Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional
The Tree, The Rock, and the Morrow
A Zapatist Story
December 19, 2024

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In those big meetings Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés tell us about, sometimes terrible and wondrous stories appear. Stories with which Zapatismo presents itself, explains itself, looks at itself in the mirror to understand itself. The Zapatista peoples, men women and others, tend to represent themselves with a character they call "Chompiras", nicknamed so because when he was a boy and practiced with a shooter —also called a slingshot in the city— every time that he hit a bullseye —which tended to be a plastic bottle, a beer can, or a can of well-known cola— he would exclaim, "CHOMPIRAS!"

Another stone, another bullseye —another "CHOMPIRAS!"

And he was stuck with the name.

Chompiras was a boy when the 1994 uprising began. Astonished, he saw how his parents, his older siblings, the women and the men, and even those of old age or heart, prepared and trained because they had heard, "*War is coming*." Chompiras, although young, understood that one day it would be his turn to fight, so

he would take his shooter and practice. When Chompiras grew up, he set down his shooter although he never stopped practicing because he believed, "*One day it's going to be needed.*"

He became a public health representative, an education representative, an authority representative, a militiaman —an insurgent.

In one of those jobs he met someone who would become his companion, Lucecita. Contrary to what one might think, it wasn't Chompiras who declared his love for Lucecita, rather it was her who, as some might say, "wooed him."

"You see, Chompiras is *slooooow* to understand. And no matter how much I flirted with him, he simply did not get it. So I just simply had to declare my love. Had I not, I would still be single. And Chompiras would still be thinking about it."

That's how Lucecita explained it to the late Sub Marcos —with whom she would gossip— when he asked her why had she taken the initiative and broken, unintentionally, with society's customs and traditions between couples.

Sub Marcos, just to be annoying and bothersome, asked, "And what if he says he doesn't like you? What will you do?"

"Ah, the thing is that I see him looking at me, and he sees me looking at him, and Chompiras is slow with words, but his eyes say a lot, and it's easy to understand what he means," replied Lucecita.

Sub Marcos, screwing around, insisted, "But what if you're wrong and he doesn't like you? Or if he already has someone else? What will you do?"

Lucecita takes her time to value the counter-argument and replies, "Well, then I say that there's no shame in it; I'll cry for a bit, not a lot, but still cry quite a bit. Then I'll give him a scolding, slap him, and tell him, 'Go on, git! I'll go and find someone else.'"

According to the town gossip, "That couple won't last." They were and are too different. Chompiras is more inclined to practical things, to solve the matter through trial and error —that's to say— he would first do things badly, and then, later, fix them,—or try to. And on the other hand, Lucecita was good at studying, analysis,

The partisans finish off their beers, and they leave, half-drunk, in search of more. But they just stay there, strewn about, unconscious, covered in mud, vomit, and piss. And one of them in blood because when he fell, he hit his head on a rock. And they stayed there until their wives and children come and, in whatever way they can, take them away, dragging him away to a shack so he can sleep it off because he has to wake up early tomorrow to go get the government aid.

And that's how they live in that town, some work and others loaf around.

Little by little, the clouds and trees' shadows cover the town.

Night arrives but the stars don't.

Not even the Moon peeks out a little.

Then, first a light wind, *small*, as if asking permission.

Then, later, a handful of raindrops.

Then, the Storm.

science; what's more, at making plans, in thinking things through before doing them.

Contrary to what one may think, the couple stayed together while others broke up. They found the way to understand each other, to complement each other —in short—: to be a couple.

In short, the tale of that love story is a different tale, so I'll move on.

Everyday Chompiras would go to his *milpa* by the same path, sometimes Lucecita would accompany him and sometimes she wouldn't; be it because she had a "*Mujeres que somos*" meeting, because she had classes, or because she had to tend to a patient —since Lucecita was a health representative. And —*of course*— sometimes they would fight and get angry with each other.

Chompiras would say that Lucecita would sometimes cook "very strangely," and that's what made his stomach hurt. Lucecita defended herself saying that, "it doesn't matter," because she knew "what mountain to go to or what herb to use to treat it" to make a tea to cure Chompiras.

And that's how they would fight, and later please themselves doing "little things." And the following day they would both be shining.

I don't know what they meant by "little things"; but yes! The following day both their eyes would be glowing, as if they had seen everything and all.

On one of those days, on the way to his work, Chompiras saw an old tree, aged, as if fainting, as if leaning to say, "Here and no more."

Chompiras went to look at the tree, analyzed it, and concluded that it would soon fall down; that one more storm would beat its roots and it would fall down precisely on the path he took everyday. But Chompiras studied well the terrain that was around the tree —which happened to be on a hillside— he got to the top of the hill, and saw a huge rock —gigantic— located just a couple meters from the tree.

Chompiras stood at the rock's place and looked below, seeing where the rock would go if it were to fall. In the distance —but not that far— stood the school, the town's chapel, and various community workplaces: coffee fields, *milpas*, bean and vegetable fields, pastures and paddocks.

Chompiras looked and said, "Hm."

And he went off looking for Lucecita.

She had just gotten back from a *Mujeres que somos* meeting where, of course and as it should be, they had just been badmouthing "the fucking men." Chompiras gave Lucecita a summary of what he'd seen, Lucecita heard him out, went to get her notebook, a ruler, protractor, compass and said, "Let's go."

On arriving, Lucecita looked at the tree, reached the huge rock, took out her notebook and started doing calculations. And she'd take her ruler and say, "Hm."

Then took her protractor and compass, and again, "Hm."

She looked at Chompiras and said, "Yes."

The two of them quickly returned and gathered their town's Zapatista collective. They talked, explained, the comrades listened quietly. When the explanation was over they all looked among themselves and said, "Hm."

The Local Autonomous Government's authority said, "Let's go and see." And they went in a heap, in a pile really. They looked at the tree, they looked at the rock, circled around in a heap, in a pile really, and returned.

They held an assembly, invited everyone in town —everyone—, it didn't matter if they were partisans or Zapatistas or ex-Zapatistas, Catholics, Presbyterians, Evangelists, Protestants, Muslims, or without religion. The GAL's, Local Autonomous Government, commission appointed to explain it to the assembly, talked and detailed what they saw. They put forward their own conclusion: the tree will fall down soon, it couldn't be saved.

"Even if we added wooden supports, it will not keep, it will fall and it will block the pathway to the community's workshops.

Speak with your parents, your grandparents, those old of age and heart who are still alive, and they'll tell you that, in truth, this was our way as indigenous peoples.

Bring your machete, your shovel, your spike, your hammer, your chainsaw —whatever, but don't forget to bring your will to work because if you only come to loaf around, that's no good. Oh! And if you can, bring more *pozol*, because Chompiras here is a greedy-guts and he's nearly finished it all by himself."

And they all laughed.

And together, partisans and Zapatistas alike, all stare Chompiras down because *just then* he had the mustache covered in *pozol*, and since he was in a hurry so that they wouldn't see him, he hadn't even bothered to wipe his face clean.

"Unbelievable. Lucecita surely won't give him a little kiss now."

And as Sub Moi says, "If the information doesn't fully reach up and down, oh well."

But another group of partisans arrived, and looked at the work and began and make fun of it. "Oh, how stupid are the Zapatistas, what's the point in working double and without pay? Unlike us who get government aid, and don't even work the *milpa* because we have pay and can pay a farmhand to do it or buy corn instead. I myself am even a small property owner, and one day I'll be a big rancher. I even sent my sons away to work on the other side so they could send me more pay, and I've sold their land inheritance to pay the smuggler that took them, and I don't know if they arrived. And now that I'm thinking about it, I still haven't paid off the debt on the fucking interest, and I don't know if they are alive or dead; but no matter, let them deal with that. And suddenly I'm further in debt because I have to get more pay to give a part to the government and to the cartel —which are one and the same— so that they don't take my name off the aid list. And I'll move to the city and start up my shop and become very rich, and I'll have to pay the floor standing to the cartel —which is the government— and you all will still be here, poor and working."

working and ask to speak with with them. The Zapatistas, without leaving their work behind, tell them to speak freely, that their hands are busy but their ears are clean because they washed them and can hear very well. The partisans begin to speak. In short, they say "if it turns out that everything happens exactly like how the Zapatistas say it will, that if the Bad Governments" —that's how they speak, they say "Bad Governments"— "fails to deliver as usual? What if they lose everything? And what if they don't wish to be displaced?" Because "their land there, they were born there, their center is buried there. Their history is there: the land of their parents, their grandparents, their great-grandparents, their ancestors…"

The partisans look at each other and give pause, as if to gather the courage to keep speaking.

The Zapatistas keep on working and keep on listening.

Then, at last, the partisans gather the courage and ask if they could also "help out in their work?" "What else is gonna be needed?" Because they "have growing children and one day they will go off to do 'their little things'?" Because God said it must be so, that it's not bad to do "little things," but not by force, but instead by both in equal mutual agreement between the two.

And "what if other children pop out?" Because if our father Adam and our mother Eve don't do their "little things," then no it's no surprise, it's too bad: there's no humans, and we won't exist, and we wouldn't be here talking. So it's *fine* to do "little things," but carefully, and in order to have children you've agreed to with the *compañera*, both mutually and together. And so, "children will pop out anyways, and more children of those children. And so, even if there's no misfortune, there won't be anywhere to go. We'll be lost right away."

"So," say the partisans after another pause, "we wanted to ask if we could also work to help ourselves."

The Zapatistas keep on working, rest their ears, and respond, "Of course brother, yes sister; what we do here is for all —not just for the Zapatistas. What we're building here is called the Commons.

But that's not the problem —or not just that— because there's a worse one still," said the GAL *compañera* and she was right, "because when the tree fell it would take other trees with it, and with their roots torn off, it would loosen the soil and that would weaken the base of the big rock, which was very heavy and stayed aloft the mountain thanks to the trees that reinforced the terrain it rested on. The rock would overpower its base and roll downhill. It would go on to flatten all the trees along its path."

"But that's not the problem —or not just that— because there's a worse one still," finished the *compañero* from the Local Autonomous Government, "the route the rock would take on its quest downwards points to the chapel, the school, the little stores, fields and shops of the townspeople, Zapatista and partisan alike."

"That is, as some would put it, the town will be destroyed," added the autonomous *compañera*.

Everybody looked at one another and said, "Hm."

And a bustle began in the assembly, whether "To do" or "Not to do," that "It's a Zapatista lie," "No, it's not." "Yes it is," "No it's not." They spent time arguing.

And it came to pass that the information had been spread and everyone could proceed as they saw fit, that is, they all said that "It's up to each to decide for themselves."

The group —that is, the Zapatistas of the town— had a separate meeting, as such, and reached an agreement on what they would do because it was clear to see what was going happen and they weren't just gonna resign and wait; or to pray that the storm doesn't come, and that it doesn't rain, and that the wind doesn't blow, and that the tree doesn't fall, and that it doesn't take other trees with it, and that the soil beneath the rock doesn't become loose, and that the stone doesn't take other trees with it, and that it doesn't destroy the chapel and the school, and the fields, and the little shops, and the houses and the whole town.

So they think and they think.

And somebody says something!

And everyone looks at him as if to say, "Don't be foolish *compadre.*"

And then another says something else, and everyone stares at her like, "C'mon *comadre*, simply unbelievable."

And that's how they deliberated, contributing ideas, saying foolishness, but also well though-out words.

They took their time, not just a while, but days, weeks, months, years instead, racking their heads with what to do. And the time came when they reached an agreement. They made a subplan, organized themselves, divvied up the tasks: who does what and at what time in such a way that everyone had enough time and the means to help each other.

And they began to go at it. They began to farming a *milpa*, bean field, coffee field, pastures, vegetable garden, sheds, small shops — but on the other side of the town. They raised another chapel and another school, and built a basketball court, but they were being sly because they were really in it so that they could dance cumbia instead without dealing with the mud. And, well, it serves to play basketball and volleyball, and to learn to ride a bike for those who are afraid of gravel: that's for you.

And they build a clinic that ended up being a little crooked, but they painted it in many colors so that it you can't tell it's crooked. They said that even the captain mocks the clinic saying that you need to enter like how Pedro Infante says, "Crouched, and to the side." And the captain sings very wildly, so they "better paint it so that the captain doesn't sing any more, and instead looks at the drawings and the signs," and not see that, "yes, the door is crooked."

And they then built another structure that at first no one knew what it was. And the GAL, the Local Autonomous Government, explains that it is to be a laboratory and an operating room. That comrades in other places and locations would back it because *they would also* be their operating rooms and laboratories. And that other comrade doctors would arrive to give courses and stick knives in when the medicine was not enough to beat sickness and,

"oh well, they will also open up your stomach with a machete because, what if there are no knives?!" Ah, you see?

The crooked houses are not for the comrades from elsewhere, those go to the comrade masons who, due to singing corridos, rancheras, and banda, didn't see that the wall, and the roof, and the door were crooked. "Here comes the captain again just to criticize. Quick! Form a pile and close the door, and turn up the music as if we're dancing. No, not that one, put on *El Moño Colorado*, it'll make the captain leave faster."

While they were going at it hard and fast at work, a group of partisans look over and ask, "Why are you working double if you already have workshops? Why another chapel if you already have one, and it was even blessed by the Pastor? Why another school if the one you have is the New Mexican School? And the government already promised to fix the old roof with the oxidized tiles, and the walls that are all worn out and sometimes worms, and scorpions, and rats and even violin spiders pop out. And the teacher doesn't come because the government won't pay him and he can't afford the ticket. But real change is coming and they'll pay him fairly now!" And they ask, "Why are the Zapatistas so happy and cheerful telling jokes —singing even— when they are working overtime?"

And the Zapatistas, without setting down the work, reply, "Oh, brother, sister, don't you see that a great misfortune is coming?" And they explain the situation with the tree and the rock and the storm, and what will happen. "If you don't believe us, go and see for yourself, and decide for yourself," they tell them.

A group of partisans go to see the tree, and see the rock, and see the horizon, and see that it's getting cloudy, and that the clouds are getting dark already. And say among themselves that in other towns there's talk of huge rains, of very fierce winds, and a big destruction and misfortune, and how they were displaced because they lost everything. That group of partisans meet separately and reach an agreement, and they go back to where the Zapatistas are