***Tree Girl* by Ben Mikaelsen** Ch2

I think my youth allowed me to ignore the possibility of war, although I, too, had seen more military trucks passing by me on the highway as I walked to school each day down in the valley. Patrols of soldiers had begun crossing the hillsides, sometimes stopping in our canton to ask questions. Guerrillas without uniforms also questioned us.

Both sides used the same words. "You must not help the enemy," they warned us. "If you do, then you are also the enemy."

"When did you see the enemy, and how many were there?" they asked us. "You are not sharing any food with the enemy, are you?"

"What direction was the enemy going, and what weapons did they carry?"

We could have easily answered these questions, because each day we worked near the fields, not always looking at the ground. We saw guerrilla and troop movements, and often we knew which way they travelled and where they stayed at night. But we learned to say nothing. If we helped either side, that made us somebody else's enemy.

And yes, we heard that some cantons took payments in trade for information. Some even hid guerrillas in their homes. This carried great risks. We heard of people disappearing from their homes in the middle of the night.

I saw all the same things my parents saw, but I doubted that the changes they feared would lead to war. I wanted to believe that the troop movements were normal and that the guerrillas were simply a new political party. Always in our country there were political problems. Political parties in Guatemala were never above using threats, abductions, and assassinations. But that didn't mean war.

Maybe I refused to be concerned because my quinceañera celebration was near and I wanted nothing to wreck my special day. Each day teased me with hope and anticipation, until I was ready to burst with excitement. So I chose to ignore the worry in my parents' voices. It was simply the fretting of adults, I told myself.

Finally April arrived, and one week before mv birthday, Papi walked with me to each home in our canton and announced, "Next Tuesday my daughter, Gabriela, she will be fifteen years old. Will you please join us on that special day to celebrate her quinceañera?"

All week we readied ourselves for the celebration. Uncle Raphael provided a pig to be roasted, and Papi arranged to have a priest come to the canton. The twins, Antonio and Julia, were eleven years old and handled the arrival of my quinceañera differently.

Julia came to me and announced, "I'll keep the floor and the yard swept, I'll tie the dogs up, and I'll watch Alicia and Lidia. That will help you to prepare." True to his nature, my brother Antonio helped with anything if asked. He was honest and hardworking like his twin sister, but he was a timid person and feared taking risks. He would laugh and clap when another boy did something mischievous like holding on to a cow's tail, but he never allowed himself to grab hold.

Though he was shy, I knew Antonio was proud of me. "You are the first sister of mine to have a quinceañera," he kept saying.

My brother Lester was thirteen and the laziest of our family. He also was the most impulsive and short­ tempered. He announced again and again, "I'll make sure nobody forgets anything."

I knew Lester's voice held not one grain of sincerity. Lester always disappeared at the first hint of work. Two days before the celebration, Jorge needed help butchering the pig that Uncle Raphael gave us. He found Lester throwing cornhusks at the dogs. "Would you help me to dip the pig in boiling water and scrape the skin?" he asked.

Suddenly Lester held his stomach with his hands. (18)

“I wish I could help you, but something I ate is making me sick. I better go lie down."

Papi heard Lester's excuse and laughed. "You aren't my child," he joked. "You were sired by a sloth."

We all laughed, which only made Lester angry.

"I'll help you," I offered.

"I need someone big and strong to help me boil the pig," Jorge said, knowing that I resented such word.

I could do anything Jorge could, and more. I could weave, pick herbs, and climb tees higher than he could. Jorge's teasing came mostly from his disappointment and frustration that Mami and Papi had chosen their oldest daughter and not him, their oldest child, as the one who would attend school. Papi needed Jorge's help in the fields during planting and harvest, and Jorge was sixteen and as strong as a small ox.

I waited until Jorge could find no one else to help him, then grudgingly he allowed me to go with him to where the big barrel of water heated over the fire.

"I'll kill the pig," he announced, as if that made him more important.

I didn't mind. I helped to hold the struggling pig, but I looked away when Jorge cut its throat with his machete. Once the pig lay dead, we dipped it into the boiling water to make the hair shave easily. As I helped to gut and dress the animal, an awkward silence hung between Jorge and me. I broke it by saying, “Maybe next year you, too, can attend school."

"Mami and Papi don't send me to school," Jorge answered, "because they know I'm already smart "

I knew how much Jorge wished to attend school, so I resisted making any clever reply. Jorge had a good heart, and he had come to my rescue many times. So I ignored his words and offered only a quiet smile. This, however, probably bothered him worse than any sharp words I might have spoken.

All afternoon I helped with the pig until it was scraped and ready to cook. By some miracle, Lester's stomachache disappeared when he saw we were done.

The day before my quinceañera I found myself getting short with my youngest sisters, Lidia and Alicia. They (20) kept wandering away, and then everybody had to stop working to look for them.

"Julia, you promised to watch them," Mami scolded.

Julia nodded obediently. "Yes, Mami, from now on they'll stay close."

When Julia returned with the girls, I heard her say to them, "This morning saw a big dog walking beside the fields. He had a little girl's dress hanging from his teeth, and he looked hungry." Lidia and Alicia ran to my side and remained close for protection the rest of the afternoon.

The night before the celebration, Antonio and Julia made decorations with flowers and cornhusks. I washed and tried on the colorful huipil I had woven specially for the day. Julia began following me around and braided my hair whenever I stopped moving for even a few seconds. Little Alicia insisted on helping. I knew that the next morning, it would be Mami who braided my hair before the ceremony.

I spent much of that last evening helping Mami cook up fresh tortillas. I also helped her kill six chickens and make chicken soup (21) as we cooked, Alicia stayed near, offering suggestions. "I think you should do it this way," she insisted, pushing her fat little hands into whatever we did.

''Thank you for the help, my bebe," Mami kept saying.

Lidia sat politely by the table and asked questions. "What would happen if you didn't put water in the tortillas? What would happen if the soup boiled too long?" Mami patiently answered each question. "Can you teach a boy to cook?" I asked.

Mami smiled kindly and said, "Love doesn't wear only a corte. It's easy to mix a recipe and to light a fire, but cooking with love is what makes food good."

Love was what Mami gave me, not only when she patiently struggled to teach me to cook but also when we cleaned a chicken or worked grinding corn for tortillas. She taught me love when she taught me to weave the brightly colored huipil I would soon wear as a young woman. Love is the lesson she taught me as each day began and before each day ended. She also taught me kindness. "Kindness is more (22) important than love," she reminded me. "Kindness is the sharing of love." Even with the feeding of the pigs, Mami taught me to be kind.

That last evening before my birthday, the slaughtered and dressed pig and placed over the coals to be roasted by young men who styed up all night and shared both the turning of the pig and the drinking of great quantities of boj. The boj helped to pass the long hours of darkness. I called it "song juice," because it made the young men sing boisterous songs of lost love and of brave adventures. Jorge, being sixteen now, insisted this year on helping with the roasting of the pig.

Mami reluctantly agreed. "I'll beat the hair off your head with a stick if I catch you drinking any boj she warned him.

"l won't drink any,'' Jorge promised, but I saw him sneaking quick gulps when he thought no one watched. I think Mami saw him, too, but she knew that helping the young men roast the pig and drinking a little boj was as much a part of growing up and coming of age as my quinceañera. (23)

I don't think I slept at all the night before the celebration. "What if the priest doesn't come?" I fretted to Mami when I first arose. "What if the pig isn't finished cooking? What if my teacher from the school, Manuel Quispe; can't find our home? He's never been here before."

"Everything will be okay," Mami comforted me. As Mami promised, by noon my teacher, Manuel Quispe, arrived. The priest arrived on horseback a short time later. The young men announced that the pig was close to being cooked, and soon everyone from the canton and the surrounding countryside arrived. I was so glad to see Manuel come to my ceremony. I gave him a big hug, although that probably wasn't proper for a young woman on her quinceañera.

All of the students at the school loved Manuel Quispe. He was Mayan Indian, an Indio like the rest of us. He wasn't like the many Latino teachers who thought they were better than the Indios. He was a big man, big like a gentle horse, and his kindness made me more comfortable with him than I was with my own grandfather. Manuel made me curious about new things, and always he made me feel that I was learning, not only from him, but also from my own curiosity.

I was grateful that Manuel had made the two-hour hike up from the valley as I was for clear skies on the day of my quinceañera. The celebration would be held in an open field beside our canton instead of in the church two kilometers away. As the ceremony started, the priest spoke in Spanish--like most priests, he was Latino and didn't know our Mayan language of Quiche. We sat on planks laid across stumps of wood to form benches. The young men who had cooked the pig rested half asleep under the trees, paying the price for their lack of sleep and excess boj.

Papi did not let Jorge off so easily, insisting that he sit in the front row with the rest of us. Each time Jorge's head nodded, Papi elbowed him sharply in the ribs.

The children of the canton squirmed and fidgeted during the ceremony, knowing only that later there would be food and candy and the breaking of a piñata. One boy chased his sister under the nearby trees as his mother scolded him in a loud whisper. The priest finished his long sermon by solemnly (25) asking me to kneel. As he touched my head, he said, ''Gabriela, you're now a woman. No longer can you think as a child or follow the path of a child. Life now bids you to share a woman's responsibility, not only to this canton but also to your brothers and sisters and parents, and someday to your own husband and family."

I glanced over my shoulder at the older boys, who watched and smiled at me. On the day of my quinceañera, I felt beautiful not only on the inside but also on the outside. Maybe one of the boys who watched me kneel in front of the priest harbored a secret wish to someday be my husband. I glanced also at Manuel Quispe, and he, too, smiled at me. I felt my face blush.

When the priest finished, elders from our canton rose and prayed in Quiche, chanting, burning their candles, and swinging their pails of incense and the pine-resin we called trementina. Our religion was partly Catholic and partly the beliefs of our Mayan ancestors. God to us was bigger than the God that Catholics believed existed. We felt the presence of God in all things.

After the ceremony, the feasting began. For most (26) of the afternoon everyone shared the abundant food that good fortune and hard work had brought to us. Late in the day, before the dancing began, Papi presented the priest with a small gift of money and gave him some roasted pig to carry home with him. Papi gave me a set of earrings with stones as big and red as rooster eyes.

Manuel Quispe left before the dancing so that he could arrive home before dark. "You've made me so proud today," he said, embracing me with his big arms. "A teacher isn't supposed to have favorite students, but, if I had to have a favorite,” Manuel winked at me. ". . . . Enjoy your evening, Gabriela."

He pointed up. "Dance one dance with me up there in the clouds."

"I will," I said, watching him walk from our canton. Papi then began playing his marimbas, and every woman, man, and child in the canton joined arms, singing and laughing and twirling in circles, continuing to dance even as dusk faded to night. Each of the boys took turns dancing with me, even those who had in the past called me names. On that night, I was not (27) Goat Face. That night I was a beautiful princess.

More boj was brought out for the adults to drink, and everybody kept eating and dancing, including the old people who were helped to their feet and moved in circles for short dances. I walked out beside the clearing and closed my eyes. Alone in the dark, danced one dance with Manuel up among the clouds that floated like ghosts over our celebration. And when I finished that dance, I imagined Manuel kissing me gently on the forehead.

"Here, Gabi!" shouted some of the boys, bringing me a small glass. "You're fifteen now and old enough to try boj."

Hesitantly I sipped from the glass, tasting the foul liquid for the first time. My mouth burned and my ears warmed. Blushing, I handed the glass back to the boys.

"The rest is for you;" I said, thanking them with a smile. I also took time to thank each of the elders for sharing my special day with me.

"Of all the young people in the canton, you're our favorite," Señora Alvarez kept repeating. "You'll do great things with your life." (28)

"Oh, I think you say that to everyone," I kidded her. "Oh, no," she insisted. "You have dreams." That night, I was so proud to be Gabriela Flores.

The future was as bright as a glowing sunrise. No one could ask for better parents or family than I had, and who could ask for a teacher more kind and wise than Manuel Quispe? On this day I had become a woman, so I danced late into the night, even allowing myself a few more sips of boj.

At that moment I looked toward my future like a child watching the smooth surface of a great river. I did not realize that there were powerful currents ready to pull at anyone who tried to cross to the other side. That night, celebrating in the canton, I sat only beside the shore of life and skipped rocks and threw flowers into the ripples, making childish wishes. For many long hours I danced and enjoyed myself. But then Papi suddenly stopped playing the marimbas, and the dancing ceased as if by command. The sudden silence made all of us tum to look. Eight soldiers in uniform appeared like ghosts out of the darkness, their rifles pointed toward us. (29)