate with him easily. Fortunately, Marina had a razor-sharp mind, and she soon realized that there was a staggering amount of information that she needed to absorb and process rapidly if any of it was going to be of use to her.

It seemed that the sea that surrounded their world was not boundless after all. It was larger than she could imagine, but within about ten weeks' sailing toward the rising sun, there lay a land full of people who worshipped a powerful god of their own. They called themselves *cristianos*, among many other names. In any case, explained Jerónimo de Aguilar, his people were one group among many who worshipped this same god. He himself was, he said, a Spaniard, and it was the Spaniards who had first discovered this part of the earth, this New World, and conquered and settled the great islands that lay a few days to the east in the Caribbean Sea. At first the Spaniards thought that they had reached the islands off the coast of a place called Asia, such as the famed Cipangu (Japan), or perhaps India. The explorer called Columbus was so convinced of this that he had named the people he met "Indians," and the name stuck. After more than ten years, the newcomers had acknowledged that what they had found was not Asia, but a landmass hitherto unimagined by anyone. They sent out many exploratory expeditions from the Caribbean and kidnapped a number of interpreters. They thought they had learned that on this mainland there was a rich nation somewhere to the west. It was important that they find it, Aguilar added, for there were now about five thousand Spaniards living in the Caribbean, and there simply was not enough wealth for all of them. Over four hundred men and another hundred or so servants and retainers had come away with Cortés on his expedition, convinced as they were that better things awaited them over the western horizon. They would be grievously disappointed and therefore dangerous, at least to their own leaders, if they did not find what they sought. But Hernando Cortés had no intention of letting them taste such bitterness.[19]

In the days after peace was made with the Chontal, the two sides did a brisk business together, the Spaniards presenting goods they had brought for the purpose in exchange for food. The priest they had with them said mass. Jerónimo de Aguilar may have tried to explain some of what he was talking about, but it would have been difficult. Later, a linguistically talented missionary would try to translate Hail Mary into an indigenous language. He heard the murmured words in his head: *Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Virgin, mother of God, pray for us sinners. Amen*. He tried to convey these words in an utterly foreign tongue to people who were completely unfamiliar with any of the ideas. He struggled. "May you be joyful, oh sainted Mary, you who are full of *gracia*." He left just that one word in Spanish; it was too difficult to translate. He

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went on, “God the king is with you. You are the most praiseworthy of all women. And very praiseworthy is your womb of precious fruit, is Jesus. Oh Saint Mary, oh perfect maiden, you are the mother of God. May you speak for us wrong-doers. May it so be done.”[20] The much less articulate Jerónimo de Aguilar could not even have gotten this far. As they listened, the Chontal looked non-committal, but politely kept their impatience to themselves. When they were given a chance to speak, they said nothing about God or his mother. Instead, they worked to convince the Spaniards that the type of tribute they sought could best be delivered by the Mexica, to the west.

On the day that the Spaniards called Palm Sunday, they took to their ships with the twenty enslaved women and headed west. About three days later, they passed near the land of Marina’s birth, drawing into the entrance to the Coatzacoalcos River at the foot of the Tuxtla mountains. This place, however, seemed to be of no interest to her new masters. They sailed on, and she watched the coast of her homeland recede once again in the distance. A day later, they anchored at a point that had been charted by the previous year’s expedition, on the site of today’s Veracruz.

Within half an hour, two canoes approached the flagship of the fleet, which bore Cortés and Puertocarrero and their Indian servants. Moctezuma, they would later learn, had ordered that this spot be watched since the strangers had visited it the year before.[21] Cortés called for Jerónimo de Aguilar and asked him to translate. The man tried. In his desperation, he may even have considered feigning comprehension, but that could only go so far. Aguilar spoke Yucatec Mayan well enough, but unbeknownst to him, the expedition had now left Maya territory. He was hearing Nahuatl and could make nothing of it. Cortés grew angry. He had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense to ransom the castaway, and the man had assured him he could speak to Indians. Now it seemed he couldn’t, after all.

The young woman now named Marina did have alternatives. She could have remained silent. No one expected a young slave girl to step forward in that moment and become an international conduit. But she chose to explain what the Nahuatl speakers were saying. By the end of that hour, she had made her full value felt. Afterward, Cortés claimed that he took her aside along with Aguilar, and promised her “more than her liberty” if she would help him find and speak to this Moctezuma of whom he now had heard so much. He meant that he would make her rich; it was what he promised everyone who agreed to help him.[22] But it is doubtful that Marina acted out of any interest in the riches promised by an interloper whom she had no real reason to trust. Her motivations would have been quite different. As it was, she was the concubine of Puertocarrero—a man with so few morals that he had once even abandoned a Spanish girl whom he had persuaded to run away with him. When he tired of his Indian slave girl, or when he was killed, Marina would be passed on and might even become the common property of all the men. Alternatively, she could speak aloud, earning the respect and gratitude of every Spaniard there, especially their leader. If she did that, the group might survive longer, and she along with them, for if she rendered it possible for them to communicate with the local people, she could help stave off battles, gain important

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information, and aid them in trading more efficiently for food. She does not seem to have hesitated. Within days, the Spaniards were calling her "doña" Marina, a title reserved for highborn ladies in Europe. Over the months to come, she proved herself to be both courageous and charming; she even managed to laugh at times.

Mexicans today generally consider Marina to have been a traitor to Native American people. But at the time, if anyone had asked her if she should perhaps show more loyalty to her fellow Indians, she would have been genuinely confused. In her language, there was no word that was the equivalent of "Indians." Mesoamerica was the entire known world; the only term for "people native to the Americas" would have been "human beings." And in her experience, human beings most definitely were not all on the same side. The Mexica were her people's enemies. It was they who had seen to it that she was torn from her family, and their merchants who had sold her in Xicallanco. Now this relatively small group of newcomers wanted to make war on the Mexica. No one in her world could have imagined that she owed loyalty to the Moctezuma's people. While she lived, and for many years afterwards, no one expressed surprise at the course she chose. Only modern people who lacked knowledge of her situation would later say that she was some sort of traitor.

Gradually, Marina and others of her generation did begin to understand that the people on the American side of the ocean were profoundly different in some regards from the people on the other side of the sea, and that the former were eventually going to lose to the latter. None of them, however, could see that at first contact. The indigenous people struggled with categories and eventually began to refer to themselves as *nican titlaca* (NEE-kan tee-TLA-kah, "we people here"), whenever they needed to distinguish themselves as a whole from the outsiders who were arriving. Moctezuma's messengers, for example, told him that the interpreter the strangers had with them was not one of the ones from across the sea, but rather "one of us people here." They explained that she was from the eastern lands; they never meant that she was "one of us" in the sense of being one of the Mexicas' own. It would not have occurred to them to expect any loyalty from her, any more than they would have from anyone else whom they had made war against.[23]

In the first few days after Cortés discovered that he had such a marvelous translation chain at his disposal, he worked hard to convince Moctezuma's messengers that he needed to be taken to meet their lord in person. Meanwhile, the emissaries worked hard gathering information and preparing their report. Sometimes they questioned Cortés though Marina and Aguilar; sometimes they spied on the Spanish encampment, watching them race their horses up and down the hard-packed sand of low tide. Soon they decided they had as much information as they could glean easily, and they departed.[24]

The Spaniards covered themselves with stinking grease to try to ward off the mosquitoes that swarmed them, driving them nearly mad. And then they waited.

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MANY YEARS LATER, it would become an accepted fact that the indigenous people of Mexico believed Hernando Cortés to be a god, arriving in their land in the year 1519 to satisfy an ancient prophecy. It was understood that Moctezuma, at heart a coward, trembled in his sandals and quickly despaired of victory. He immediately asked to turn his kingdom over to the divine newcomers, and naturally, the Spaniards happily acquiesced. Eventually, this story was repeated so many times, in so many reputable sources, that the whole world came to believe it. Moctezuma was not known for his cheerful disposition. Even he, however, had he known what people would one day say, would certainly have laughed, albeit with some bitterness, for the story was, in fact, preposterous.[25]

What really happened when the messengers returned with their report was that he sent scouts out to every important town between Tenochtitlan and the coast, and then set up a veritable war room. This is exactly what one would expect him to have done, given his history as a ferociously successful tlatoani who believed whole-heartedly in order, discipline, and information. Years later, a man who had been young at the time remembered: “A report of everything that was happening was given and relayed to Moctezuma. Some of the messengers would be arriving as others were leaving. There was no time when they weren’t listening, when reports weren’t being given.”[26] The scouts even repeated a summary of the religious instruction that was being regularly offered by the Spanish priest and translated by Aguilar and Marina. When the Spaniards later got to Tenochtitlan and tried to deliver a sermon to Moctezuma, he cut them off, explaining that he was already familiar with their little speech, his messengers having presented it to him in full.[27]

Only one European recorded the events in writing as they were unfolding—or at least, only one account from that time has survived. Hernando Cortés himself penned a series of letters that he sent back to the king of Spain between 1519 and 1525. These are our only existing direct source, all other commentaries having been written years later when their authors were older men and the events deep in the past. And in his letters, written on the spot, Cortés never claimed that he was perceived as a god.

The idea first appeared, albeit in somewhat incoherent form, in some writings by Europeans in the 1540s. Fray Toribio de Benavente wrote of the indigenous observers’ purported understanding: “Their god was coming, and because of the white sails, they said he was bringing by sea his own temples.” Then, remembering that he had earlier claimed that all the Spaniards were supposed to have been gods, the priest quickly added, “When they disembarked, they said that it was not their god, but rather many gods.”[28] It was a deeply satisfying concept to this European author and his readers. In such a scenario, the white men had nothing to feel remorse about, no matter how much the Indians had suffered since their arrival. The Europeans had not only been welcomed, they had been worshipped. Indeed, could there be a European man living who *didn’t* like the idea, who didn’t feel flattered and pleased by the notion? In years to come, other invaders would try out comparable assertions. John Smith, for example, would claim that in Virginia, the local chief’s daughter had been wildly in love with him and had been willing to sacrifice her very life for

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his. He didn't mention that when he had known her, she had been only ten years old. And interestingly, he only told the story of her adulation when she and her English husband had both been dead for years and couldn't possibly refute what he said; in the report he sent back to London during the period in question, he said nothing remotely similar. There are, in fact, numerous such tales in the annals of colonialism.[29]

In retrospect, the story of Cortés being mistaken for a god seems so obviously self-serving and even predictable that one has to wonder why it was believed for so long. In a fascinating turn of events, by the 1560s and'70s, some of the Indians themselves were beginning to offer up the story as fact. The first ones to do so were the students of the very Franciscan friars who had originally touted the idea. The young indigenous writers were from elite families, the same ones who, forty or fifty years earlier had lost everything with the arrival of the Spaniards. And they were longing for an explanation. How had their once all-powerful fathers and grandfathers sunk so low? They were intimately acquainted with both sets of people—their Mexica families and their European teachers. They knew them both too well to believe that their own people were simply inferior, necessarily weaker or less intelligent than Europeans. Their own personal experience taught them that this was definitely not the case.

Here, however, was an explanation. God had been on the side of the Christians, of course; their own immediate ancestors had been trapped by their own loyalty to a blinding faith, tragically imprisoned in their own religiosity. The students of the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, author of the Florentine Codex, beginning in the 1560s and'70s, wrote down what no indigenous person had ever said before—namely, that their forefathers had been paralyzed even before 1519 by the appearance of a variety of terrifying omens. Interestingly, the stories they told bore a distinct resemblance to the narrations in certain Greek and Latin texts that were in the Franciscan school library.[30] They waxed eloquent in their tales of pillars of fire and a trembling king. A few pages later, the students turned to a new phase of the project and began to write down what certain old men who had actually participated in the events had to say, and then both the substance and the tone of their writings changed dramatically. They became much more specific and the indigenous people they described much more pragmatic. "At the first shot the wall did not give way, but the second time it began to crumble," someone remembered, for instance. Gone were the pillars of fire.[31]

The students weren't done with the subject of influential prophecies, however. They liked an idea that one of their teachers had offered, which was that the great schism that had occurred in ancient Tula, present in so many of their early histories, had really been a battle between a brutal leader who believed in human sacrifice and a peaceful one who did not—one who was in effect an early Christian, unbeknownst even to himself. The group that had wandered away to the east had been following the peaceful leader. If they decided the man's name was not Huemac, as a leading culture hero of numerous ancient stories was called, but rather Quetzalcoatl, as the former teacher fray Toribio was the first one to suggest, the story would work perfectly, as one of the many year signs associated with the god Quetzalcoatl corresponded to 1519.

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The mortal man could have become a god and been expected to return then. Unfortunately, the students got the matter a bit confused. From their people's own records, they knew of the arrivals along the coast in the two preceding years, and they said it was the second captain who was thought to be Quetzalcoatl returning from the east.[32] That one was actually Juan de Grijalva, sailing in 1518, not Cortés arriving in 1519. But no matter. The gist of the story was there, and it could be taken up in generations to come and embellished as much as future authors saw fit to do.

None of the original Nahua histories written down by the earliest generation of students in the privacy of their own homes had said anything like this. In fact, none of the elements ring true, given what we know about Mexica culture. The Mexica did not believe in people becoming gods, or in gods coming to earth only in one particular year, or in anybody having a preordained right to conquer them. They didn't consider Quetzalcoatl to be their major deity (like the Cholulans did) or originally associate him with an abhorrence of human sacrifice. When we add the fact that we can actually watch the story's birth and evolution in European-authored and European-influenced works, the case for its being a later fabrication seems closed.[33]

However, even if the notion that the Mexica mistook Cortés for the god Quetzalcoatl is discounted, the fact remains that they did refer to the Spaniards for a number of years as *teules*. Beginning a generation later, Spanish writers delighted in this, as it was a bastardization of the Nahuatl word *teotl*, meaning "god." But the word carried other connotations as well. In religious ceremonies, a *teotl* was a representative of the god, destined for sacrifice. In certain other contexts, the word implied strange and unearthly power, such as some sorcerers or priests might wield. At the time, the Europeans seemed to understand this: in an early letter back to Cortés, the Spanish king instructed him to take special care to convert the Indians' political leaders (their "señores," he said) as well as their priests (their "teules," he called them).[34] Later generations, however, forgot what the Spaniards had initially understood about the word's use, probably because they hadn't seen the chaos and confusion of the earliest interactions. In general, the Nahuas struggled to come up with terms that would apply to the Spaniards. In their world, everybody was named for the place from which they came (the Tenochca from Tenochtitlan, the Tlaxcalteca from Tlaxcala, the Culhuaque from Culhuacan, etc.). If a person's geographical origins were unknown, then it wasn't clear what to call him. The newcomers presented a problem in this regard. The only element that rapidly became clear was that the strangers considered themselves to be representatives of their god. That made sense to the Nahuas. Until they were certain what the name of the newcomers' god was—and the strangers used a confusing array of terms—it apparently seemed most logical to refer to them by a word that conveyed they were the representatives of a revered divinity.[35]

Their choice of labels apparently left even some of their own grandchildren believing that the white men really had been considered gods. The fact remained that those grandchildren desperately needed to come to

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terms with the conquest. That their ancestors had been benighted savages, as the Spaniards sometimes said, they knew to be false. But their ancestors could perhaps have made a mistake of this nature, and if they had, it might explain a great deal.[36]

Indigenous youths of the late 1500s had no way of knowing the deep history of either the Old World or the New. They had no way of knowing that in the Old World, people had been full time farmers for ten thousand years. Europeans had by no means been the first farmers, but they were nevertheless the cultural heirs of many millennia of sedentary living. They therefore had the resultant substantially greater population and a panoply of technologies—not just metal arms and armor, but also ships, navigation equipment, flour mills, barrel-making establishments, wheeled carts, printing presses, and many other inventions that rendered them more powerful than those who did not have such things. In the New World, people had been full-time farmers for perhaps three thousand years. It was almost as if Renaissance Europe had come face to face with the ancient Sumerians. The Mesopotamians were stunningly impressive—but they could not have defeated Charles the Fifth of the Holy Roman Empire working in combination with the Pope. Had the young indigenous writers of the late sixteenth century known all of this, it would have been a relief to their minds. But that relief was denied them. And so they participated in constructing a version of events that Moctezuma would have derided—but that he had no power to change from the land of the dead.

***

IN THE RAINY SEASON OF 1519, neither the Spaniards nor the Mexica knew what stories would someday be told about them. At the time, both sets of people had pressing realities to contend with. Neither could spare time or energy for philosophical musings about the future, historical memory, or the nature of truth.

First of all, the Spaniards were hungry. Marina bargained as effectively as she could. From the people living nearby, she bought cages full of turkeys, and some of the other women plucked and stewed them. She bought tortillas and salt, fruits and vegetables. The people grew used to dealing with her and sought her out. They did not have an “r” in their language, so they heard her name as “Malina.” They added the honorific “-tzin” to the end, and it became “Malintzin,” which sometimes came out as “Malintze.” As the Spanish speakers did not have the “tz” sound in their language, they heard the “Malinchi” or sometimes “Malinche.” Thus when they did not call her “doña Marina,” they called her “Malinche,” and so she has remained to historians ever since. What the Spaniards found disorienting was that to the various groups they dealt with, this woman seemed to be the most important member of their party. They did not even seem to see Jerónimo de Aguilar, and they called Hernando Cortés himself “Malinche,” as if her name must be his name, too, though the Spaniards felt it should have been the other way around.[37]

Cortés knew he was dependent on Malintzin, and he did not like it. In his letters home to the king, he referred to her as little as possible. He might not have referred to her at all, but then his whole story would

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have been suspect, as there were moments where an interpreter simply had to have been present in order for events to have transpired as they did. What Cortés did not want others to realize was that if Malintzin hadn't been there, they could not have succeeded. Of course, it was possible that if she had not appeared when she did, someone else might have filled this role later. After all, women who had been ripped from their homes and had no love for the Mexica were now scattered all across Mesoamerica. But Cortés had been especially lucky, and on some level he knew this. Not all women who hated the Mexica spoke both Nahuatl and Yucatec Mayan. And of those who did, not all of them were the daughters of noblemen and spoke with such finesse, with the ability to understand and use the high register of the nobility, which even had its own grammar. Nor did all of them have such a subtle understanding of complex situations. It soon became clear that Malintzin actually had a special gift for languages. She began to learn Spanish from Jerónimo de Aguilar, without a blackboard or a grammar book. Within a few months, she no longer needed her teacher at all.[38]

In the meantime, she helped Cortés to lay his plans. Messengers came back from Moctezuma twice, each time bearing gifts and promising more in the future, but also categorically refusing to escort Cortés and his party to Tenochtitlan. There was a drought, said Moctezuma's emissaries, and the king could not entertain them in the style to which they were undoubtedly accustomed. Cortés, however, was absolutely determined to get there. He had decided that he would either conquer this city, or if that was impossible, then he would trade for marvelous goods and bring back specific intelligence of the place to Spain; in either case, he would be hailed as a great discoverer. Undaunted, he considered what he had learned from some nearby Totonac villagers and from Malintzin herself—namely, that Moctezuma had many enemies who would help him in his travels. He could proceed by making his way first to a rebellious Totonac town, and then go on to Tlaxcala, where the people hated the Mexica. There, his forces would have access to food and water and other support.

There was a serious obstacle, however—namely, that he had left the Caribbean without the governor's permission, so he was, technically speaking, an outlaw.[39] The governor had at first assigned him to go on an exploratory expedition, which was the reason that more than four hundred landless men had flocked to join him. At the last moment, however, the governor began to fear that Cortés planned to exceed his authority and attempt to establish some sort of fiefdom on the mainland, one that would cut the governor out of all the profits. He sent a messenger to convey that he was revoking his permission. What could Cortés do but leave immediately and pretend he had never received the word? (The messenger himself he dealt with by bribing him to come along to find the rumored land of riches.) Yet even if his venture into the heart of the mainland succeeded, he was still liable to be arrested when he returned. Even the permit he pretended to believe was still in effect only gave him the right to explore, nothing more.

Cortés knew Spanish law well—some historians even believe he had attended law school for a while—and he clearly had been trained by a notary. He knew that the Spanish legal apparatus was based on the idea

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that an organic unity of purpose bound together a leader and his subjects. Any leader, even a king, could be set aside by "all good men of the land" if he was behaving outrageously. In that case, the good men of the land were not traitors when they refused to obey, but were acting instead for the common good. Cortés therefore needed a citizenry to demand that he lead them in settling the land. He arranged for all the Spaniards present to band together and sign a document insisting that they found a Spanish town (it was to be called the Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, or the "Rich City of the True Cross"), and that he lead them where they wanted to go—which was to Tenochtitlan.

There was more to do, however, before they set out. Cortés asked Puertocarrero, the most influential man on the expedition because of his high social status, to return to Spain and speak directly to the king, in order to ensure that the Caribbean governor not prejudice him against their case too much. This was not just a maneuver on Cortés's part to get rid of the man who kept him from having Malintzin all to himself. Crucially, Puertocarrero's high status meant that he could take responsibility for sending more men, supplies, horses, and arms. Five hundred Europeans could not bring down the Mexica, but Renaissance Europe could, so Cortés needed to make sure that more of mainland Europe was on its way to support him. At this point Puertocarrero and his party left. Finally, Cortés ordered that the remaining ships be beached. They weren't permanently destroyed, but leaving would now be a major undertaking requiring many weeks of repair work. It was a way of preventing discontented men from easily going home.[40]

With this done, Cortés led the ascent from the hot coastal lands up into the mountains. Two Totonacs guided them toward Tlaxcala. They entered a pine wood, where it was unexpectedly cold at night. Many of the men weren't dressed for it, and a few of the enslaved Indians the Spaniards had brought from the Caribbean died after a drenching rain with hail. At length the path began to lead downhill, into a valley. There they came upon a nine-foot-high wall built of stone, stretching to the right and left as far as they could see. It was shaped like an extended pyramid: at its base, it was twenty feet across, and at the top it culminated in a flat walkway only a foot and a half wide. This, it seemed, was the Tlaxcalan border. Despite the forbidding boundary, the Totonacs continued to insist that all would be well. The Tlaxcalans, they explained, truly hated the Mexica, for although they had remained independent, they had done this by participating in the dreaded Flower Wars against them for years.[41]

The travelers soon found an opening in the wall, and Cortés along with half a dozen men rode forward to explore. They soon caught sight of about fifteen warriors up ahead and called out to them. Cortés sent one of the riders galloping back in case reinforcements were needed, and then he and the others approached the Indians. Suddenly, hundreds of warriors seemed to rise out of nowhere and surrounded them completely. Cortés actually claimed it was thousands in his letter home, but he always exaggerated numbers for dramatic effect whenever anything went wrong; it wouldn't have been possible for the Tlaxcalans to have placed a guard of thousands at the entrance, given their total population. In any event, two of the horses were killed and their riders gravely injured before more of the Spanish cavalry approached and the

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Tlaxcalans retreated. Cortés had learned a crucial lesson: a handful of armored men was not enough to withstand an onslaught, not even if they were mounted on horseback. His men simply had to move in larger groups in order to remain relatively invulnerable.

Late in the day, some Tlaxcalan messengers arrived. They apologized for the incident and blamed it on foolish and rambunctious Otomí who lived in their territory. They claimed to desire friendship and asked to tour the impressive camp. Malintzin had misgivings; she wasn't sure what to expect.

A huge Tlaxcalan force attacked at daybreak. The Spaniards were ready for them, and with their armor on, they could inflict more casualties than they received, but they were weakened from their travels and distraught at this reception. They had to fight without food or respite all day long, surrounded by a sea of enemies who only withdrew when darkness made it impossible for them to tell friend from foe. That night, Cortés took the thirteen remaining horsemen galloping over the plain to the nearby hills, where lighted fires signaled the presence of villages. "I burnt five or six small places of about a hundred inhabitants," he later wrote to the king.[42]

The next morning, the Tlaxcalan warriors attacked once more, in such numbers that they were able to enter the camp and engage in hand-to-hand combat. It took four hours for Spanish armor and weaponry to drive them back. This time, the Spanish even used their guns, which were really tiny cannons that couldn't be aimed well but could scatter grapeshot with deadly effect. "The enemy was so massed and numerous," commented one of the Spaniards later, "that every shot wrought havoc among them."[43] Many dozens of Tlaxcalan men died that day, each one swept up into the arms of his comrades and carried from the battlefield. Yet only one Spaniard died.

Before dawn the next day, Cortés once again led the horsemen rapidly out of the camp, this time in the opposite direction. "I burnt more than ten villages," he reported. For the next two days, the Tlaxcalan chiefs sporadically sent emissaries suing for peace, but they somehow sounded unconvincing, perhaps because no gifts were forthcoming. Cortés tortured one of them, demanding the truth through the interpreter, Malintzin—who was quickly ascertaining that the Christian god was not truly one of peace. The emissaries learned nothing, and Cortés cut the fingers from the hands of a number of them, so that "they would see who we were," as he said, and then sent them home.[44]

The Indians attacked again, and again were driven back. After a few days of silence, Cortés took his now-rested horsemen out again during the hours of darkness. "As I took them by surprise, the people rushed out unarmed, and the women and children ran naked through the streets, and I began to do them some harm."[45] He had Malintzin on horseback with him and had her shout aloud that the strangers offered peace and friendship, if they chose to accept it. Something she said convinced them, for the war ended that night. Peace talks began in earnest in the morning.

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Tlaxcala was in effect four countries in one. The altepetl consisted of four well-populated sub-altepetls. Each had its own king, but they were so tightly bound by intermarriage and tradition that they remained an unbreakable unit in their relations with outsiders. So it was that they alone had been able to resist Mexica aggression. For many years, they had been allies with nearby Cholula and Huexotzinco, but recently these two, facing the possibility of destruction by Moctezuma, had gone over to his side and fought against the Tlaxcalans. The Tlaxcalans remembered proudly that they had gotten word of the defection while they were playing a ball game and then had roundly defeated the Huexotzincan traitors. “We pursued them right to their own homes,” they bragged in their annals.[46] Their courage notwithstanding, they were still surrounded by enemies, their trade routes cut off. The Mexica could not bring them down without losing more men than they could spare, but they did not really need to, because they could use the traditional enmity to fuel the ritual Flower Wars that often ended in death.

Over the years, the Tlaxcalans’ survival had depended on their ability to prove that their warriors were the match of anybody’s. Although they would have been aware of the approach of an expedition of over four hundred strangers, they would not have had a ring of spies and messengers bringing them detailed reports or anyone to explain to them ahead of time the newcomers’ hope that they would help bring down the Mexica. It fell to Malintzin to convey the situation to them. Fortunately, until the recent wars had cut them off, Malintzin’s people in Coatzacoalcos had been among Tlaxcala’s trade partners. She apparently presented herself as a gracious and authoritative noblewoman, for they decided that they could trust her.

The Tlaxcalans brought the Spaniards to the imposing palace of the tlatoani Xicotencatl (Shee-ko-TEN-kat) of Tizatlan, one of the two largest sub-altepetls. There, they offered the newcomers women, ranging from princesses whom it was intended the lords should marry, to slave girls meant as a form of tribute. Cortés gave the most important princess—a daughter of Xicotencatl himself—to Pedro de Alvarado, a charismatic man with a bright blond beard who was one of his lieutenants. One of the minor lords’ daughters was given to Jerónimo de Aguilar, and the rest were distributed to other men in the company who were proving their worth in the eyes of Cortés. Not many years later, Tlaxcalan artists painted a record of the politically important event on Tizatlan’s palace walls and made another copy on bark paper. They wished the early alliance to be recalled in perpetuity. Strings of young women being given to the Spaniards, together with the names of the most important ones, looked out from the painting; they personified the treaty of alliance that the Tlaxcalans believed had been made.[47]

Meanwhile, Cortés was bargaining for more through the women. He wanted several thousand warriors to go with him to Tenochtitlan. The Tlaxcalans agreed. It was the kind of alliance they had had in mind when they offered Xicotencatl’s daughter as a bride to one of the strangers’ leaders. When the company set out, it was at least three times larger than it had been before. It gave the appearance of an army of victory.[48]

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AT THIS POINT, Moctezuma decided he could not delay any longer what he had so dreaded having to do. He sent messengers offering annual tribute—including gold, silver, slaves, and textiles—to be delivered as the strangers desired. The only provision was that they not enter his lands, as he could not host so large a company. Moctezuma and his council assumed that this arrangement was what the foreigners' sought. It was certainly what the tlatoani himself would have sought in like circumstances. He had hesitated to make the offer before because it would constitute such a drain on his resources, and he had hoped there might be another way of turning the newcomers aside. What he absolutely could not afford, politically speaking, was a confrontation with such a force anywhere close to home. He knew from his sources that the strangers won their battles. Even if he collected a mighty army and did manage to bring them and their allies down, his kingdom would still be lost, for the casualties would be immense, beyond anything calculable from past experience. And if he could not deliver an easy victory at the heart of his kingdom, his allies would not continue to stand with him. Under no circumstances could the Mexica be made to appear weak in the central basin; it would be political death to them. Moctezuma could not afford a battle; he did not even want the strangers to come close enough for comparisons to be drawn. In later years, scholars would delight in arguing that Moctezuma did nothing at this point because he was paralyzed by some aspect of his culture which the scholars could perceive and specify (he was relying on man–god communication rather than man–man, or perhaps unable to fathom warfare to the death) but there is no genuine evidence that overwhelming fatalism had anything to do with it. Moctezuma had, as he had always had throughout his adult life, a pragmatic agenda.[49]

However, his plan failed. The strangers and their newfound friends, the Tlaxcalans, turned down his offer of tribute and continued to approach. They stopped in Cholula, now a subject town of Moctezuma's. He gave orders to the Cholulans that they not feed the strangers well. It seems that he also commanded them to attack the party as they left the city, when they would be forced to pass through certain narrow ravines as they entered the ring of mountains surrounding the central valley. At least, Cortés claimed that Malintzin gathered this news from an old woman who lived in the city. It is eminently logical that Moctezuma would have done this: Cholula was the last stop outside of the central valley, and the town was a new ally. He had little regard for the lives of the people who lived there, and if their attack failed, he could easily dissociate himself from it, both in his own people's eyes and those of the Spaniards. But perhaps he was too cautious to order a confrontation even this close to home; we cannot be sure. Whether he wanted a battle or not, the Tlaxcalans were spoiling for a fight. They had not forgiven the recent turncoats in Cholula. If they could bring down the present chiefly line and install one more sympathetic to Tlaxcala, the result would be of lasting benefit to them. It may, indeed, have been the Tlaxcalans who planted the story of the planned attack, and the Spaniards were merely their dupes. However it came about,

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the Spaniards and the Tlaxcalans combined forces in a terrible rampage. The temple to Quetzalcoatl was burned—Quetzalcoatl was the primary protector god of the Cholulans—as were most of the houses. “The destruction took two days,” commented one Spaniard laconically.[50]

That business done, the combined Spanish and indigenous force moved on. They safely traversed the mountain pass between the volcano Popocatepetl (Smoking Mountain) and the snow-capped Iztaccihuatl (White Woman) and entered the valley. As they approached the lakeside towns at the center, the Spaniards—as well as many of the accompanying Indians—began to feel a sensation of awe. A Spaniard named Bernal Díaz wrote of his impressions many years later: “These great towns and cues [pyramids] and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision from the tale of Amadís.” (Amadís was a legendary knight, and a book about him had recently become a best seller in Spain.) “Indeed,” the Spaniard remembered, “Some of our soldiers asked if it were not all a dream.” When the men stopped to rest at the town of Iztapalapan, they were literally stunned. The lord’s palace there rivaled buildings in Spain. Behind it a flower garden cascaded down to a lovely pond: “Large canoes could come into the garden [pond] from the lake, through a channel they had cut…. Everything was shining with lime and decorated with different kinds of stonework and paintings which were a marvel to gaze on…. I stood looking at it, and thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world.”[51]

Bernal Díaz was writing these words as an old man. He had reason to feel a bit maudlin as he thought of his lost youth, and then also recalled all that had happened since. At the end of the paragraph, he almost visibly flinched with shame. “Today all that I then saw is overthrown and destroyed; nothing is left standing.”

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ON THE MORNING of November 8, 1519, the Spaniards and the Tlaxcalans crossed the wide, clean-swept causeway that led straight to the city. Cortés rode on horseback towards the front of the cavalcade; Malintzin, her small shoulders squared, walked at his side. Moctezuma had wisely decided to handle the situation by putting on a grand show of two brother monarchs meeting. At the gate at the edge of the island, hundreds of dignitaries had gathered, including multiple representatives of each of the central altepetls. Each person in turn stepped forward and made the gesture of touching the ground and then kissing the earth upon it. The joint performance was a classic Nahua method of expressing the strength of a united body politic. The chiefs were nothing if not patient as they carried it through. But Cortés was different. “I stood there waiting for nearly an hour until everyone had performed his ceremony,” he said huffily.[52]

Then Cortés and his company were led across a bridge and found themselves looking at a broad, straight avenue leading to the heart of the metropolis. It put the tiny, mazelike streets of European cities to shame, and the small downtown area of Tlaxcala also paled in comparison. For the newcomers, there was a moment of doubt as they tried to make sense of the scene, and then the various elements resolved

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themselves before their eyes. Not far down that wide sun-lit road, there stood a royal company, which now moved toward them. Every man there was dressed in bejeweled cloaks, and at the center came Moctezuma, the tlatoani, speaker for his people. Anyone could see that he was the high king. Over him his retainers held a magnificent canopy, a great arc pointing toward the sky, its bits of gold and precious stones glinting in the light.[53] It was as if he carried with him a reflection of the sun itself.

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