Plots

by José Skinner

Justo Godoy made his modest living selling miniature replicas of cocobolo trees he carved from cocobolo wood itself, detailed replicas complete with tiny leaves he cut from dark green crêpe paper and painstakingly glued onto the intricate, needle-like branches. He sold them as genuine Tzotzil crafts, because he himself was half Tzotzil, on his mother's side.

Justo had never met his father, Paco Godoy. Paco Godoy left the village before Justo was born and hadn't been back since; but he'd had the decency to bestow the respected Godoy name on his unborn child. Justo possessed the written document to prove it, typed and notarized and sealed by Paco's own brother, Justo's uncle Saturnino.

Justo managed, *de puro necio*—by dogged insistence—to get his trees placed in the front windows of the Godoy chain of artisanry shops, whereas crafts made by the Xul clan, who were full-blooded Tzotzils, were relegated to their back rooms. And then came the rebellion. The pro-Indian rebels had taken over the town for several weeks and given the Xuls courage to set up their own outlets in competition with the Godoys. The Xul stores were doing well, appealing as they did to the gringo tourists who came now to witness the social changes taking place in the region.

A year or so after the rebellion, Justo's mother died. Justo spent all his savings to have her buried in the town panteón. He'd taken his tambache of pesos to Saturnino, who typed him a receipt. It was a lot of money for a rectangle of soil. One day his father, wherever he was now, would be buried there too, or so Justo hoped. All the Godoys were buried in the panteón. Justo himself would be buried there—or so he hoped.

Two days after Justo's mother's funeral, Casimiro Xul approached Justo as Justo sat on a bench in the plaza putting the finishing touches on one of his trees with a pair of tweezers.

"Compañero, my sympathies," said Casimiro, touching the tips of Justo's fingers with his own. Touching tips of fingers was a traditional Indian way of greeting; calling people compañero was a new, revolutionary thing.

It was late morning, and the three typists were already busy at their typewriters under the nearby arches of the Municipal Palace, including Saturnino at his heavy metal desk. Two of the typists still used old typewriters for clacking out the love letters or tax declarations or last wills and testaments or whatever it was their clients, sitting beside them, had asked them to write. Saturnino had a small computer attached to a printer that breathed out the pages. Behind his head, embedded in the marble of the palace wall, shone the brassy mouth of the municipal mail slot.

"Listen, Justo," said Casimiro. "If you want, we can give your trees a shelf at Artesanías Xul. And sell them on the Net, too."

Justo had heard of this Net: the rebels were said to use it for their propaganda. The Net was found on computers, like Saturnino's he supposed, and the ones that the gringos, stooping their way to deep shade beneath the laurels, placed on their laps and hinged open like little caskets, their pale faces soon laughing or frowning in the glow of the light. Unlike the typewriters, which seemed to battle with each other like machine guns, the computers made no noise.

"We'll buy them from you wholesale," Casimiro Xul added. His face was fatter than it used to be, and lustrous as the cocobolo wood Justo carved.

"How do you mean?"

"You don't know what wholesale is? You sell us a certain number for a certain price. Let's say, ten for a hundred pesos. A hundred for a thousand pesos. Godoys never offered you such."

"But each tree is unique."

"So?"

"So then each one has to have its own price."

"Look, I'm giving you a deal. The way it normally works is the more you make, the less you get per item. I should be offering you $750 for a thousand trees. But out of respect for the deceased . . . "

"She was a Tzotzil," said Justo.

"Exactly."

"So she would agree with me. Each is unique, each has its own price. That's the indigenous way." He turned the tree in his hand.

Casimiro Xul laughed. "Ah, mi Justo. Now you've decided you're indigenous. But you know something? A Tzotzil is always

buried up in the monte, not down here in the Godoy cemetery. You should have thought about that."

A grackle in the laurel tree above them whooped a jeer and let splat on the gray stone below.

That night, as he had each night since his mother's burial, Justo went to the panteón to pray at her grave. He waited until the high hours of the night before going to the graveyard, because only then could he be sure the grackles would have finished their mocking and shut their hard yellow eyes and tucked their heads under their oil-black wings. Lucky for them there was no laurel directly above his mother's polished headstone, because if they were to shit on it, he'd have to poison them all with the DDT pellets the children sold at the market.

His mother had told him his father had those crushed-glass eyes all the Godoys had, all colors of glass crushed to shards. Justo's eyes were smooth, river-clay brown, like hers. He'd once asked her why he didn't have glass eyes like his and she laughed and said, "Because in you, my little indio, the Indian part won."

He wondered if it was going to be hard for him to get buried beside her in the panteón. He had no wife, or children of his own, to insist on it. It was always a chore persuading Godoys to give him his rightful place in their world; just getting his trees placed in the front windows of Godoy stores had taken some coaxing. The only thing to guarantee him a plot would be to buy it ahead of time. As soon as he earned enough money, he would present Saturnino with his birth papers to remind him he was a Godoy, pay for his plot, and get a receipt for it, which he'd then place in safekeeping with the parish priest. If he had even more money, he could also pay for a plot and funeral for his missing father, and arrange for acolytes to sing the alabanzas for them both.

The only way to afford all that was to carve and sell more trees. Justo hiked deep into the forest in search of good wood for carving. He at last found a large, straight-trunked cocobolo and sank his machete into the white sapwood. A strong smell of roses emerged. As he hacked into the bright red heartwood, he considered Casimiro Xul's offer. It would be steady money; but the proposal angered him doubly, once because more trees for less money apiece

wasn't the indigenous way, and twice because a Godoy should not be exploited by an Indian.

He didn't hear the rebels approach on the soft, moist ground. But the scent of the subcomandante's pipe smoke cut through the smell of roses. Justo turned, his machete raised.

"That species, compañero," said the subcomandante, "is rare."

Justo had never seen the fabled subcomandante in person. It was possible that this wasn't the real subcomandante, but an imitator. Anyone could wear a ski mask and stick a pipe in the mouth hole. Still, his rifle, and that of his masked companion, who Justo thought might be a woman, were real, their muzzles tarnished with use. Justo lowered his machete.

"There aren't many of them left," the subcomandante said. "Soon there'll be none."

"Who do they belong to?" Justo asked him challengingly.

"They're the patrimony of the nation."

"The wood is good," said Justo.

"That's why the trees are scarce. What do you use it for?"

"I carve from it."

Justo showed him a tree he was working on, its branches emerging half-formed from the red block.

He watched the subcomandante's eyes for his opinion of the work. Sometimes, a tourist's eyes would glitter with tears when Justo showed her a tree. But it was hard to read the subcomandante's eyes. They were Godoy eyes, all colors of crushed glass.

The subcomandante invited Justo to have coffee. They sat in the shade of the cocobolo, whose wound continued to exude its fragrance of roses. The subcomandante removed an ammunition clip from his morral and then produced a slender silver thermos and two blue enamel mugs and poured Justo and the compañera some coffee. The coffee was very sweet. The subcomandante took tobacco from a pouch and tamped it into his pipe. In front of them, a gigantic millipede humped across the moldy ground.

They spoke of Justo's trees. He showed them his tools, the small chisels and knives he used to work the hard wood.

"Do you sell a lot of them?"

"Xul says I can sell more," he said, and he explained to them Casimiro Xul's offer. "It's not the indigenous way," he added.

"You would feel exploited," the subcomandante said.

"Eso."

"Alienated from your labor," said the compañera.

"Enajenado."

Justo looked at her sharply. She had wicked, black Indian eyes, ojos rasgados. He didn't like the word she used, enajenado. Enajenado meant crazy. Already, he knew, people called him raro, strange: un chico raro. But maybe she was right: carving trees at the rate Xul wanted might drive him crazy.

"So why don't you say no and carry on as before?" the subcomandante asked.

"I need the money. I need to buy a plot in the Godoy cemetery for me and my father. We're Godoys."

Justo searched the subcomandante's crushed-glass eyes for some sign of recognition. The subcomandante puffed on his pipe and gazed out into the forest. Then he took a computer from his morral, raised the screen on its hinges, and began to type, his masked face lit by the ghostly light.

"Your feelings are understandable, compañero," said the woman as she wiped the cups clean with a red bandanna. "But after all the centuries of oppression, do you not believe the purely indigenous might be allowed to run their own businesses?"

Justo ignored her and continued to watch the subcomandante. When the subcomandante finished typing, he shut the lid and put the computer and the thermos and the cups and the ammunition clip into his morral and stood.

"Compañero," he said, "use the whole tree. Don't just cut a wedge and leave the rest to die."

He shook Justo's hand—a firm, Godoy handshake, not a finger-touching Indian one—and he and his compañera disappeared into the forest.

Justo did what the subcomandante said, and filled his sacks with as many chunks of cocobolo from the one tree as he could carry. Back in town, he contracted two plaza urchins to help him, not with the carving itself, which was his own secret skill, but with the tedious gluing of the leaves, which their small fingers performed well even as their bodies squirmed with impatience.

He had decided to accept Casimiro Xul's offer. Casimiro Xul bought all the trees the Godoys had in their shops, and commissioned another fifty from Justo. Justo and the boys labored on the plaza benches to the sound of the clacking typewriters under the arches. Justo wondered how Saturnino and the other Godoys were taking his decision. In stride, he hoped. After all, Casimiro Xul had paid them fairly for their stock of Justo's trees.

Besides, soon enough Saturnino would understand why Justo needed all the money he was going to make: to buy two plots in the panteón, the Godoy cemetery, good plots by the west wall where his mother was buried, for him and his father.

One hot afternoon, an afternoon so hot that even the grackles were stifled into silence, Saturnino approached Justo. It was siesta time, and the other typists had gone home to their hammocks. Justo had sent the boys to their shady spot by the river. The municipal palace guard dozed, standing, against his pillar.

"Still at work, are we?" said Saturnino.

"Sleepy shrimp get taken by the tide," Justo replied.

"Ah, qué Justo," Saturnino said. "Well, I have another job for you, a small job. If you're not too busy, that is."

Saturnino, wiping the sweat from his oily brow with a dirty red handkerchief, explained what he wanted. He wanted Justo to carve a jaguar-head seal, a wooden stamp he could use on wax seals for letters. Justo occasionally did jobs like this; some time back, when Saturnino still used a manual typewriter, he'd had Justo replace the worn letters on his keys with polished wooden ones. Justo also made keys for xylophones: the density of the cocobolo wood gave the marimbas great resonance.

"The jaguar head is the logo of the rebels," Justo said.

"Precisely so. They've commissioned me to print and seal their official correspondence. They send it to me over the Net, from the jungle, and I print it and send it on for them. You mustn't tell anyone, nephew. But business is business, no?"

"Mine is the silence of the tomb."

It made sense for the rebels to use Saturnino's services. It was part of the reconciliation. Even the government had entered a kind of truce with the rebels, the rebels conceding the town to the government troops and the government allowing the rebels their jungle sanctuaries. When they communicated, they did so now

through letters and newspaper articles and the Net, rather than with bullets.

Justo recalled the leaflets the rebels had packed in the little bomb that had exploded in front of a Godoy store on the plaza, in the early days of the rebellion. The bomb had gone off—a loud pop, which sent a narrow plume of black smoke straight into the air, and the grackles too—at this same sleepy hour, scattering the leaflets, and shattering the window of the store and hurling Justo's trees to the ground but otherwise doing no harm. The leaflets, each stamped with the rebels' jaguar-head logo, warned the Godoys to cease harassing the Xuls and Xul efforts to set up their own enterprises. Justo had picked up one of the leaflets and studied the logo before throwing it away.

After the rebels' brief occupation of the town, the rebellion became international news. The tourists of revolution began to appear. The Xuls were allowed to set up their own stores. Xuls, not wanting bad blood, used Saturnino and his computer for their typing needs. And Saturnino was apparently happy to oblige. Business was business.

Justo carved the stamp that very day from a bright block of cocobolo, its red streaked with luminous striations of black and purple and deep orange. He carved the jaguar's head with his tiniest chisel, and smoothed the edges with an emery board the way a beautician might treat the most elegant nails. He rubbed the finished stamp with copal resin, whose scent mingled with the smell of roses from the wood.

"Very good, very good!" said Saturnino that evening, delighted. "What an eye for detail."

Justo refused payment, but Saturnino insisted. "Don't offend me, nephew," he said. And then added, mysteriously: "Soon there'll be plenty for us both."

Justo no longer visited his mother's grave every night. Now he went only on Sunday nights, but always still near midnight, when the grackles were sure to be through with their mockery. The crews that took care of the cemetery grounds had butchered the laurels into box shapes with their big scissors, but the grackles still insisted on roosting in them: absurd, evil ornaments.

The night of July 1 he was not particularly concerned about their jeering, though, because his mood was good. In a few days, considering the number of trees he had sold to Xul, he'd be able to make a down payment on his new plots. If the birds wanted to jeer, they could jeer the Godoy who had passed out drunk on the railroad tracks and had his leg severed; he'd buried the leg in the panteón, and on the Day of the Dead he'd hobbled to its plot with a bottle of mescal and sprinkled the soil with it, as if with holy water.

Justo was thinking about the Godoy leg when he heard a plop by the cemetery wall. He went to investigate, and found a soft bundle wrapped tightly with brown packing tape. As he picked it up, a burst of automatic gunfire severed the night, sending the grackles to the sky in a single shriek.

"Entrégate, cabrón!" a hoarse voice yelled, as a row of soldiers emerged along the wall, pointing their rifles at him.

"So you kept an eye on the typewriters from your bench on the plaza, and when the typists were at siesta and no one was watching, you typed this letter," the army captain said to Justo. He thrust a paper at Justo through the bars of the jail cell:

CASIMIRO XUL: IN VIEW OF YOUR EXPLOITATION OF INDIGENOUS LABOR YOU ARE ORDERED IN THE NAME OF REVOLUTIONARY JUSTICE TO DROP THE QUANTITY OF $50,000 M.N. IN RETRIBUTORY TAXES SUNDAY JULY 1 AT 23:00 HOURS BEHIND THE WEST WALL OF THE MUNICIPAL CEMETERY. LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE!

The letter had a wax jaguar-head seal at the bottom.

"I don't know what it says," said Justo, massaging his tender ribs where the soldiers had struck him with the butts of their guns. "I don't know how to read!"

"No?" said the captain. "All Godoys know how to read."

"He wrote it!" Justo said, thrusting his finger at Saturnino, who sat in a metal chair beside the captain's desk, looking into the middle distance, stone-faced.

"We know the letter's from his printer," said the captain. "But the seal, pendejo, the seal. Who else but you could carve such a fine seal?"

"I carved it on his orders. He used it!"

"Yet we found it among your instruments," the captain said, a smile spreading his thick moustache.

Justo observed the stamp gleaming among his chisels and files. Eventually the captain would force him to stand for his perpetrator's picture, with the letter, the stamp, his tools and the bundle of money he'd allegedly tried to extort from Casimiro Xul all spread out on a table in front of him.

"I knew the message was a fake," said Casimiro Xul, glaring at Justo. "The rebels wouldn't try to shake me down."

They passed the stamp around. "It's good." "The work of a master!" "The rebels won't be pleased at such a fraudulent use of their symbols."

The captain, Saturnino Godoy, and Casimiro Xul gathered around the captain's desk. The captain produced a deck of cards and shuffled. As he dealt them, he called to Justo: "When the rebels are through with you, where do you want to be buried? In the panteón? Or shall we leave you in the monte, where the jaguars can eat you?"