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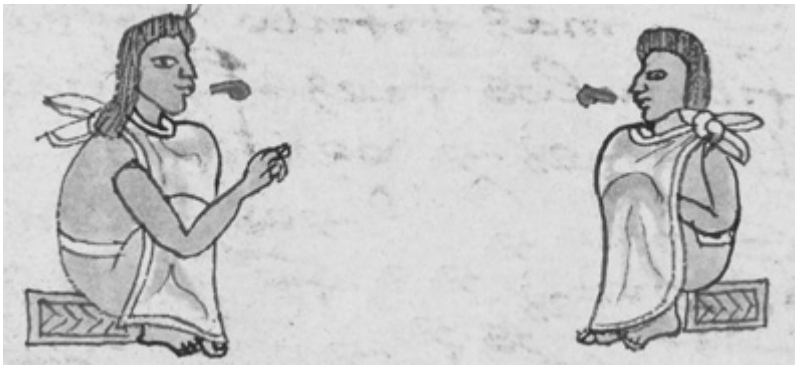
The Trail from the Seven Caves

BEFORE 1299



Two Nahua chiefs address each other. The Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford, Codex Mendoza, MS. Arch. Selden. A.1, folio 60r.

The girl heard the voices of those who loved her in her head. They had petted her, sung to her, told her she was their precious, shining gem, their light, silken feather. She knew now she would never hear those voices again. They had warned her that it might come to this, that she might one day be taken in war and lose everything, that every flower was fragile. Now the worst had indeed come. For a time, terror left her mind blank. But after she slept for a few hours, she was able to remind herself what her mother and grandmother had taught her she must do.

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SO IT WAS that in the year 1299, Shield Flower looked upon her own death and found the courage to pass from this earthly life with the dignity and style that befit a royal woman. At least so her people said in the stories they told of her for many generations after.[1] Sometimes they called her not Chimalxochitl (Chi-mal-SHO-cheet, Shield Flower), but the more valiant Chimalexochitl (Chi-mal-eh-SHO-cheet), meaning Shield-Bearer Flower. Her ancestors, going back six or more generations, had been among the last of the people to leave the desiccated, war-torn lands of the American Southwest and begin a trek across the expanse of desert in search of the rumored southern lands. Some two hundred years had passed before their descendants made it to the central basin of Mexico, and the tales of the land's fertility had all proven to be true. Here the precious maize crop grew easily. Yet they found that the best lands had already been conquered by other bands of warriors from the north, people who were just as good with a bow and arrow as Shield Flower's grandfather and his warriors. In the absence of a better alternative, Shield Flower's kin hired themselves out as mercenaries, fighting other people's battles in exchange for the right to make their camp unmolested, hunt a few deer, and plant a little corn.

But the year 1299 had brought misfortune to her people. Indeed, their luck had been so poor that one storyteller would later insist that it had not all happened in a year Two Reed, as everybody else said, but rather in a year One Rabbit. One Rabbit was always associated with disaster; there was even an old saying, "We were really one rabbited," meaning "We were really up a creek."[2] In any case, Shield Flower's father judged that his people had grown strong enough to cease living in fear. He declared himself an independent king or chief, a *tlatoani* (tla-to-WAN-ee) meaning "speaker," implicitly the mouthpiece of the group. His declaration indicated that he would no longer pay tribute to others or work as a mercenary for them. He even taunted the area's most powerful chief, to be sure that he had made his point. Some said he went so far as to ask to marry the leading chief's daughter, but then sacrificed her when she arrived.[3] Since he was not a madman, it is more likely that his taunting took the form of attacking one of the strongman's allies or refusing to obey one of his direct orders. Whatever his uppity move was, it proved to be a significant error of judgment.

King Coxcox (COSH-cosh) of the Culhua (CUL-wa) people personally led the war party that came to destroy the upstarts. The party consisted of warriors from six communities working in unison. They killed without mercy, keeping only a few warriors alive to take as prisoners to the towns that had defeated them. The young women were divided up and led away to their new lives as concubines. Shield Flower and her father, Huitzilihuitl (Wee-tzil-EE-weet, Hummingbird Feather), were taken to Culhuacan, the most important Culhua town. Huitzilihuitl's heart wept for his daughter, whose torn clothes rendered her body visible to all, exposing her to shame. He begged Coxcox to have mercy on the girl and give her a little something to wear. Coxcox turned and looked at her, then laughed. "No," the people always remembered him as saying. "She will stay as she is."

Thus Shield Flower found herself bound hand and foot, waiting under guard to learn what her fate would be. Days went by, dragging out the torment. The Culhua people were searching the surrounding marshes for survivors who had escaped the battle. They counted on hunger bringing many of them forth eventually, and so it did. When they began to trickle into Culhuacan—some dragged by captors, some coming of their own volition to offer to act as slaves in exchange for their lives—Shield Flower was still a shamed captive. She had been able to bear it when none of her people were there to see, but she could not endure it now. She asked one of her people to get her some chalk and some charcoal. Her captors allowed it. Perhaps they were amused. The bound girl struggled to mark herself with the black and white substances in the ancient way. Then she stood and began to scream, "Why do you not sacrifice me?!" She was ready, the gods were ready; the Culhuas only dishonored themselves by delaying, as if they had no courage for the deed. Later, some of the bards would say that the Culhuas were shamed by her words and wanted to quiet her, so they lit the pyre. Others said that some among her own people valued her honor more than their lives, so they stepped forward and did the deed themselves, at her command. As the flames rose, Shield Flower stood tall: she now had nothing left to lose. Tears streamed down her face, and she screamed at her

enemies, “People of Culhuacan, I go to where my god lives. My people’s descendants will all become great warriors, you will see!” After she died, the Culhuas washed her blood and ashes away, but they could not wash away the dread that her words had awakened in them.

Many years later, when her people had achieved great power and then lost it again with the coming of the Christians, some would say that perhaps Shield Flower had never really lived. After all, in some of the stories her name was Azcalxochitl (a kind of flower; we might call her “Lily”). And in some of them she was not the chief’s daughter but his elder sister, the one destined to mother the next chief in some communities. If the bards could not even agree on such basic plot elements, why believe any of it?

It isn’t necessary to believe that we can hear the exact words of a conversation held in 1299 to know that the essentials are true. Archaeological and linguistic evidence, as well as the written historical annals of multiple Mexican towns, all indicate that the ancestors of the people now known as the Aztecs came down from the north over the course of several centuries, that those who came last found themselves without land, and that they then had to jockey for power in the fertile central valley.[4] We know how they waged war, and we recognize the symbolic significance of the chiefly daughters and sisters raised to mother the next generation’s chiefs. We even know that the people of the valley educated their noble girls to be almost as stoical as their brothers in times of duress, and that Shield Flower and Lily were both common indigenous names for noble daughters. In short, the story of Shield Flower would have been the story of more than one young woman.

All of those young women, as well as their warrior brothers, learned their history while sitting around the fire in the evening and listening to the storytellers. They all learned that their people had come from the far north and had crossed mountains and desert to build new lives for themselves, their leaders carrying the sacred bundles of their gods to their new home. The stories differed slightly, but there were certain commonalities, and we can add to the mixture the evidence of archaeology and of linguistic maps to form a coherent vision of what happened. The narrative has all the makings of an epic drama.

It stretches back to an era unknown to Shield Flower, except perhaps in myth and dream, to northeastern Asia in the time of the last Ice Age—to the time of the peopling of the Americas. By that time, humankind had emerged from Africa and had wandered far and wide, living almost everywhere in the Old World. Later, each group would learn to love the character of the land it called home, from Scandinavia’s icy fjords to the arid promontories of India’s Deccan. But twenty thousand years ago or more, the land was not so varied, still covered in many places by gradually receding glaciers, and “home” was not so clearly marked. Small groups of people followed big game from place to place, and valiant hunters brought it down with their relatively frail spears. Starting about thirteen thousand years ago, most scholars think, some who lived in northeastern Asia trekked across the Bering Strait into Alaska. At the time, the strait was covered in ice; the land bridge was miles wide. The strife of war or a shortage of resources drove waves of people across this strait at least three different times. They, or their children and grandchildren, continued to pursue the

mastodons, the caribou, and any other animal worth eating, and they gradually populated two continents. Here and there, they found a few groups who had preceded them in the new hemisphere, apparently traveling down the coast in canoes. By about fourteen thousand years ago, before the land bridge made sizable migrations possible, a few people had gotten as far as southern Chile. At a place now called Monte Verde, a child stepped in the mud next to a cooking fire and left a clear footprint for archaeologists to find countless generations later.[5]

Then, about eleven thousand years ago, the Ice Age ended. The ice melted; the sea level rose and covered the land bridge, separating the Old World and the New. Some of the more massive game species became extinct. Climates grew warmer; more plants flourished. Everywhere on earth, curious and hungry people experimented with eating more of the plants' blossoms and fruits and roots and seeds and stalks. It didn't matter if they lived where the weather was warm or cool, or if the land was woody and shaded or hot and dry. They did this everywhere. Yet despite the commonality of their actions, differences that began to emerge at this time would prove crucial to human history in later millennia. When the people of Eurasia later met those of the Americas, decisions that human beings had made about farming in those early times would determine their fates, in the sense that the past determined their degree of strength relative to each other. It is a tale worth telling if we wish to understand both the rise and the fall of the Aztecs.

In most places, it was men who hunted and women who gathered. In their lives, always on the very edge of survival, it behooved these women to notice everything in the natural world: they saw that the plants grew from the seeds; they sowed some of the seeds of their favorite plants in the damp earth and returned to gather the fruits of their labor the following year when the hunt drew them back to the same area. They learned, for example, that if they gathered seeds only from the bushes that grew the most berries, the next generation of plants would yield more berries. The women told the men what they had deduced, and those men who valued survival listened to them. Almost everywhere, humans became part-time farmers. However, hunting and fishing remained the main affairs—it was flesh that humans relied upon to obtain the protein they needed to live.[6]

People gradually became full-time farmers when and where it made sense to do so. That is, they dedicated themselves to cultivating the local flora instead of hunting only when the game grew thin on the ground, and they also had in their environment a constellation of protein-rich plants that could support human life.[7] It happened first—about ten thousand years ago—in the Fertile Crescent, a swath of land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (in today's Iraq). There, the available wheat and peas rendered farming an obvious alternative when the overhunted deer began to disappear. In other places, such as New Guinea, where bananas and sugarcane were the tastiest plants available, people experimented eagerly with the sweet treats, but they continued to depend on wild boar and other game animals to feed themselves. They were not so foolish as to devote their lives to the full-time cultivation of desserts, and the wheat and peas native to the Middle East did not exist in their world. It might not have mattered in the long term

except that full-time farming had such huge and momentous effects. Those who lived their lives as full-time farmers had to abandon the nomadic lifestyle. They could then construct big buildings and heavy items, experiment with metal forges, potters' wheels and looms. They could store food surpluses and thus increase their population. They had to devise ways to share water as they irrigated and developed new kinds of tools. It began to make sense to divide tasks and allow people to specialize in one area or another. Inventions proliferated. In short, the sedentary lifestyle of full-time agriculturalists eventually yielded more powerful civilizations.

Not that farmers are necessarily happier than hunter-gatherers, or smarter or more moral, nor do they always invent the same things in the same order, or even the things we would expect them to invent. The ancient Andean farmers, for example, never thought of straining plant fibers through screens to create paper on which to write, as those in the Old World did. Instead they "wrote" in knots and braids along colored cords and tied them together to record their prayers and their tax records. And the Europeans, later famous for their fighting, were not the ones to create the first explosives; the supposedly peaceful and self-contained Chinese did that. The point is that farming peoples always developed mightier civilizations in the sense of being able to defeat people who had not developed comparable weapons and goods, and whose populations had not grown equivalently.

The people of the Fertile Crescent made the shift first, but they were not alone for long in their new way of life. Wheat and peas spread quickly to nearby Egypt, southern Europe, and Asia, where people became far more dedicated to cultivation than they had been. In Egypt farming peoples included such local plants as figs. In Europe, they added oats and other crops to the mix. And in China, people were experimenting with growing more rice and millet. Large populations could now live in permanent towns—unthinkable to a population of hunter-gatherers—and trade routes between the towns soon fostered an exchange that gave peoples across the Eurasian continent regular access to each other's favorite domesticated plants and newest inventions.

Eventually the presence or absence of farming ceased to explain differences in power within Eurasia or people's ability to win a war there. With only a few centuries of difference between themselves and their neighbors, farmers soon found that their cleverest inventions and their best weapons could be bought, borrowed, or stolen by the more nomadic peoples who surrounded them. And once the nomads had such goods in their hands, they were just as powerful—or more powerful—than farmers. The Germanic tribes used Roman methods against their erstwhile conquerors. The Mongols of Asia's northern plains obtained horses and metal weapons from the Chinese. Then, when Genghis Khan and his men galloped down from the north, the farmers trembled—and with good reason.

Meanwhile, across the sea in the Americas, Shield Flower's ancestors continued as hunter-gatherers, with only a part-time interest in farming, for at least five millennia past the time when agriculture emerged with force in the Old World. Plants comparable to wheat and peas simply did not exist there. Later, the

Native Americans would be known for their reliance on corn, along with beans and squash. But ancient corn, the plant called *teosinte*, was merely a wild grass with a tuft of tiny kernels, smaller than today's baby corn. Ancient wheat was almost exactly like today's wheat, but teosinte was not nearly so nutritious. It required thousands of years of effort on the part of Mexico's women to turn those little tufts into what we would recognize as ears of corn; they occasionally planted the larger kernels from the biggest tufts, just as they experimented with other plants. In the meantime, they and their menfolk followed the deer and other game. Even when the ears of corn began to grow to a substantial size, scraping off the kernels and eating them still left a person hungry. Eventually, the women began to notice that when they ate corn at the same time as they ate beans, they were better nourished.[8] Far more so than in Europe, the rise of agriculture was a long and protracted process that occurred in fits and starts. The shift did eventually occur: by 3500 BCE a few groups in Mexico were farming corn in earnest; by 1800 BCE, many more were doing the same.[9] But there had been several millennia of delay in comparison with the Old World, a fact that would matter a great deal in the future, as Shield Flower's descendants would discover.

In coastal and riverine areas of Mesoamerica, some people had established permanent villages even without access to significant, protein-rich plants because they could dedicate themselves throughout the seasons to the collection of different kinds of seafood. These people, who already had a tradition of sedentary living, may have been more interested than others in the benefits of farming. As early as 1500 BCE, near the southern shore of the Gulf of Mexico, on what is called Mexico's isthmus, the Olmecs began to collect in impressive towns, living primarily on the corn and beans they planted.[10] They built large, sturdy buildings where they stored surplus food, and their population grew rapidly relative to other groups. They divided up the necessary labor, and the distinctions allowed some segments of the population to become more powerful than others. They developed a calendar, and talented artists grew adept at sculpture. Their carvings honored gods or chiefs or godly chiefs—we cannot know exactly which—by creating mammoth statues of their heads. Later in the course of their descendants' history, other gifted individuals created a form of writing, scratching out symbols on tablets to represent words, such as the name of the Venus god, Ten Sky. Clearly these people took pride in all that they had accomplished and offered gratitude to their gods; their sculptures and inscriptions underscore the point.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the corn-and-beans culture complex spread east and west from the isthmus, and Olmec influence expanded, its elements of grandeur firing the imagination of others.[11] To the east, great stone pyramids soon rose above the jungle canopy. The Maya artisans who built them added paint made from lime or plant pigments; others had learned to weave twisted strands of wild cotton into beautiful cloth, and soon colorful pennants fluttered in the breeze. They carved their writings on great slabs of stone that they set before the pyramids for all the world to see, commemorating the triumphs of their kings and staking their claim to greatness. Sometimes, they painted much tinier characters on ceremonial vessels and plates. These became veritable poems. One day in about the year 800, for example, a skilled artisan crafted

a cup for drinking hot chocolate as a gift for a young prince. He connected the earthly world to the divine world, honoring at the same time both a powerful prince and a creator god: “He who gave the open space its place, who gave Jaguar Night his place, was the Black-Faced Lord, the Star-Faced Lord.”[12]

The people were never utterly carried away by their philosophical musings, however. When the Maya population exceeded the number that their lands could provide for, or they needed a particular resource, they made brutal war upon their weaker neighbors. Thus, several kingdoms became powerful indeed, but time after time, they rose and fell. There was no single Maya state that dominated others permanently. In what scholars call the “classic” period, lasting until somewhere between 800 and 900, the decisive victory of a particular royal lineage often led to the construction of the monumental architecture that has stood the test of time; in the “postclassic” period most Maya kingdoms remained relatively small. Still many were indeed impressive, such as Chichen Itza in the middle of the Yucatán peninsula.

Meanwhile, to the west, other Olmec-influenced cultures took root and flourished. The civilization of Monte Alban, for example, near today’s Oaxaca, ruled over a great valley; the central government drew representatives from many different village councils. And in the central basin in the heart of Mexico, a city state called Cuicuilco flourished from about 200 BCE. It far exceeded its neighbors in power until the day in the first century CE when nearby Mount Xitle erupted and lava covered the town completely (the volcano did its job so thoroughly that Mexican archaeologists were forced to use dynamite to uncover even part the city.) Cuicuilco’s disappearance created a power vacuum, but this situation would not last. Nearly all the people of central Mexico had become corn planters by that time, and a number of them thus boasted impressive arts and crafts and a large population. One among them would surely rise to become a great state and take Cuicuilco’s place.[13]

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IT WAS A PLACE NOW CALLED Teotihuacan (Tay-oh-tee-WA-kahn) that did so. The city rose out of the vacuum to such heights of power that even centuries after it fell, its ruins were known to Shield Flower and her people. When her ancestors came down from the north, they paused in their passage over the ring of mountains that encircled the central valley at the heart of the region and looked down at the panorama before them. All who came this way did this, and to a person of ordinary experience, it was a truly awe-inspiring vista. The valley was actually a basin without drainage. The damp earth of its frequently soaked plains was perfect for farming, and the encircling sweep of mountains formed a literal barricade against the outside world. It seemed to be the very center of the earth, created as a sort of enchanted place. In the predawn darkness, the scattered villages were visible, for the women were already up, lighting their fires, and the points of light shone in the obscurity like clusters of stars in the midst of the blackness.

Perhaps that same month, or a bit later, the wanderers went to see the great ruins that lay in the northern half of the valley, ruins that were famous to everyone in their world and could be seen for miles. Shield

Flower probably never saw them herself, for girls did not get out much in times of war, but her father or grandfather certainly would have in the days before the troubles started, when the group's menfolk spent their time as wandering bands of hired mercenaries. Those ruins were a holy place. The earliest arrivals from the north had given them a name in their own language, *Teotihuacan*, by which they were known ever after. It tied the place to the divine, for it meant either "the place of people who become gods" or "the place of those who had great gods," depending on what one heard.[14]

The descendants of the newcomers later envisioned Teotihuacan as the birthplace of their world. They said it was the scene of their storied hero Nanahuatzin's courageous self-immolation. Sometimes they told the tale in great detail, saying that when the first four imperfect worlds, each with its own sun and living creatures, had all been destroyed, and the earth was left in darkness, the gods met together at Teotihuacan. "The gods gathered and took counsel at Teotihuacan. They said to each other, 'Who will carry the burden? Who will take it upon himself to see that there will be a sun, that there will be a dawn?'"[15] They had great faith in one called Tecuciztecatl (tekw-seez-TEK-at) who volunteered, and they offered him the honor of a forked heron feather headdress for his sacrifice and other gifts; they chose Nanahuatzin for his very ordinariness. When midnight arrived and the moment had come, Tecuciztecatl found he could not do the deed. It was the ordinary Nanahuatzin who shut his eyes and threw himself into the flames "in order that the dawn might break." He suffered, and in his bravery he became the sun. All the gods honored him; his face had become so bright that none could look upon it. Suddenly Tecuciztecatl, inspired by another's bravery, found the courage he needed and threw himself in. And he became the moon. Then two ordinary animals, the jaguar and the eagle, modest but brave, threw themselves in likewise and thus proved themselves great warriors. Teotihuacan, the people believed, was the site of the beginning of everything.

The first newcomers from the north who stumbled upon the city's inspirational ruins must have been stunned at what they saw. The old city lay between two great pyramids, each of which was aligned with a towering mountain behind it; each offered homage to the power, the divinity, of the earth itself. Between them lay a great avenue, and along each side ran the houses and schools and temples of a people long vanished. Turning down the side streets, which were laid out in a grid pattern, and wandering among the remnants of an earlier world, the Nahuas found hundreds of apartments opening onto little courtyards. They found painted walls and aqueducts and holes used as latrines. In the temple precinct, carved snakes slithered down grand stairways, and the heads of giant feathered serpents jutted out of the wall at eye level. These creatures were the pale color of rock, but colorful patches here and there demonstrated that they once had been brightly painted.

In the past, the hum of the city's life had been audible from a goodly distance, and in the time of Shield Flower, the ruins still told that story. Between the 200s and the 600s, in the wake of Cuicuilco's destruction by the volcano, the population of the twenty-square-mile city rose to an astounding fifty thousand. The most sumptuous households were for the nobility, but each neighborhood was impressive in its own right

and each had its own character and trade. The largest neighborhood was that of the obsidian craftsmen who worked with the volcanic material that resembled black glass, making spearheads, knives, statues, jewelry, and mirrors. Indeed, the city had been founded near an important obsidian mine, and when it was exhausted, the people found another mine seventy kilometers away and began to have the stone carried to them by slaves from conquered states. The potters were also known for their expertise. Like the obsidian products, their work was sent hundreds of miles away, where other goods were traded in exchange. In small enclaves in the city lived merchants from other regions, whose presence guaranteed the continuance of long-distance trade. In the remains of their cooking and their garbage pits, they left behind evidence of their foreign ways of doing things. All around the city, in a great circle, were the huts of the farming peoples and their irrigation ditches. The farmers did not feed the city all on their own, however; other food stuffs came in as payments of tribute from less powerful peoples. The city apparently even made war on or traded with some of the Maya kingdoms, far to the east, for the influence of Teotihuacan was later visible there.[16]

In about the year 500, the city's elites arranged for the founding of another city that Shield Flower's people later called Chalchihuitl (Chal-CHEE-weet), their word for the green stone that we call jade, at the site of a great gemstone mine far to the north. The site, in today's Zacatecas, in northern Mexico, is now called Alta Vista. A settlement had existed there for several hundred years, but it would be transformed into a place of grandeur. The ceremonial center was designed as a copy of that of Teotihuacan. The new city was charged not only with continuing to mine the precious jade but also with guarding the route to today's Arizona and New Mexico, from which turquoise and other goods came. The people who lived in Chalchihuitl did more than this, however. They had brought with them knowledge of the calendar in use at Teotihuacan, and there in the desert, they became expert astronomical observers. They aligned their built world with the celestial one, and people came from miles around to worship, just as they did at Teotihuacan.[17]

In around 650, a great crisis shook the world of all who lived under the sway of Teotihuacan. The working people—peasant farmers, or perhaps even slaves who had come as war captives—rose in revolt. They burned the palaces and the ceremonial precincts but left untouched the apartments of the ordinary folk. Archaeologists know that this was no foreign invasion: foreign enemies always try to destroy the common people's homes and livelihood, but they do not destroy the great monumental architecture they hope to acquire for themselves. It does not take much imagination to envision the kind of coercion that had to have taken place in Teotihuacan in order to maintain such a metropolis in a world without highways and railroad supply lines, or engines to aid construction projects. Add to this the fact that a major drought seems to have hit the area in this period, and the rebellion seems more like an event waiting to happen than a mystery in need of explanation.[18]

The fall of Teotihuacan created another great power vacuum. There was an almost inexhaustible supply of nomadic peoples living to the north who knew about the central valley due to the once-thriving long-

distance trade networks. And those nomads were armed and dangerous. The people of the hemisphere had been killing their game—and each other—with spears for many millennia. They had grown expert in the design and production of what Shield Flower would have called the *atlatl*, or spear thrower, a device that considerably extended the trajectory that an individual man would otherwise have been able to achieve. Not long before the fall of Teotihuacan, however, a new invention had made its way down from the Arctic: the bow and arrow. These had not existed when the early migrants made their way across the Bering Strait, and although they had since become ubiquitous in the Old World, the same had not occurred in the New World. Bows and arrows did not give a decided advantage over the atlatl in the hunt; they only offered definite benefits in warfare with other humans, as they could kill from a greater distance, and they allowed for stealth. It was probably for that reason that this type of technology had not been vigorously pursued in the sparsely populated New World, where it was far easier to wander away to unclaimed territory than to attack one's neighbors. By around 500 CE, however, bows and arrows had definitely reached the American Southwest and northern Mexico and had rapidly become an important element of every warrior's gear.[19]

Waves of conquering nomads descended into central Mexico. Presumably drought or power struggles (or both) drove them out. The migrants would have been mostly young men, traveling without women and children when they started out, so they could move with greater speed. They learned to pride themselves on their ability to keep moving without complaint, even in grueling heat. Because nothing tied them to one place, they could strike sedentary people living in farming villages with lightning speed and then disappear again into the desert, where they were impossible to trace. They could take the farmers' stored food, their weapons, their precious stones, their women. If the interlopers did stay long enough in one area to engage in major battles, they generally won what fights there were, thanks to their bows and arrows, which at first the other side did not have. Then, if they chose, the newcomers could set the terms for their future residence in the area.

The migrants imbued their bows and arrows with magic and told stories about them. The stories were passed down through the generations until Shield Flower heard them in the form of entertaining tall tales about her ancestors: "They lived armed with the bow and arrow. It is said that they had bee sting arrows, fire arrows, arrows that followed people. It is even said that their arrows could seek things out. When the people went hunting, an arrow of theirs could go anywhere. If it was hunting something above, they would see it come back with an eagle. If the arrow saw nothing up above, why then it came downwards towards something else, maybe a puma or a jaguar or a snake or a deer or a quail or a rabbit. The people would follow along to see what their arrow had brought back to them!"[20]

There were no horses in the Americas at the time. Ancient equine species had become extinct much earlier, and the horses that would later arrive with the Spaniards had not yet made their appearance. So we must not envision the Apache of later centuries, who came galloping into farming villages on their painted ponies. Among the migrants' most famous war leaders was a man who went by the name of Xolotl (SHO-

lot), according to the legends. He could never have appeared on horseback at the brow of a hill like Genghis Khan, the famed Mongolian. And yet, Xolotl was, in essence, a sort of Genghis Khan on foot. Wherever he went, he had the same bravado and aura of victory, though he maintained it on his own, in his own person, without the aid of a trusty steed. His nickname meant “Little servant boy,” an ironic moniker intended to underscore his deadly power.[21]

In fact, the analogy to Genghis Khan goes much deeper. The Mongols certainly won their battles, but it was high Chinese culture that ultimately absorbed the nomads, not the other way around. It was the Mongols who changed their own lifestyles, to become farmers and merchants; some of their sons learned to write. Likewise, it was central Mexico’s ancient culture that absorbed the incoming barbarians, as they were called (and as the latter proudly called themselves). The descendants of the newcomers eventually settled down and became corn planters; their children became adept in the complex ancient calendar of central Mexico.

In these same years, far to the north, in today’s New Mexico, the Anasazi built extraordinary temples and apartments along a nine-mile stretch of the San Juan River’s Chaco Canyon.[22] The intricate, three- and four-story brick buildings dazzle beholders even now; in their colorful heyday, when thousands of people came to attend the yearly religious ceremonies, they would have have been truly stunning. In the oldest part of the largest development (now called “Pueblo Bonito”), the builders guarded the precious jades and quetzal feathers that had come from distant Mexico. They aligned their buildings with the solar and lunar cycles, as did the people of Chalchihuitl, through whom the Chacoans traded with the Mexicans. After the collapse of Chaco, ever more migrants moved south, for in stories told around fires it was the south that was the stuff of legend to the people of the north.

Perhaps it was the south’s calendar that carried the greatest mystique. Although elements of phonetic writing had moved from the central isthmus eastward toward Maya country, joining with and influencing writing traditions there, the tradition of writing had not moved westward with any great force. What writing did exist in the region was largely logographic, consisting of symbolic pictures, without phonetic representation of speech of the type the Maya were creating. The complex calendar system, on the other hand, had made its way to nearly every village in central Mexico, and a particular version had taken root there. Every child kept track of the basic elements of the system, although only learned priests ventured into the realm of more esoteric branches of the science. There were two ongoing cycles of time. One was a solar calendar, which consisted of eighteen months of twenty days each, plus five blank or unnamed, frightening days at the end, for a total of 365 days. The other was a purely ceremonial calendar containing thirteen months of twenty days each, for a total of 260 days. The two streams of time ran parallel, so on any day, one knew where one was both in relation to the sun and ceremonially. On a much simpler level, one could

argue, we do something similar. We know what day of the year it is, which relates to our position in connection with the sun, and at the same time, we run a totally arbitrary, continuous seven-day series of Nordic gods' names, so we know it is Wednesday or Thursday as well.

The two cycles of time both returned to their starting point at the end of fifty-two solar years. Thus a "bundle" of fifty-two years, as they termed it, was as important to them as a century is today. To name each year, they tied it to the ceremonial calendar's most important number: thirteen. The fifty-two years were divided into four groupings of thirteen each, like this: One Reed, Two Flint-knife, Three House, Four Rabbit, Five Reed, Six Flint-knife, Seven House, Eight Rabbit, Nine Reed, Ten Flint-knife, Eleven House, Twelve Rabbit, Thirteen Reed, and then beginning again One Flint-knife, Two House, and so on. The priests and their people were proud of their knowledge of the calendar, revealed to them by the gods and aided by careful measurement and record-keeping.[23]

Or perhaps pleasure, not counting, lay at the crux of the southern realm's cultural prestige. The element of central Mexico's way of life that seems to have spread more easily than any other was the notion of a central town square surrounded by pyramidal structures, where people gathered and shared cultural events, and where there was almost always a ball court with slanted walls on two sides. There, athletes played before their people, using their hips to keep a rubber ball aloft, until finally they scored a point by causing it to hit the ground on the opposing team's side. Often there was a stone ring carved on each side of the court; only the most skillful could send the ball through such a hoop. The crowd yelled with excitement and frustration while watching the dramatic games. Later, when empires arose, there would be occasional games played to the death, with the losing team sacrificed. But it was not that rare practice that caused the ball courts to last for dozens of generations; rather it was the thrill of the game and the joy it brought. The town square with its pyramid temples and its associated ball court spread through Mexico and eventually northward as well.[24]

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DESPITE THE GLORY of the southern realms, Shield Flower prided herself on her descent from northern *Chichimecs*, from barbarians, more than on her descent from the culture of corn planters and calendar-keepers they had married into. At her death, she cried out as a warrior maiden. The history she had been taught—and which she saw herself as a part of—focused on the wanderers, not on those who had occupied the valley before their arrival. Dozens of those stories survive, written down in her language by the first generations of her people to learn a phonetic transcription system. Each story is a little different from the others, depending on whether it came from her people or a neighboring people, whether it was written down in the first or the third generation after contact with Europeans, whether it was taken from a teller who valued humor or one who preferred high drama. Taken all together, although they may contradict each other in certain details, they reveal a great deal about her world.[25]

Almost all the wanderers believed they came from the northwest, from Chicomoztoc, "the place of the Seven Caves." Some groups said their specific origin was called "Aztlan," a word of uncertain meaning, but it was probably meant to be "Place of the White Heron." Where was Aztlan? We don't know, and we never will. It was likely a mythical name, used to mask the fact that the ancestors had migrated multiple times. The newcomers spoke Nahuatl, which belongs to the Uto-Aztecan family of indigenous languages. These languages stretch from that of the Utes (originally in today's Utah) down to Nahuatl. In between these areas, other peoples, such as the Hopi, also speak a Uto-Aztecan language. Thousands of years ago, along this linguistic route, people in neighboring villages would have been able to understand each other, yet a Ute would not have been able to understand a Nahua. It is very possible, even probable, that some of the migrating populations originated as far away as Utah and that others originated in northern Mexico. No single person ever traveled the entire path. No one in Shield Flower's day could or would have carried memories of a childhood in Aztlan; it was a communal memory of a home or homes abandoned long ago that they carried with them.[26]

Like all humans, the Chichimec barbarians seem to have spent most of their time forming alliances with others and deciding when and where to break them. This was the core of their political strategy as they made their way to power in central Mexico. They were proud of their alliances, and although they knew it was the stuff of life, their stories reveal that they were also guilt-ridden about the rages and the schisms. In their narratives, the worst of these crises nearly always occurred at a previously utopian place called "Tula." There was in fact a real city of Tula that rose to prominence about three centuries after Teotihuacan's fall, not far to the north of that once-great site. But it was never anywhere near as grand as Teotihuacan, and its period of ascendancy was relatively brief. Only a few groups of the arriving Nahuas actually spent time there, yet nearly all the old Nahuatl histories mention the glorious Toltec people, with their breathtaking arts and crafts, and allude to a political crisis at Tula as if it were a foundational moment for every group that had a story to tell. This was because the word "Toltec" was used to describe any of the artisan peoples of central Mexico who had inhabited the area for many generations, and a reference to a place called "Tula" (meaning "a reedy place" or "a swampy piece of ground," like most of the central valley) was a symbolic way of speaking of any nomadic group's first important moment of settling down with locals. The tensions, it seems, were always horrendous.[27]

One of the first—perhaps the very first—of the Nahua histories that was recorded using the Roman alphabet opens in "Tula." There the barbarians, who already had some ties to civilized folk (and are thus called the "Tolteca Chichimeca"), set up housekeeping with the decorous Nonohualca, who had closer ties to the more ancient people of central Mexico. The Chichimec barbarians bossed the others around, but it was not exactly the Chichimecs' fault that they exhibited such rough, uncouth behavior. One of the more malicious gods had tricked them: he left a foundling for them to find and take pity on and raise as their own. They adopted him, having no way of knowing that the creature's sole purpose was to make trouble for

them. In a bawdy tale designed to catch the audience's attention, the 1540s storyteller described the ensuing crisis:

> When Huemac became a young man, he gave orders that the Nonohualca tend to his home. Then the Nonohualca said to him, "So be it, my lord. May we do what you desire." The Nonohualca came to tend to his home. And then he demanded women of them. He said to the Nonohualca, "You are to give me women. I order that the buttocks be four spans wide." The Nonohualca said to him, "So be it. Let us first seek where we can get one whose buttocks are four spans wide." Then they brought four women who had not yet known sexual pleasure. But as to size, they were not enough. He said to the Nonohualca, "They are not of the size I want. Their buttocks are not four spans wide. I want them really big." The Nonohualca left in great anger.[28]

The audience had to laugh, but as the story continued, matters only grew worse. This Huemac proceeded to do the most terrible thing one could do to a conquered people's women: rather than keeping them as minor wives, he sacrificed them. He tied the four of them to an obsidian table and left them there to await their fate. At this, the Nonohualca had had enough. Naturally, they blamed the Chichimecs who had taken Huemac in, and they launched an attack against them. In their rage, they were about to attain victory, when the Chichimecs suddenly begged them to desist. Their leader cried aloud, "Was *I* the one who sent for the women over whom we are fighting and making war?! Let Huemac die! *He* made us fight!" Working together, the two groups managed to defeat their preposterously evil enemy, but in a sense it was too late. They had killed too many of each other's sons. "The Nonohualca gathered together and talked. They said, 'Come, what kind of people *are* we? It seems we have done wrong. Perhaps because of it something may happen to our children and grandchildren. Let us go. Let us leave our lands…. We should leave here.'" The Nonohualca thus departed that very night. The rest of the history is an account of their own and the abandoned Chichimecs' efforts to find peace and stability without the aid of their lost allies.

Alone and vulnerable, the Chichimecs became wanderers again. And now the ultimate message of the Nahua histories becomes clear: they did not simply tell exciting stories of the forging of alliances and the dramatic crises that would break them apart. What Shield Flower really learned as a girl as she listened to the elders around the fire was that her people were destined to survive. Their creator would see to it. "Here he has placed us, our inventor, our creator," one of the historians had a character say. "Will we have to hide our faces, our mouths [that is, will we have to die]? What does he say, how does he test us, our inventor, our creator, he who is everywhere? He knows if we will be defeated here. What will he dispose? O Tolteca, may you have confidence! Gird yourselves up, take heart!" Shield Flower learned that her people deserved to survive because they loved life and fought for it, using their smarts, their love, and their ferocity, each in turn, as might be necessary. And their young people were expected to carry on in the same tradition.

In the story, the Tolteca Chichimeca eventually found themselves living as the servants of another, more powerful ancient tribe. They were demeaned; they suffered hunger; they could not worship their own gods properly. They had no weapons, no way of fighting back. But they cleverly devised a plan. They offered to take responsibility for handling the festivities of an upcoming religious holiday. Dancing was involved, dancing that required weapons. Their leader went to speak to the overlord chiefs, asking permission for his people to collect broken-down, cast-off weapons for use in the performance. He returned with the needed permission and addressed the young people of his community with tears in his eyes. Their people's fate was now in their hands. "O my children, O Tolteca, go to it with a will!" he cried out. The story continued:

> Then they dispersed and went to do the borrowing, saying to the [powerful] town's residents, "Please lend us your old weapons, some of your old shields and war clubs—not your good equipment—if you gave us that we would break it."
>
> "What will you do with them? What do you want them for?"
>
> "Listen, we are going to perform for the rulers. It's for when we will dance in the homes, the households, of your town."
>
> "Maybe you want our good weapons?"
>
> "No, my lord, just your old weapons that lie fallen where you throw out the ash water. Let's fix them up, and with them we will entertain the rulers and lords."
>
> Then the town residents said, "Fine. Here and there our old weapons, our old shields, our old clubs, are lying around. Gather them up. Ha, we don't even need our new weapons." So then the people wandered everywhere, looking in the various houses and patios. Wherever they went, there was eating and drinking going on. The residents spoke to them. They just belittled them and laughed at them. But the Chichimeca, they prepared themselves.

They worked night after night, patiently, painstakingly gluing, sewing, and repairing, rendering the feathered, painted shields and spears truly beautiful. At last they were ready to launch their bid for their people's freedom—which of course they won.

Each group of Nahuas had their own traditions and stories that were variations on this theme of courage and survival. Shield Flower's people were called the Mexica (Me-SHEE-ka). They shared versions of the tales common to almost all the Nahuas, but they also told stories unique to their own group. They said, for example, that after Shield Flower died, the survivors among her people were given land by the king of Culhuacan, in exchange for which they had to act as his servants. He entertained himself by giving them impossible tasks and threatening them with dire punishment if they failed to perform them. They had to move a chinampa (a farmable field built in swampy ground by constructing a basketry-style fence and filling it with earth—nothing could be less movable); they had to capture a deer without piercing its hide or

breaking its bones; they had to defeat an enemy unarmed. In each case, they managed the task, either through trickery or, in the latter example, the use of extraordinary violence. (After they ambushed the designated enemies, they cut off their left ears to prove that they had done so and placed them in a basket.) Each time they returned to the king of Culhuacan with the job done, he and his people marveled and asked themselves, "Who *are* these Mexica?!"[29]

At last Coxcox, the king of the Culhua, determined to be done with his unwelcome guests. He said that they might build a temple to their own god, but all the while he intended to retract permission and then have his people destroy them for their impudence. Hidden in the bushes, he watched as they prepared the dedication of their temple. Suddenly the people's god chose to intervene. "While the sacrifice was being made, the Mexica and Coxcox heard the sky howling. At that an eagle came down, alighting on the peak of the temple's thatch roof, just as if he had his nest there." Coxcox knew then that he could not destroy these people, who had the blessing of a powerful divinity. So he banished them. And they survived more wanderings.

Not so many years after 1299, in the mid-1300s, an eagle alighted before the Mexica where they were camping; they decided that the eagle wanted them to build a permanent town there. This was no longer the world of legend. The campsite was very real, and the people probably saw at least one veritable eagle land there, a bird they revered. They were motivated to find a good reason to stay. They were on an island in a great lake, a place no one else had claimed, probably because the land was so marshy. There grew in abundance the prickly pear cactus, with its edible fruit, the *nochtli*, being especially nutritious. And there were fish to catch, water fowl to shoot, and algae to gather. It was a lively, colorful world. The Mexica looked around and decided the site could definitely be made to work. The town they built would be called *Tenochtitlan*,[30] and it would soon have a tlatoani, or king, and be beholden to no one else. This was what Shield Flower's father had attempted to orchestrate years before, but he had acted prematurely. A generation or two later, in the mid-1300s, the Mexica were better prepared to defend themselves, and this time they began with no rash implicit declarations of war against their neighbors.

If only Shield Flower could have known! Her beleaguered, wandering, utterly exhausted people were to find some peace even before the close of the old age she should have had. On their island home, her people began to transform themselves into the great figures she had wanted them to be. Yet perhaps it is just as well that Shield Flower could not know with certainty what heights they were to attain. Had she known of the future good, she would have known of the future agony as well. She had to die as all do, knowing only that to posterity the fates would undoubtedly deal both blessings and trauma; she had to die as all do, hoping that those who came after her would demonstrate the same determination to be strong that she herself had shown.