

## GODBURNED by Karen Jordan Allen

Karen Jordan Allen lives in Maine with her husband and daughter. Her fiction has appeared in such venues as *Black Gate* and *The First Heroes: New Tales of the Bronze Age*. She has worked as a Quaker pastor, an art school admissions office manager, a high school Spanish teacher, and a pianist. She has a master's degree in religion from Yale. At Yale, she tells us, she took an anthropology course on "Ancient Mexican Thought" with archaeologist Michael Coe. "This sparked my interest in the Aztecs. Some years later I spent a week in Mexico City, where I visited the sites mentioned in 'Godburned,' got a sunburn in the rain, and watched a young man put his hand on the Sun Stone." These experiences all provided inspiration for her first story for Asimov's.

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*Shouts and triumphant howls. Woody thumps, as if clubs struck trees. More shouts, the low and heavy rumble of many feet pounding the earth.*

*Pearl tried to push herself up, but a large wooden disk strapped to one arm impeded her. She fell back to the ground and tried to think.*

*Was this it? This noisy place?*

*She hadn't expected to be conscious of anything. At most, a bright light, a soundless void. Never had she dreamed it would be like this—raucous, dusty, dimly lit. Perhaps she had been wrong not to believe in hell.*

*She pushed herself up again with her free arm. A coarse grit shifted under her fingers and dug into her knees.*

*Must be the medication, she thought. Goddamned stuff. I told them not to give me any more. I told them to let me die.*

*A thin light shone, too pale to permit her to distinguish colors. Gray earth, gray skin, gray round object bound to her left arm. No, this couldn't possibly be it. Could it?*

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Pearl squinted into the crooked hotel-room mirror and winced. Pink—God, had her face ever been such a flaming pink? Or she so stupid? Yes, clouds had blanketed the sky. Yes, rain had spit on her while she stood atop the Pyramid of the Sun. But she was in Mexico, in the *tropics*, for pity's sake. She should have known better than to leave her sunscreen in her room.

She parted her gray hair carefully to cover the painful scarlet strip on her

scalp, and rubbed a little SPF-30 cream into the new white part and the roasted wrinkles around her eyes. *I looked like a goddamned steamed crab*, she thought. She turned from the mirror in disgust. Not that she really minded about her looks. She glanced down at her travel-worn sandals and the ugly crossed toes that protruded from them. It had been a long time since she'd cared much about her appearance. But being thought stupid, even by Mexicans she would never see again—that would rankle. *Gringa estúpida*, they would think. *Gringa idiota. Viejita gringa idiota*.

But she had no time to waste anticipating insults on this, her last full day in Mexico City, with the Great Temple of the Aztecs and the anthropology museum yet to visit. They were the heart of her trip, her reasons for coming, and she was annoyed with herself for leaving them for last. Of course there had been distractions: the shrine of Guadalupe, the Frida Kahlo museum, the markets, the pyramids. She had even visited the great central plaza, the Zócalo, to see the cathedral and the National Palace, right around the corner from the Temple. Why had she neglected the Temple itself? Was she afraid of being disappointed? Or just saving the best for last?

*Oh, don't kid yourself, Pearl*, she scolded. *You just don't like being reminded of all that death*. She had read most of the *Florentine Codex* and knew all about Aztec sacrificial death: the cutting of hearts, the flaying of skins, even the killing of children—

She shook herself, plopped her faded canvas tote-bag onto the bed, and checked her day's supplies. A bottle of water. Two juice boxes. Granola bars, raisins, a stale peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich, a roll she had risked buying at a bakery. Surely Moctezuma could not exact revenge with a roll. She had wondered, when she opened her suitcase full of food and drink in customs, what the young man there would think. But he had gazed on the contents only briefly, his face expressionless.

"I suppose I'm being silly," she said out loud. And in her mind she could hear Burney say, *Silly woman*, his imagined voice so clear it sent a pang through her heart. Poor Burney, Mexico had not been kind to him on their honeymoon here, years ago. They had both been sick, but he had suffered more than she. A week together in a Mexican hotel little better than this, taking turns in the bathroom—it hadn't been much of a start for a marriage.

*Got sick a few days ago*, he had written from Korea, not long before he was killed. *Stomach bug. Pretty bad, but Mexico was worse*.

She inspected the roll for dirt and insect parts, and returned it to her bag. She wished she hadn't taken half a century to come back to Mexico. After the disastrous honeymoon, she had vowed to return to see everything she had missed, everything she had longed to see since studying Spanish in college with the young and dashing

Señor Rueda—*Raúl Moctezuma Rueda Tinoco*. She whispered his name and smiled, remembering his sculpted chin, his outstretched hand, his eagle's gaze that searched the air as he shared the words of Nezahualcoyotl, the poet-king of Texcoco:

\* \* \* \*

*Cuix oc nelli nemohua in tlalticpac?*

*An nochipa tlalticpac*

*Zan achica ye nican.*

\* \* \* \*

Perhaps we truly live on the earth?

Not on earth forever,

Just for a moment here.

\* \* \* \*

Then Señor Rueda had lowered his arm, leaned on Pearl's desk, and looked into her eyes. "I once recited this poem with my hand on the Sun Stone," he said quietly. "It is a very special thing, to touch the Sun Stone."

From that moment Pearl had longed to visit Mexico. Señor Rueda lent her a book of Aztec poetry, and she read it aloud, over and over, even stumbled through the original Nahuatl. Then he gave her a history of the Aztecs and a travel book, and she imagined herself strolling the streets of Texcoco or Tenochtitlan, bargaining in the plazas, approaching the Sun Stone with her hand outstretched.

But she could not possibly have imagined being here today, seventy-three and retired, her life largely behind her.

Retired. Re-tired—tired again. What an awful, dull word. She didn't want to be retired. She preferred the Spanish word, *jubilado*, which looked quite jolly. "Jubilant," she always thought. That was what she wanted to be. The jubilant retiree.

Maybe she should join the Peace Corps. Could the Peace Corps use an old but jubilant school librarian?

She grunted. She could just see herself trotting through the jungle with her suitcases of granola bars and juice boxes.

Now, what had she been doing? She scanned the hotel room, frowning. Ah! Her bag. But as she reached for it, the floor shifted under her feet. She grabbed the bed's footboard. The light bulb overhead swung gently, as if someone had breathed on it.

The floor steadied. A tremor, that was all.

Pearl breathed deeply to calm her thudding heart. In old Tenochtitlan, she had read, the air echoed with whoops as those who felt a tremor warned neighbors who might not have noticed. Then parents lifted their children by the neck so the earthquake would not stunt their growth, and everyone sprinkled their faces and their belongings with water.

Pearl stifled an impulse to rush to the bathroom and splash her face. She zipped her bag, adjusted her voluminous denim skirt, and checked to make sure the pouch she had pinned inside was invisible under the folds. Then she squared her shoulders, opened the door, and found herself nose-to-nose with Sofía, the plump-faced maid who cleaned her room each day.

The young woman's eyes widened. Pearl detected a flicker of shock, then amusement, and her sunburned cheeks grew even hotter.

*"Buenos días, Sofía,"* she said, trying to sound nonchalant.

The young woman inclined her head. *"Buenos días, señora."*

*"¿Cómo están las niñas?"* Pearl asked. Sofía had brought her two little girls to the hotel one day, and Pearl had played with them while their mother cleaned the room.

*"Muy bien, gracias, señora."* Sofía beamed. *"Hablan mucho de la muy amable abuela norteamericana."*

The very kind American grandmother. Pearl smiled, remembering how the girls had shrieked with laughter when she attempted to teach them the hokey-pokey. Her granddaughter, Jasmine, had loved the silly dance at their age. Now Jasmine was nearly grown and lived an ocean away in Botswana, but on their all-too-rare visits they still did the hokey-pokey together until they were breathless.

Pearl nodded to Sofía. *"Las niñas son preciosas."* Truly precious. She tried to edge past the young woman and into the hallway.

But Sofía raised a hand to her own cheek. *"Señora, ¿necesita algo?"*

*"No, gracias, muy amable."*

Sofía looked concerned. But she stepped back. “*Que lo pase bien, señora.*” Have a good day.

Pearl escaped down the hallway to the creaky elevator.

Outside the hotel, high gray clouds arched across the sky, masking the perilous Mexican sun. On the sidewalks, vendors set up tables, or arranged shoes and cell phones on blankets. Intrepid children rushed into traffic at stoplights to hawk snacks. On the corner, a woman tempted passersby with a glass of fresh orange juice, a just-peeled mango. Pearl’s mouth watered. One more day of bottled water and juice boxes, she told herself, just one more day.

Her legs ached from climbing the pyramids, but she walked briskly, to fend off pickpockets—across the busy Paseo de la Reforma, through the Parque Alameda Central, past the Palacio de Bellas Artes where she had seen the Ballet Folklórico. She slowed as she passed the elegantly tiled exterior of a restaurant. She was so tired of granola bars, and she hadn’t had salad or vegetables in a week. Maybe she would take a chance and eat here tonight.

She shifted her bag to ease the knot of pain in her shoulder and walked on.

Finally the great expanse of the Zócalo, the city’s main plaza, opened before her. The National Cathedral rose at her left, the National Palace stood guard across the plaza and to the right. Between them, a side street passed the remains of the once towering and bloody Temple.

Pearl walked into the plaza until she could glimpse the ruins. She stopped and stared. Chills pulsed through her. The Templo Mayor, center of the Aztec universe. The Spaniards had leveled most of it, and what was left had lain buried for centuries. Then not even thirty years ago, electric company workers uncovered an enormous stone relief of a dismembered Aztec goddess, and the excavation of the Temple began.

Pearl remembered her excitement when she had learned of the discovery. She had pulled out her old class notes, pored over museum guides, and read rare books that she could get only through interlibrary loan. The artwork, the design, the scale of the Temple fascinated her. But no matter how much she read, the sacrifices continued to distress her. She knew the reasons, the myths, the stories. But they did nothing to dispel the deep disturbance in her heart: Why did so many die here? Especially the children?

Something tugged at her skirt—she looked down at a tiny round-faced boy, his cheeks gray with dirt. Five fat fingers reached toward her, and his gaze fixed on her face as if she were a saint. Pearl caught her breath, barely stopped herself from patting his head, caressing his hair. His hand stretched insistently, his face shone.

She dug into her purse and found a few coins and the roll. She bent and put the coins into his palm.

His fingers closed over them, barely large enough to hold them all. The other hand snatched the roll.

She knelt, and he took a step back.

“¿Cómo te llamas?” she asked.

His mouth made a little round *o*. She repeated the question.

“*Rubén*,” he whispered. A smile lit his face. Then he ducked his head and ran. She glimpsed a double cowlick of black hair as he darted away. A double cowlick, just like her son, Philip. She knew what that had meant to the Aztecs: children with double cowlicks had been sacrificed to the god Tlaloc to bring rain.

Her imagination obliged her with the sudden vision of a group of weeping children stumbling toward their deaths—no, they had ridden singly on litters, she reminded herself, trying to turn the vision off as if it were a disagreeable video.

But the unwanted images haunted her as she strode briskly toward the Temple. Children, bought from their mothers, doomed by double cowlicks or unfortunate birth signs. The more they cried, the more rain would fall.

She shook her head. The adults, the god-impersonators and warriors, all believed—presumably—that the gods required their blood. Perhaps they even welcomed a sacred manner of death.

But the children—what could they possibly have understood? And the poor mothers. How had they borne seeing their children led off to die? From the moment she had held the already fatherless Philip in her arms, she had known that she would defend him with her life. Surely Aztec mothers had felt no differently.

At the gate into the Temple’s archaeological zone, the woman who took her entry fee offered her a guided tour in her choice of languages. Pearl declined. No living person could answer the questions that mattered to her now. She stepped onto the narrow pathway that led through the ruins, walked slowly, and let the questions come: Whose hands had cut those black and red stones? Whose had mortared them into place? Had they been proud of their work? And those snake heads that now eyed the cathedral—what sculptor had carved them? Who had painted them? Had the artists seen their work spattered with blood when those who had given their hearts to the gods rolled from the altar to the bottom of the steps?

Pearl shook the image from her mind, turned a corner, and came upon a tour group gazing earnestly into the depths of the Temple. Two shrines rested there, open

to the air after centuries in darkness. Under them, she knew, lay two more, still older, and still unexcavated. The original Temple had been enlarged six times, with each successive Temple built on top of the older ones. Now only these early shrines survived.

Pearl looked into the double temple's heart. On the left, a reclining figure with lifted head, a chacmool, stared into the sky with white-painted eyes. His reddened hands still clutched the carved vessel that had received hearts and blood to nourish the rain god, Tlaloc. On the right, a rectangular chunk of stone marked the spot where priests had split human chests for Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird-on-the-Left, mighty god of war and manifestation of the sun. No statue of Huitzilopochtli had survived the Conquest, Pearl had read, though some might lie hidden still in caves, safe from European invaders.

Or Euro-American tourists.

She turned from the unwavering gaze of the chacmool and studied the tour group. They ranged from toddlers to old men, not a blonde head among them. The young men in front leaned against the rail as if their old empire pulled at them from the past.

How different for them, Pearl thought. To be able to say, my ancestors did this. My ancestors killed here—and died here. My ancestors built Tenochtitlan and conquered the Valley and met Cortés.

Pearl swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. They had every right to stand here. But what right had she, the child of invaders, to gape at the remains of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli as if they were broken toys?

A girl of six or so glanced at her, clapped a hand over her mouth, and buried her face in her mother's skirt. Pearl grimaced and turned away. The sunburn must be Huitzilopochtli's revenge, she decided, his and Tlaloc's. Tlaloc sent rain so that unwary visitors forgot their sunscreen, then Huitzilopochtli commanded the sun to scorch their faces through the clouds.

She leaned toward the double shrine.

“Okay, you got me,” she whispered. The chacmool did not respond. But a cloud of butterflies danced through her line of sight and disappeared behind the stones.

She did not remember until she stood in the adjacent museum that dead warriors and sacrificial victims were believed to turn into butterflies and hummingbirds after bearing the sun on its rounds for four years. Was that why butterflies flitted about the old temple complex?

Pearl impatiently dismissed the thought. Turning to the display cases, she moved from artifact to artifact, reading all the labels like a good librarian. But when her stomach began to rumble and her feet to ache, she went back outside, found a seat on a stone wall, and pulled out her sandwich. A gang of children wandered past, begging, and she gave them all her granola bars.

Yet even as life moved around her, she thought only of death—the flowery death, the Aztecs had called it. Did consciousness end abruptly, she wondered, with the knife thrust into the chest, or did the victims watch the priests lift up their beating hearts? Did they feel their bodies begin the long roll down the Temple steps? Perhaps the old men had sat here, where she now sat, waiting to carry the dead away, dismember them, and distribute them for ritual meals.

She looked at her sandwich, suddenly not the least bit hungry.

“Mrs. Richards?”

Pearl jumped.

A paunchy man in a white shirt and straw hat, unmistakably American, leaned toward her and held out his hand. “Joe Werner. The bus to the pyramids?”

She shook his hand. “Yes, of course.” Now she remembered—his thick wrists, the enormous black opal on his ring, the way he had overflowed his half of the bus seat. They hadn’t talked much, and she had quickly outdistanced him and his wife at the ruins. Last she’d seen him, he’d been surrounded by locals trying to sell him ceramic whistles and “authentic” artifacts.

Pearl hoped he would just say something polite and move on. But he sank onto the wall next to her and sat panting. His shirt was drenched from his underarms to his waist. She noted with satisfaction that his nose was bright red. So she wasn’t the only one who’d forgotten the sunscreen.

He smiled at her. “Sun got you, too.”

She winced. “Unfortunately.”

“That your lunch?”

They both looked at Pearl’s flattened peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. For once Pearl was glad for her sunburn; it disguised a blush handily. “I was sick last time I was in Mexico,” she said. “Really sick. So this time I brought my own food.”

“You just got to know where to eat,” Joe said. “The best hotels. Everything cooked. No ice. Never had a problem.”

“Good for you. *E. coli*’s a nasty bug.”

Joe took off his hat and rubbed what was left of his white hair. “Yup. Plenty of *E. coli* in Korea. And worse. But I was young then. Gotta be more careful these days.”

Korea. So he’d fought there, like Burney. Pearl glanced away, ashamed now that she had wished herself free of him. She suppressed an impulse to ask if he had known a Burney Richards. What were the chances? Thousands had fought in Korea. But she smiled, determined to be friendly.

“Is your wife with you?” she asked.

Joe grunted and nodded toward some stalls. “Over there. Loves to bargain. What she came for.” He shrugged. “I came for this.” He gazed across the Temple ruins, his eyes narrowed and focused, as if he were looking for something.

Pearl studied him, as he studied the ruins. “You came to see the Temple?”

Joe glanced at her sideways. His mouth spread in a sheepish smile. “Yup. Boyhood dreams and all that. Always wanted to be an archaeologist. Saw those Indiana Jones movies a hundred times. But it was the Aztecs I loved. Or whatever they called themselves.”

“Mexico,” Pearl said, pronouncing the *x* as a soft *sh*, the way Señor Rueda had taught her.

“That’s it. Mexico. I guess you’ve done some reading.”

Pearl nodded. “I had a Spanish professor who talked about his Aztec—*Mexica*—ancestors. He loaned me books, taught me a little Nahuatl. So I always wanted to come to Mexico. But the first time, well—” She shrugged and grimaced. “After I got sick, I hardly made it out of the hotel. But when I learned they’d found the Temple, I knew I’d have to see it.”

Joe grinned. “Me, too. When I was a kid, I read whatever I could get hold of. Wasn’t much. Some great books were getting published just when I got drafted. The ones that Spanish priest wrote.”

“The *Florentine Codex*?” Pearl couldn’t believe that Joe had heard of it.

“Yup. Read the first volume. Left for the Army.” Joe fanned his face with his hat.

Pearl tried to imagine him as a retired archaeologist, and failed. “So what happened?”

He leaned forward, propped his arms on his knees. “Don’t know. Life, I guess.” He sighed. “Or death. Can’t avoid it with the Aztecs. Saw way too much death in Korea. Didn’t want to read about it. And she—” He glanced toward the stalls. “She was ready to get married. A normal life. After the war, that sounded good. Real good.”

Pearl found herself gazing at his wedding ring. Plain gold, the sheen softened by wear and age.

“Are you sorry?” she asked.

Joe put his hands on the wall and stretched out his legs, lifting the tips of his dirty white walking shoes. “Nope. Not sorry. I’ve had a good life. But—wistful sometimes.” He nodded. “That’s it. Wistful.”

Pearl struggled to apply the soft, fragile word to the large sweaty man beside her.

“Can’t change anything now.” Joe gestured toward the Temple. “You been through?”

Pearl nodded.

“Amazing, huh? The wife asks what I see in them. The Aztecs. I tell her, best damn poets I ever read. But when I looked at that chacmool. Imagined the hearts in its bowl—” He shook his head as if trying to clear his brain. “Maybe it’s impossible. Understanding them, I mean. But I try.”

“So do I,” Pearl said softly.

“No blood, no world. That’s what they thought, I guess.” Joe sat very still. His voice dropped to an anguished whisper. “But how could they kill the kids?”

Pearl sat silent. She still had no words to bridge that gap between her and the people who had built the Temple. Perhaps there were none.

Joe sat up straight and put on his hat. Then he slapped his knees. “How about lunch? A real one. Our treat.”

Pearl considered her stale sandwich. A good meal would be wonderful. And Joe had turned out to be much more interesting than she could have guessed. But she didn’t need another distraction to keep her from the Sun Stone.

“That’s very nice of you,” she said. “But I’m kind of on a schedule. Last day here, things to see.”

“You’re sure?”

She nodded.

“Well, the wife’s waving at me. Must need more money.” Joe replaced his hat, pushed himself up from the wall. “Have a good trip home. Stay away from that *E. coli*.”

Pearl smiled as she shook his hand. “Nice to see you again. Say hello to your wife for me.”

Joe lumbered off toward the stalls. Pearl watched him join his wife. He put a hand on her shoulder, and their straw hats touched as she pointed to something in a merchant’s stall. A lump formed in Pearl’s throat. The same scenario must have played out for centuries in this very place—the haggling between seller and buyer, man and woman, the exchange of merchandise for dollars, pesos, gold, cacao beans.

She sighed, bit into her sandwich, and chewed mechanically as she surveyed the ruins. What was it, she wondered, that pulled so many like her, like Joe, to the Temple? Did they really hope for some epiphany of understanding? Or were they no better than voyeuristic motorists gaping at a bloody traffic accident?

The peanut butter stuck in her throat and she coughed, then tossed the remainder of her sandwich toward a pigeon. Señor Rueda had spoken about Aztec human sacrifice in the very first class, astonishing her with his directness. *Your ancestors, too, sacrificed human beings*, he had said. *Don’t judge without trying first to understand*. She had found the latter good advice, and not only in dealing with the Aztecs. But what happened when one tried and tried to understand, and couldn’t? Did that deny one forever the right to pass judgment?

She stood and brushed off her skirt, then gazed one last time across the ruins—broken stones and low tin roofs, where once had towered a magnificent structure higher than the cathedral. Little remained of the outermost walls of the Temple. But deep within, two shrines had been preserved and once more received visitors. Within them two others lay secret. On street corners, she heard men declaiming in Nahuatl. How much, after all, had the Spaniards destroyed, and how much lay underground like the oldest shrines, waiting?

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*Pearl struggled to her feet. Heavy clothing made it hard for her to bend at the waist. She patted her stomach. What on earth was she wearing? A vest of some sort covered her chest and stomach, thick and stiff as cardboard, with the texture of heavily starched cotton. A long cloth was wrapped around her hips and tied in*

*the front, the ends hanging to her knees. Her legs were bare. Simple sandals protected the soles of her feet.*

*The great rumbling noise grew nearer and louder. Pearl turned just as a dense crowd of running men overtook her. She raised the object on her arm to fend them off—a shield, she saw now, and the strange vest was padded body armor. Her strength surprised her, and she stared at her arm. The skin was smooth and taut, and revealed muscles she hadn't seen in years. She flexed the fingers on her free hand. Her arthritis was gone.*

*The men pushed her forward, shouted in her ears, shoved her with their shields. She pushed back with her new, young strength. The light brightened, and the shields flashed turquoise, mother-of-pearl, quetzal-feather green. The thumps that had puzzled her earlier were simply the shields colliding.*

*Pearl turned her head and craned her neck, looking for someone to talk to, someone to ask about this bizarre place. But the gray-featured warriors did not meet her eyes—not until her gaze fell upon a face that stunned her, eyes that looked into hers, narrowed, then brightened in recognition.*

*The man smiled.*

*“Señor Rueda?” she whispered.*

\* \* \* \*

As in most museums, books and souvenirs crowded the entrance to the Museo Nacional de Antropología, and the thing Pearl most wanted to see stood farthest away. Mexico had a long history—three miles of exhibits, the guidebook said—and most of it stood between her and the Sun Stone. She sighed. She could have spent her whole week here. Just as well that she had saved the museum for last.

Pearl shouldered her bag and trudged through centuries and cultures. In the Oaxaca gallery she paused to study some Zapotec deities: the Goddess of the Thirteen Serpents, hands crossed on her breast, gaze aimed piously skyward. A grimacing Old God. Xipe Totec, his face masked by a flayed skin. The Aztecs, she knew, had also worshipped Our Lord the Flayed One. Some had worn human skins for an entire month, until they stank like dogs.

Pearl's skin tingled with sympathetic pain. She hurried on.

Finally, in a darkened room, the illuminated ten-foot disk of the Sun Stone loomed before her, staring across a broad platform. She paused, feeling the need to mark the occasion—to touch holy water, genuflect, make an offering. After a moment she walked slowly to a convenient bench, sat down, and stowed her bag between her feet.

*I'm here. I made it, Señor Rueda.*

She took a deep breath and gazed into the face at the Stone's center. It was round and grim, compassionless, with a flint knife for a tongue, and flanked by clawed fists that clutched human hearts. Pearl's books had not agreed on the identity of the face. Perhaps it was the sun disk, perhaps the earth monster. But no one disputed the identity of the symbol in which the face rested: *ollin*, movement, a reminder that the present world, the fifth sun, would end in the shaking of the earth.

She studied the twenty signs that circled *ollin* and the face, trying to identify the sacred day-names, rabbit and dog and reed and death and the others. But age had softened the carvings and she could not match name and figure. She would have to look them up later, she supposed, to learn after the fact what she had seen. Perhaps life was the same way. Not until life was over—or nearly so—could one see it for what it was.

Weariness settled over her. She let her eyes close.

Hushed museum voices and the scuffle of slow footsteps soothed her. Her sore muscles relaxed and her mind calmed. Surely, she thought, the other visitors understood the great paradox of the Aztecs no better than she: how could so sophisticated a people, lovers of poetry and children, shed so much blood?

For they had not been barbarians. Barbarians could not have turned a swamp into a city, or created the Sun Stone. Barbarians would not have told their children: *Life is full of pain and suffering. But you are precious as turquoise stones and quetzal feathers. Live cleanly. Work hard. Avoid drunkenness and bad company. Be faithful to your spouse and respect your elders.* Parents of any age and place might offer such advice to their children.

But these parents had also drenched themselves in death—bloody, sharp-scented, sacrificial death.

Pearl shook her head. She knew the arguments for the ceremonies, the justifications: that the Aztec rulers used their religion as an excuse to kill people, to gain power through terror; or, that the rulers and people alike were helpless victims of their imaginary but bloodthirsty gods.

No, Pearl thought. Surely there was something more. Something was missing from her understanding.

She studied the Stone as she pondered once again the myth that described the creation of the fifth sun. A pitiful, sore-covered god called Nanahuatzin threw himself into a fire at Teotihuacan, after all the other gods refused to immolate themselves. Nanahuatzin was transformed into the sun, but he hadn't enough

strength to rise into the sky. He sat impotent on the horizon, until one by one the other gods sacrificed themselves. And not willingly, either—they whined and stalled and even tried to shoot down the newly born sun to avoid their fate. But only their sacrifice could set the sun in motion.

Pearl caught her breath. *The gods—even the gods had had no choice.* Was that the missing piece? Her own culture conceived of God as almighty, omnipotent, able to arrange the universe as he pleased. But in the world of the Aztecs, even the gods had to submit to the cosmic order, an order that required human death for its survival—a requirement not without logic, Pearl realized. Every day, her own survival depended on eating plants and animals that died to nourish her. She, like the gods, consumed the dead. What if the universe were a living thing, requiring similar nourishment, but on a much grander scale? What if it survived only on human blood and tears?

Pearl felt cold, right down to her bones. If the Aztecs had doubted, if they had even suspected themselves to have a choice, then they had committed the cruelest acts imaginable. But if they had truly believed, had *known*, that the cosmos needed their sacrifices, she could see in them only a tragic determination.

She closed her eyes once more, tried to imagine herself into that mythic world, to know the universe as a living being dependent on human blood for food, on children's tears for rain. She became dizzy with the effort, but all she sensed was a vast emptiness.

A low, resonant voice interrupted her musings. She opened her eyes and saw a young man standing on the platform with one hand on the Stone. His other hand held a small book, and he read aloud, his voice subdued but emphatic, his face intense. Pearl thought she recognized the sound of Nahuatl.

He snapped the book shut and vanished into the shadows without looking up. Pearl stared after him. So Señor Rueda had not been the only one to perform that strange ritual. What could it possibly mean?

Pearl scanned the galleries for anyone who might see her. But she found only glass cases and the blind eyes of stone gods. She was alone with the Sun Stone.

*To touch the Sun Stone is a special thing.*

She glanced around once more. She imagined her embarrassment should she be caught, a librarian of all people, breaking museum rules. Then she grabbed her purse, hurried across the floor, stepped onto the platform, and lifted her trembling hand to the Sun Stone.

The Stone was cool and rough, pitted with age. She let her fingertips explore the crevices, puzzle out a decorative shape as if reading Braille. The stone warmed

under her hand, seemed to soften under her touch. She whispered: *Cuix oc nelli nemohua in tlalticpac?*

The world shuddered to a halt. All sound and movement stilled, as if the earth paused between breaths. Pearl tried to step away and couldn't. For a moment she panicked. Then her thoughts turned some strange corner in her mind. Pain lanced her heart, a desperate hunger filled her belly, and she knew, she felt with her whole body, the terrible dependence of the Aztec world on human ritual, the horrific cost of creation. She saw in her mind's eye the apocalypse that would descend if the sacrifices ended, the world shaken into dust by earthquakes. No choice. Truly, they had had no choice. She shook, then wept, and the gods wept with her.

Approaching voices startled her. The world seemed to take a breath, to resume its movement. She jerked her hand away, wiped her tears, stepped back from the Sun Stone. A Mexican family gathered to look at the Stone, four children with their mother and father. The adults were studying the guidebook, but the children stared at Pearl. She turned as casually as she could and pretended to look at another exhibit. When the family moved into another gallery, she fled the museum, unable to bear any longer the gaze of the Aztec gods.

Out in Chapultepec Park, well away from the museum, Pearl lowered herself onto an empty bench. *Stop trembling*, she told herself. *Your imagination, that's all it was. Your overly active imagination.*

But even her imagination wasn't usually that vivid. Had it been a dream, then? she wondered. Or even a hallucination? She was tired, that was obvious, too tired to think clearly, to trust her senses. *Something* had happened. But what?

She closed her eyes and let her thoughts approach the Stone again, trying to recover the experience, the way she could sometimes remember a dream if she sat very still. But as her mind brushed up against that terrible pain and hunger, a deep anguish awakened in her, and she groaned. Tears flowed from under her eyelids and poured down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around herself, bit her lip, and tried to hold the tears back. So many deaths. How had one people willingly caused—and borne—so many deaths?

“¿Señora?” Something soft touched her knee. Pearl opened her eyes and saw a small brown hand, dirty fingernails bitten to the quick. She looked up into a girl's enormous dark eyes. The child lifted her hand, as if to touch Pearl's face.

“¿Le duele tanto la cara?” she said in a piping voice. “¿O es que alguien se ha muerto?”

Pearl made herself smile. No, she told the girl, her face didn't hurt much, and no one had died. Then she added in English, mostly to herself, “I'm just an old woman poking about in things I shouldn't. I'll be fine.”

The girl tilted her head. Pearl smiled again. The girl smiled back, then took off before Pearl could offer her anything. The loose soles of her sneakers slapped on the concrete as she ran.

Pearl felt an urge to call out, to stop her. But what would she say, what would she do? She couldn't take the child home with her. And even if she could, she would leave many behind.

She thought of the Aztec children. They, at least, had been cherished, even—perhaps especially—those who had been sacrificed, for they gave their lives to ensure the survival of their people. These street children—who cherished them? Who told them that they were as precious as turquoise and quetzal feathers?

She sat for a moment to gather herself, feeling her helplessness in the face of so much need, so much pain past and present. Finally she took a bottle from her purse, poured some water into her palm, and splashed her face. For the first time since she'd arrived in Mexico, she felt every inch her age. Her feet hurt, her joints ached, and the wrinkles in her face burned. She should go back to her room, take a nap, have some dinner. In the morning she would board the plane and return to the twenty-first century and her little house in Ohio. Let someone else try to understand the Aztecs now, she thought. She had understood all she could bear.

Pearl pushed herself to her feet and wearily crossed the park. As she approached the Metro stop, yet another street child stepped into her path, hand outstretched. The boy was nearly as tall as she, dusty-faced, lean and wary.

*“Señora, por favor.”*

Pearl reached into her purse and pulled out her last juice box. Then she thought better of it, and dug into her hidden skirt pocket, pulling out a few bills. They were more than she usually gave, but she held them out. *“Que Dios te bendiga,”* she said softly. God bless you.

The boy's eyes grew wide. He snatched the money and ran.

\* \* \* \*

*Señor Rueda's smile broadened. He looked young, as young as when he had patiently taught Pearl the difference between ser and estar, to be and to be.*

*“One-vulture,” he said gently, as if correcting a slight pronunciation fault.*

*“What?”*

*He deflected one of the gray soldiers with his shield, and raised his voice.*

*“Here we are known by the signs under which we were born. My birth sign is one-vulture. Ce-cozcaquauhtli. A good sign, auguring long life.”*

*“How old were you?” Pearl asked.*

*“Eighty-four.”*

*“What happened?”*

*“Car accident. The sun was in my eyes.” He nodded toward the ever-brightening dawn. Suddenly Pearl understood. Huitzilopochtli, Hummingbird-on-the-Left. The god had killed Señor Rueda, and her professor had passed into the afterworld of the sacrificed Aztec warrior.*

*And so, somehow, had she.*

\* \* \* \*

It was deep winter, past Christmas, and the sunburn had long since faded when Pearl’s hairdresser, Phyllis, gently parted her hair, rubbed her scalp lightly with a finger, frowned (as Pearl watched in the mirror), and said, “I don’t remember this mole. It looks funny. Maybe you should have somebody look at it.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Pearl said.

“Sometimes they don’t.”

Then Pearl remembered Mexico, the sunburn, and the Sun Stone. Her stomach knotted, but she mustered a smile for Phyllis. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll have it checked.”

When she got home she used a hand mirror to peer at the top of her head. A bluish lesion spread across her part. She called Dr. Moulton and made an appointment. Then she turned on her computer to research her newest concern, reading long into the night.

“Hmph,” was all Dr. Moulton said at first, when she finally sat before him in a tiny examination room that smelled of latex and disinfectant. Pearl rolled her eyes. Was he going to scold her now for bothering him with something not worth worrying about? But he dug into a drawer for a magnifying glass. She felt his beard against her hair as he leaned closer. Then, in a gentler voice, he said, “Yes, I think that should come off, and soon. I’m going to send you to a dermatologist. Dr. Anderson. He looks like a kid, but he’s very good.”

He startled her by patting her on the shoulder. So—it *was* something. But she had already guessed as much.

The following week Dr. Anderson removed the mole under local anesthetic. He did indeed look like a shiny-faced kid, a Little League coach rather than a doctor. Pearl calculated his age from the dates on his diplomas and concluded he was nearly young enough to be her grandson. He remained carefully professional throughout her appointment, refusing to speculate on whether the mole was malignant or benign, but assuring her that the lab work would be done as soon as possible. When the anesthetic wore off her scalp hurt like hell.

A few days after the excision he called her. Could she come in? That afternoon was fine.

When Pearl arrived he greeted her without smiling and led her into his office. She sat next to his desk in a soft, upholstered chair and waited. He opened her folder and studied the page on top. Pearl leaned forward a little, but he shut the folder before she could decipher any of the contents. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands together.

*Poor thing*, Pearl thought. *He can't have had much practice telling people they may die.* She wanted to pat his arm. Instead, she lifted her chin. "Give it to me straight. How bad is it?"

"It's hard to say for sure," he replied cautiously. "The tumor was a malignant melanoma, yes."

"What kind of melanoma?"

His eyebrows drew together and he gave her a curious, doubting glance. "What *kind*?"

"Nodular? Superficial spreading? Lentigo maligna?"

"Oh. I see." He looked at the floor. She could almost hear him think, *Goddamned Internet*. But when he raised his eyes she saw a flicker of amusement as well as concern. "You've done some research," he said.

"I'm a librarian."

"Ah." He smiled then, a full, friendly smile, and Pearl found herself suddenly, irrationally angry with him for smiling. "My Aunt Sue is a librarian," he said. "She used to send me book reviews. Now she sends me website addresses. Lots of them." Then the smile vanished, replaced by a practiced, professional concern. "As long as it doesn't distress you too much, read what you like. But you know that some sources are more reliable than others."

"Of course." Pearl heard her own voice, curt and impatient, and knew for the

first time how truly frightened she was. But she couldn't stop herself from going on. "What do you think? That I'm going to run off to Mexico for some so-called miracle cure? Not likely."

One corner of Dr. Anderson's mouth twitched. Pearl could not tell if he was amused or annoyed.

"If you are interested in alternative medicine," he said, "I might be able to suggest something that would complement the standard treatments. But it's far too early to—"

"I'm not interested." Pearl took a breath and lowered her voice to keep it from quavering. "Just tell me what I have. And how long."

The chair squeaked as Dr. Anderson leaned forward. "You have a nodular melanoma," he said.

"Invasive?"

"Pretty deep. I believe I got everything that was on your scalp, but we'll need to do a lymph node dissection."

"And if that's positive?"

"We'll consider that when we come to it."

"But don't nodular melanomas often metastasize early?"

He sighed, and Pearl prepared herself to reject the well-meant but false reassurance that was surely coming. But he just nodded.

The questions continued to spill out of her. "The prognosis for a melanoma on the scalp is poorer than for some other locations, right?"

"Sometimes. Scalp, hands, feet. Mucous membranes."

"So you're not optimistic?"

He rubbed his chin and stared intently at some point behind her. "It's far too early to say. I think metastasis is likely, at least to the lymph nodes. But only tests will determine that. Have you had any other symptoms? Weight loss? Balance problems? Headaches? Pain?"

"No."

Pearl could see that Dr. Anderson thought she had answered too quickly. But

he pulled out a pad of paper and scribbled on it. “My receptionist will schedule your tests. And remember what I said about your reading. It’s fine as long as you watch your sources and don’t become distressed. But don’t spend all your spare time on it.”

“I won’t,” she said tartly. But she couldn’t look him in the eye. Sometimes she had stayed online until three or four in the morning, her eyes so bleary she could hardly read. She promised herself she would do better.

So in the following days, she limited her computer time to a couple of hours in the evening, and tried to keep to her usual schedule—volunteering at the local library, teaching adults to read, finishing a quilt for her granddaughter Jasmine. But the tests and appointments loomed over everything: lymph node dissections, liver tests, a chest x-ray, and finally a scan of her brain.

She knew from her research that her prognosis worsened with each new test. But she also felt increasingly dissociated from the test results and images the doctors showed her as they explained what was wrong with her body. She felt fine, except for her sore scalp. Those pictures must belong to someone else. Surely.

Then the day came when no more tests were scheduled and she sat in the overstuffed chair again with Dr. Anderson beside her and dark pictures of her brain lying on his desk.

She gulped. Dr. Anderson took a breath, but she could not bear him to speak first.

“How long do I have?” she asked.

He paused, and she wanted to shake him. “The melanoma has spread to the brain,” he said in his careful doctor’s voice.

A chill washed over her, froze her to her chair. *Spread to the brain*. It was not a surprise—she had imagined this moment, even expected it. But she felt shocked and unprepared, as if she had awakened without warning in a different time, or on a different planet.

Her brain—the melanoma was in her brain.

*Goddamn it.*

She felt his hand on her arm, and jerked away. He leaned back. “It’s inoperable, unfortunately,” he continued. “There’s not much chance of a cure. I’m—”

“I know that,” Pearl snapped. She felt lightheaded, dizzy. “How long?” she

repeated.

Dr. Anderson reached toward her again, then let his hand drop to his knee. She wished he would be rude, brusque, insensitive, so she could be angry instead of afraid. But his voice remained gentle. “A year at the outside, if radiation treatments are effective. More likely six months.” He looked at her, his eyes steady and compassionate. “I’m sorry,” he said.

But Pearl hardly heard him. She was having trouble breathing. She remembered something Philip had said when he was three. *All the air is out of my tummy*. Now her tummy was that empty.

“There are treatments that may give you more time,” Dr. Anderson added.

She closed her eyes to shut out his face. *Treatments*—but for what? A few more weeks of misery? She had seen some of her friends go through that. No, damn it, she wouldn’t. She sat up straight and looked at him.

He waited.

“I don’t want any treatments,” she said. “Just for pain, that’s all. I’ve lived longer than most people on this planet hope to. If I’m going to die anyway, I don’t want to stretch it out just to make somebody else feel better.”

“It’s certainly your choice,” he said. “But take some time to think about it. We can do more than we used to. Maybe even a clinical trial—”

“No.” She stood up, trembling right down to her fingertips. “No treatments. And no machines. Read my living will.”

“I’m glad you have one,” Dr. Anderson said quietly.

“I’m not stupid!” Pearl shook with fury. She needed to leave, to get out, before she burst into tears in front of this man who knew her brain better than he knew her. She clutched her purse to her side and reached for the door. “I have to go now.”

“Are you sure? You can stay for a few minutes. No hurry.”

She closed her eyes, took a couple of breaths. She had to stay calm long enough to get out of the office. “No,” she said steadily. “I have to go.”

Dr. Anderson put his hand on her shoulder. This time she endured his touch, but she barely held back the tears. “All right,” he said. “But call me if you have more symptoms, or if you change your mind about treatments. Or if you have any questions, any at all.”

“I’m not going to call you. I’m going on a trip.” Only as she spoke did she realize what she would do. “I’m going to Greece. And Botswana.”

She left him standing in his office doorway, looking ten years older than when she had come in.

The moment she closed her car door, her composure shattered. She clung to the steering wheel and wept. So this was how it would end, seventy-four years of life, *good* life, struck down by a renegade mole on her scalp. How utterly trivial.

How was she going to tell Philip?

She knew immediately—she wouldn’t. Not Philip, not anyone, not until she had to. Philip would insist on coming home, staying with her through every last minute, giving up the work he loved on the wildlife reserve in Botswana. No, she would not let him. She was his mother, and it was her privilege to protect him. He would be angry when he found out, but as long as she allowed him a good-bye, his anger would mend.

Not until that night when she lay in bed, staring into the darkness, did it occur to her that by telling no one she protected herself, too. If people knew she had a fatal disease, they would pity her, whisper about her, put on overly cheerful or kind faces.

How she would hate that.

She left for Greece the following week. She wore hats and scarves to cover the evidence of surgery, feeling quite stylish, and she told everyone in her tour group about the Spanish word, *jubilado*, that sounded so much nicer than “retired.” They all laughed—only two were under sixty—and dubbed themselves “the jubilant retirees.” E-mail and snail mail addresses were exchanged, and everyone promised to stay in touch.

But the last thing Pearl wanted was more people waiting for news about her illness. So she said good-bye warmly and discarded her address list before boarding the plane to Botswana, where she toured the wildlife reserve with Philip and his wife, and danced the hokey-pokey with Jasmine. She could almost pretend she was well.

But she knew the melanoma was growing, and would catch up to her in the end. Almost as soon as she returned home, she started having dizzy spells. She reviewed her will, sorted her belongings, and put off calling Philip as long as she could. If she could not die in her own time, she could at least die as much as possible on her own terms.

\* \* \* \*

*“So what about you?” Señor Rueda asked. “How did you get to be here?”*

*“Melanoma. After a bad sunburn at Teotihuacan.”*

*“Ah.” His dark eyes bored into her. “And?”*

*Suddenly Pearl knew what she had done. “I touched the Sun Stone. Because of you. You said you had touched it, and it was a special thing.”*

*Señor Rueda laughed grimly. “Even I didn’t know how special. I suppose that means you’re my sacrificial captive. To us Mexica, that’s like family.”*

*The surrounding soldiers surged forward, carrying Pearl and Señor Rueda with them. She fought to stay near the professor. They ended up pinned back to back as the crowd cheered the waxing light.*

*“Is it like this every day?” she shouted.*

*“Every day,” he replied.*

*“Don’t we turn into butterflies or hummingbirds after four years?”*

*“So they say. I think I have two years left. One loses count.”*

*Pearl didn’t wonder at that. She was finding it hard to think in the din.*

*A passing soldier shouted, “Hail One-vulture!”*

*“Nine-serpent!” Señor Rueda shouted back. “A terrible sign,” he explained to Pearl. “Nines are the worst.”*

*“What about fours?” she asked. “I think my sign is four-movement. I tried to figure it out once. But I don’t know if the calendar I was using was accurate.”*

*He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Four-movement? Do you know what day that is?”*

*Pearl shook her head.*

*“It’s the day-sign of the sun. The fifth sun.” He paused. “Those born on that day are destined either to take captives or to be sacrificed.”*

*Pearl grunted. “I guess we know what happened to me, don’t we?” A loud cheer sounded. “So what happens now?” she asked.*

*“We carry the sun.”*

*A blinding light burst upon them. Pearl raised her shield. A hole the size of an arrow's shaft let a few rays pass through. She drew the shield close and squinted through the hole. In the middle of the reddened sun-disk she made out a flickering face, traced in solar flares. The mouth gaped.*

*"Come!" shouted Señor Rueda. "It's time!" He broke into a run. Pearl followed him toward the dawn.*

\* \* \* \*

Ice melted slowly on Pearl's tongue. With great effort she swallowed the water that dribbled into her throat. How long would she be entangled with this failing, aching body? She struggled to pull her thoughts in from where they wandered, and found herself concentrating on her name. *Pearl*. But this flesh, this thing lying in a hospital bed was not her, not Pearl. Pearl roamed the Acropolis. Pearl raised a son, alone. Pearl traveled to Mexico and explored the Great Temple.

That Pearl would not have endured the way people whispered around her now. Her son, home with his family from Botswana, her daughter-in-law, her sister, and assorted in-laws of her sister whom she could no longer keep straight. Why couldn't they be quiet? She had enough trouble trying to think without having to filter out their babble. Especially now that the pain medication dulled her.

But not Jasmine. She silently exempted her granddaughter from the list of unwelcomes. Jasmine read books to her daily, for which Pearl blessed her, even when she fell asleep or could not follow the story. The others acted as if her brain were already gone, which it wasn't, not quite. Not yet.

Ten months. She had beaten the melanoma for ten months, and she was proud of that. But she wouldn't want another ten months in this bed, even if she could have them.

Not that she expected much of death. She didn't expect to meet God, and she certainly didn't believe in heaven or hell.

But she did entertain a fantasy—something that sounded so silly out loud that she had never mentioned it except to Burney, who had smiled but hadn't laughed—that when she died, if she did not cease to be, she would at last learn everything she had always wondered about in life. Whether God existed was among the least interesting of questions. What she really wanted to know was whether conscious life existed elsewhere in the universe. What was written in the books that burned in Alexandria. How the Incas built Sacsahuaman. Who Tutankhamun's parents were.

What the sacrifices had really meant to the Aztecs.

Whether death would satisfy her curiosity, she would learn soon enough. She thought she was ready. But something still nagged at her, something she needed to do. Something she needed to tell Philip. What was it? Something—yes, something to do with the Aztecs, with her trip to Mexico.

She heard the door creak and let her eyelids open half way. Just a nurse. Good. Quick hands pushed back her hair, smoothed the sheet.

“Would you like more ice, Mrs. Richards?”

Pearl nodded. The nurse spooned crushed ice from the pitcher. Pearl closed her mouth over it and shut her eyes. Then she opened them again. She had remembered. She struggled to lift her hand.

“Nurse? Please?” The ice in her mouth made her garble the words.

The nurse leaned over her. “Do you need something, Mrs. Richards?”

She swallowed some of the ice. “Tell—Philip,” she whispered. God, she hated this feeble voice. “Tell Philip. Don’t touch it. The Sun Stone. In Mexico. The Sun Stone,” she repeated.

“Tell Philip not to touch the Sun Stone,” said the nurse. “Is that right?”

Pearl nodded. “They say it’s special. A special thing. But don’t touch it.”

“I saw it myself once,” the nurse said. “It is a special thing. But I didn’t touch it.”

Pearl lifted her hand and pointed. “Don’t forget.” Suddenly it seemed terribly important. The nurse said, “I’ll remember,” and gently pressed Pearl’s hand back to the sheet. She left quietly in her soft white shoes.

Pearl let her head fall to the side, but the oxygen tube irritated her nose, so she turned back the other way. Her limbs felt heavy, and the sheets scratched like straw. She had never imagined that a time would come when she would not want to live. But she was so tired of dying, of the endless good-byes.

The slow click of the doorknob reminded her that others waited, too. *Quick*, she told herself, *now, before the sorrowing hordes return*. She let go of the bedsheets, let her chest sink and be still.

*Zan achica ye nican.* Just for a moment here.

She slid into darkness.

\* \* \* \*

*Pearl ran until the thick mass of bodies slowed and then stopped, like people in a theater converging on an exit. But this was no exit. She raised her shield and squinted at the sun. Its hungry face crept into the sky, supported by a writhing pillar that grew higher and higher as soldiers scaled their fellows to push the glowing disk toward its zenith.*

*Señor Rueda stepped onto a man's back and offered his hand. "Come with me. I'll show you how we lift the sun into the sky."*

*She hesitated. The mass of soldiers reminded her of insects crawling over one another. She shuddered.*

*"Hurry!" Señor Rueda reached for her.*

*She could not force her hand up to meet his. The image of the sun flared in her mind. Huitzilopochtli had killed her, and now he expected her to carry the sun? What about all the others who had died for the Aztec universe? The thousands of warriors? The slaves? The children with double cowlicks?*

*Señor Rueda grabbed her wrist. "Come! Now!"*

*From beyond the crowd, beyond the sun, beyond even the sky, a deep voice, vibrant like a string on a bass viol: "Four-movement! Help us."*

*The world stopped, held its breath, as it had when she'd touched the Sun Stone. Pain and hunger flooded her. She felt the Sun's weakness, its need for her. But she remembered the slaughtered warriors, the weeping children, the flayed and dismembered ones, and she mustered her courage. "No," she shouted. "I won't." She shook herself free of Señor Rueda's grip, then stripped her shield from her arm and threw it into the sand.*

*"What are you doing?" Señor Rueda, One-vulture, leapt down beside her. "Without us the sun will fail to rise, and the world will end. You must join us."*

*Pearl sat down in the gray sand. "I tried to understand, truly I did. But I will not serve these gods. Besides, the sun doesn't really rise. The earth turns. You know that."*

*Señor Rueda shook his head. "Not here, Four-movement. Not here."*

*The shouts gave way to mutterings, all the way up the column to the sun and back, and then every soldier fell silent. Pearl squinted at the sun, shieldless. Was it her imagination, or did the sun rock a little back and forth?*

*The deep voice spoke again, pleading. “Four-movement, without you and the other soldiers we are nothing. The sun is nothing. The world is nothing. Help us.”*

*Pearl jumped to her feet. “I will not spend my eternity with you, Huitzilopochtli,” she shouted. She turned her back on the sun and the soldiers. The dry plain stretched toward a distant horizon of darkness. Scraggly trees and thorny maguey plants grew in the unending sand.*

*Behind her the soldiers groaned. The bass-viol voice thrummed. “Four-movement!”*

*Then she heard Señor Rueda shout. “Look to the sun!”*

*She turned. The golden disk rolled to the left, then to the right. The soldiers that had stopped climbing to plead with her scrambled up the column, hurrying to steady the life-giving fifth sun.*

*Pearl wiped her hands on her hips and headed briskly into the desert. As she walked she studied the bleak landscape. For a moment she wondered what she would do for water and food, and whether there were rattlesnakes. Then she laughed. Silly woman! She was dead. Snakebites and sustenance were no longer concerns.*

*Perhaps Burney was somewhere out there.*

*Perhaps she would walk through nothingness forever.*

*But anything was better than staying here. Death had not turned out the way she had expected. Of course, neither had life, and she had managed that just fine. She would manage this, too.*

\* \* \* \*

A maid in a cheap Mexico City hotel grabbed a bed as the floor rocked. Across the room a mirror crashed. People screamed in the street below.

Sofía crossed herself and held her breath. At last the floor steadied. That was the third *terremoto* this month, and the strongest. She hoped her children were not too frightened—either by the earthquake or by what their great-grandmother would tell them. The old woman thought the world was coming to an end. When Sofía went home tonight, the *abuelita* would shake her finger, again. “Earthquakes,” she would croak, clutching her dark-beaded rosary. “This world ends in earthquakes. That is what my grandmother taught me, and I teach you. The last one is coming. *Ya viene*. Soon.”

Sofía did not dare to contradict her grandmother, but she knew that Mexico had endured earthquakes for centuries past and would probably suffer them for centuries to come. People studied the quakes now, and understood them, and maybe one day would predict them. That was what her husband said.

Besides, he had argued, if the old stories were true, the world would have ended centuries ago, when the Spaniards arrived, and sacrifice to the old gods ceased.

She shrugged. Who could know the future? Some things were best left to God.

Distant sirens wailed. Car horns added to the din.

Sofía went into the bathroom and splashed her face, as her grandmother had taught her. Then she pushed aside the curtain at the tiny bathroom window and peered out.

The pale, fuzzy sun—the fifth sun—hung just over the roof of the next building.

She blinked. Was it her imagination, or did the sun tremble?

She closed her eyes, shook her head, looked once more. The sun hung as it always had, steady and still. She tried to laugh and could not.

From nowhere a hummingbird zoomed to the window and hovered in the lower lefthand corner. Its wings flashed green as it stared through the dirty pane. The maid stared back.

The tiny bird dipped to the right, then again to the left, swinging in wider and wider arcs. Finally it darted once more to the glass, hung briefly in the air, then tilted and sped away over the city rooftops, flying toward the sun.

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