

AD 600





Some might guess that I live in blackness. Others that I see vague splashes of color. But in truth I see everything.

For I am the Seer. The Shaman. The Holy Man.

As I swam in the dark waters of my mother's womb, my destiny was divined. When I emerged from the dank tunnel, holy men wrapped my eyes with thirteen layers of bandages, immersing me in sacred darkness. Thus I have been blinded for almost thirteen revolutions around the sun.



2011



Poof!

Two village dogs joined Rosalba as she walked through a forest full of birdsongs. The dark purple trills, bright red calls from one treetop to another, the golden squawks reminded her of the colors she wove into her loom.

Pine needles released their drowsy fragrance into the warm air.

Halfway to the highway the river turned, making a deep pool. In other parts of the forest men cut the trees, and even burned them, but not here. The thick trunks were covered with moss and white mushrooms. In the late afternoons, Rosalba loved to sit quietly in this spot, letting her thoughts wander loose from the tight lines she wove.

Sometimes when she was at the pool, she closed her eyes. She saw colored shapes and strange faces that she thought might be those

of her ancestors. Sometimes when she was by herself, she heard soft, otherworldly flute music.

Other girls from the village wouldn't have gone to the pool alone. Certainly not her cousin Sylvia, who said things like, "You might fall in and never get out," or "Sometimes the boys from town go there."

But Rosalba didn't like to feel penned in by the village. She looked forward to being close to the water in this dusty time before the rains. She walked confidently to the deep pool, certain of the protection of the Earthlord.

Suddenly one of the white dogs barked.

"Shhh," said Rosalba, and stood motionless. Underneath the music of the birds, she heard singing.

"Los de adelante corren mucho, y los de atrás se quedarán . . ." Rosalba looked down through the trees to see a girl, dressed plainly in a tan jacket and pants. Her light hair curled like the tendrils of chayote squash. She wasn't a Mayan, but a *ladina* girl. She sat on the bank, tossing rocks into the water, singing: *"Tras, tras, tras . . ."*

Rosalba watched from behind a tree, her hands against the rough bark. Whenever she went with Mama to market, she saw *ladinos* and other foreigners. *Ladinos* were rich. They drove cars and watched televisions and enjoyed many different kinds of food, including ice cream. *Ladina* girls wore pretty clothes and hair ornaments.

Rosalba had always wondered about those tall, light-skinned people, but had never spoken to any. Never had she seen one so close to her village.

Just then, the girl turned and cried out, “¡Hola!” She raised her hand. “I see you behind the tree!”

Rosalba hesitated, then stepped out. “*Hola*,” she said.

“Sit here.” The girl’s voice rang over the sounds of the river. She touched the ground beside her.

As Rosalba moved forward on the soft pine needles, the dogs scampered into the trees. Reaching the edge of the pool, she settled herself

near the girl. The girl looked at her with eyes as green as the moss growing on the trees.

The *ladina's* curls were fastened with a butterfly clip covered with sparkles. Rosalba wanted to reach out and touch that shiny barrette, those light curls. The girl's fingernails were painted bright pink. She'd been building a tiny house of twigs and pine needles.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "My name's Alicia. What's yours?"

"Rosalba."

"I'm from Mexico City," Alicia announced, throwing a stone into the pool. "I'm eight."

The girl came from the far-off big city that Rosalba had heard about. In town she'd seen pictures of that place where buildings touched the clouds. There was a market where people floated on boats filled with sweet-smelling tuberoses. In Mexico City you could get on an airplane and lift off into the sky itself. Mexico City was an important place to come from. But that this Alicia was a year younger than

she made Rosalba feel braver. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm on an expedition with Papi and other scientists. They're studying frogs and I'm helping. Did you know that frogs are disappearing from the planet?" Alicia stretched her arms wide, the pink fingernails gleaming. "From everywhere. They're dying off."

Rosalba fiddled with the edge of her shawl. Sometimes her brothers caught frogs for the family cooking pot. They hadn't mentioned there being any fewer. . . . "There's a frog right there," she said as a small brown one leaped from one mossy rock to another.

"I didn't say they'd *all* disappeared. But a lot. They're sick with a fungus. Frog die-off is so important that Papi said I could miss school if I do research with him and write a report."

Rosalba, who had never written anything, changed the subject. "How do the men study frogs?"

"They catch them in traps. But not the kind

that kill them!" She shook her head and gestured, accidentally knocking over the miniature house. The twigs and pine needles fell every which way, but the girl didn't seem to mind.

"You're a real Mayan, aren't you?" she asked.

Rosalba nodded. "Of course I am." What else?

"Papi said I'd meet some real Mayan people. He said you Mayans would know all about the prophesy of the year 2012."

Rosalba wrinkled her forehead.

"You know—when the Mayan calendar ends. After thousands and thousands of years it stops just like that." Alicia snapped her fingers, her bright fingernails flashing.

"I know about the Mayans from a long time ago. Foreigners come to see their pyramids. But I don't know anything about a calendar."

"You're a Mayan, but you don't *know*?" asked the *ladina*, tilting her head, the sparkles in the barrette twinkling. "The world might stop existing. In just a little over a year. All

this"—she looked around—"the trees, the sky, you and me, *poof!* All gone."

Rosalba shook her head. "I've never heard of that. Everything's always been the same."

"But everything's not going to *stay* the same."

"But the Earthlord makes sure—"

"The who?"

"The Earthlord, who lives up there." Rosalba gestured toward the cone-shaped mountain behind the trees. "He takes care of us. He'd never let such a thing happen."

Alicia peered. "Where *is* the Earthlord?"

"In his cave." Again, Rosalba gestured.

"Have you ever seen him?"

Rosalba shook her head. "Of course not. No one has seen the Earthlord. But Mama says he keeps the heavens in motion, the crops growing, and the rain falling. Without the Earthlord, the world wouldn't run right." She reached for a twig from the fallen house and laid it straight.

"He sounds like Jesus."

"A little." In the church in town the priest

talked about Jesus. But while Jesus was in heaven, the Earthlord lived close by.

Alicia set out three more twigs. Making a square, she said, "Let's build it back. Let's make it a real Mayan house this time."

"Fine," Rosalba agreed. She placed three pebbles in the middle, explaining, "This is the hearth." She dropped in bits of dried moss for pretend fire. "This is fun. I haven't played for a long time."

"What do you do instead?"

"I help Mama with real work. Don't you help your mama?"

Alicia shrugged. "I have my schoolwork."

Together they built up the walls. Each time their hands touched, happiness sparkled in Rosalba. She hadn't only *met* a *ladina*; she was making a house with her. It was like being offered a tray of sugary sweet-potato candy.

"This can be for the frogs who live here," said Alicia.

"A house for *frogs*?" Rosalba couldn't help but giggle. "Frogs are food."

“Papi told me people here eat them. But I didn’t believe him. I love frogs.”

Balancing pine needles for the thatched roof, Rosalba considered this. She’d never heard of anyone loving frogs except in a pot of soup. But if this Alicia loved frogs, so would she.

When the house was complete, the sun had slid behind the mountain of the Earthlord, dropping into the Underworld. In the dim light, the stream ran more quietly, the frogs sang more loudly.

“I should go home,” Rosalba said reluctantly. She didn’t want to part from her new friend, but neither did she want to run across the fruit bats or spooks that came out in the dusk.

“Me too. Papi will be worried.”

After they’d stood up and brushed off their clothes, Alicia undid the butterfly barrette from her hair. She handed it to Rosalba.

The pretty clip lay in her palm, winking up at the trees. Rosalba thought quickly. What did she have to give? Nothing but her silver stud earrings. But she’d had those since she was a

baby. They matched her little sister's. "I'll bring you something next time," she said.

"Something *Mayan*." Alicia took the barrette from Rosalba and fastened it into Rosalba's hair.

Rosalba patted the stiff outline of the butterfly. She'd have to take the barrette out before Mama saw it. Mama didn't like her to talk to strangers. If she knew of the meeting, she might forbid her to see Alicia again.

"Meet me here tomorrow," Alicia said, "and I'll bring a book about the prophesy. I'll bring proof."

And then she was gone, walking quickly down the path.



I surrender to the will of my elders, the other shamans with whom I live.

I am cared for by the holy man, Mauruch. Every dark moon, he changes my bandages, his fingers rough as he unwinds the layers. Each time I count them: thirteen. When my face is bare, he washes my eyes with herb water, and I know not to open them.

Under pain of death, I never look at the world.

