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**The New Year: A Meditation Prompted by a
Recent Re-examination of Mayan Ritual**

To tell the truth, we have both become noticeably more irritable within the past several days. That is perhaps more difficult to perceive in me, for I am not by nature an even-tempered person, but my consort is as calm as water under the moon—birds might easily nest in her cupped palms. Yet last night after I had fallen asleep she awakened me with a touch, whether gentle or firm I cannot say, but enough to startle me so that my hammock swayed. “You’re sleeping with your mouth open,” she said. “Turn a little—you’re snoring.”

I suppose no one likes being awakened, although some are more able than others to extinguish that little spark of anger which seems to twitch us into consciousness, and ordinarily, despite my querulousness, I belong to the former group, but not that midnight. “Damn it!” I cried. “Now I’ll never be able to get back to sleep!” I turned away, partly petulant but partly also, I suppose, in response to her suggestion. Does it say something about our species, that we habitually have to be dragged into the world of wakefulness? Is it that we recognize in that brief and shadowy transition between non-being and being the intolerable burden of self-consciousness that we shall, like the mantle I wear, have to assume for all the days of our lives? The jaguar, the parrot, have but to open their eyes to be; they need assume nothing; in worshipping them we pay homage to pure being.

After a while she said, “What are you thinking?”

For a moment I did not reply, but then I said, “The same thing you are. Being and non-being.”

“How long have there been kings?”

I shifted back so that I could reach out and catch the strings of her hammock. “What a peculiar thing to say. What makes you ask that?”

“Nothing. I was simply wondering.”

For a long while we both lay silently, but then I spoke. "I know why you're asking. From the beginning of time as far as I know. What you really want to know, isn't it, is how long the earth has needed to drink the blood of animals and men?"

She slid upwards into a sitting position and reached out to lay her long fingers on my lips. "Do you know how long it has taken my tongue to heal, to be able to talk without mumbling, to eat without wincing in pain, to laugh without spitting blood?"

"I cannot answer your question," I said. "Where is your faith?"
"Faith in what?"

"What? In men, in the gods, in the order of the universe."

"You don't fool me at all," she said, "although you're very good at pretending." She lay back down. I said nothing more, and eventually, after much twisting and turning, we both drifted into sleep. She was right, of course, not so much about the very moment of the ceremony itself, because at that point we have drugged ourselves, but certainly before and after, which is, all in all, for most of the time. She knows, holding the pot up to me, what agony it is for me to urinate, how I bite my lips until, again, the salt blood comes. And then, how long afterwards until I can perform the duties of a husband, not with pleasure, but simply without pain. Last time, months later, she said to me in a moment of tranquillity, "Are we attacking each other as well as ourselves? Do you imagine that it is my hand clutching the spine, and, in revenge, is it my twitching heart you offer in bloody hands to the gods?"

I did not know how to answer and I rose to wash. She is a person too complicated, too introspective, for the public ritual we must embody, and which, by its continuity, maintains the world. She can barely maintain herself. I have watched her at play with the children and winced to see her tears of sympathy at a skinned knee or bloodied lip. And yet I could not bring myself to speak to her, child herself, although I believe that she has infected me. This morning when I wakened, the dawn behind the spidery trees brightened into thin green glass so that, for a moment, at least, the world of our heavy velvet darkness had paused, on its way to light, as an ephemeral and delicate etching. I would have raised my hand and stopped it there, settled for the abstraction, had I the power. "Look!" I said, taking her by the upper arm, and she looked, but already the day lay heavily upon her, and she replied, "Soon it will be light enough to see the faces of the captives."

I grew angry again. "Would you sacrifice the world because it must be sustained by a violence which the gods have reduced to a ritual? We have demanded that they recognize human nature and they have responded by protecting us from ourselves. But the earth is vast and all the blood spilled upon it soon vanishes. Mothers smile, children play, hunters return laden from the hunt. . . ."

She interrupted me, pulling away from my grasp. "Laden with death."

"But we must eat," I said, "what would you have us do, eat grass like the lower beasts?"

"Why not? You do not like us as we are. You have told me that the ritual of blood and pain is a price we must pay. Would you not be glad to see our nature change, to see the gods smile for once, rather than laugh or frown."

"Of course. It is not sacrilege to admit that." I reached for her hand and kissed her painted almond nails. "It is simply that I do not think we can change—we must struggle with our nature as it is." I pressed my thumb against the centre of her palm but her fingers did not close about it, and I let her hand slip away.

"I can change." she said, moving back into the doorway of our chamber. "Listen. Tomorrow I will not chew the leaves. Nothing from now until then. Nothing. I shall make the hole in my tongue and insert the chain of thorns, but *you* must pull it through, inch by barbed inch." She passed before me and tugged my ears until I lowered my face toward hers and gazed into her emerald eyes. "Look at me now! Tomorrow you will look thusly at me while your hands are busy. I shall try not to close my eyes, but I cannot promise not to cry."

"You would refuse?" I asked. "How could you? It is not my place. . . ."

"The priests will love it. You have only to mention that the pain and cruelty will be greater, and perhaps they will find some way to justify my action." She had released my ears, but for a long time she remained before me, pressing her palms against my cheeks, but then she dropped her arms and stepped away. "Tell them now, if you like."

"Don't be foolish," I said, "it is merely a notion. What you feel, or what perhaps we both feel, ought not to be articulated because then we are deluded into believing that it really exists as an option. *We must* preserve the ritual as it has always existed, or else we give our savage natures full range and license to destroy. Look beyond our boundaries and what do you see? Squalor and misery—barbarism, where each

man's hand is upon his fellow. Would you have us return to that?" I tried to take her wrist, but again she moved beyond my reach.

"We know nothing," she said. "A few miles of jungle and grass, and beyond that, travellers' tales. Our little world may be the exception rather than the rule. Perhaps we may be the only state among many to worship cruel gods." She passed into the chamber and I did not follow, thinking that there would yet be time enough.

I had led her to believe that I did not take her seriously, but nevertheless I could not help but put the question to our chief priest, as the two of us prepared for the festival. I held one of the spines up before me, testing the sharpness of its point with the ball of my index finger. "What if one, I, were to refuse to thrust this through my flesh, or spirit willing I could not command my hand? What then?"

He was bent over the tray on which the instruments would be placed, but I could see that he had ceased smoothing the embroidered cloth. "What a peculiar thing to ask," he said. "Why do you want to know?" He resumed his puttering.

I said, "Because the thought occurred to me. Surely such a thing has taken place. There must be a precedent. As a matter of fact, now that I think of it, it cannot be uncommon at all, for, if we have come to expect one thing of human nature, in addition to its savagery, it is its inconsistency. Come, tell me! You priests must have it all worked out."

He straightened and turned slowly about to face me, his lined and mahogany face as expressionless as a ceremonial mask. "Yes, we do. I am surprised that you do not know—you would take your place among the captives."

He made a motion as if to turn away, but I had been king long enough to know my people, and man long enough to know human nature, and I prevented him. "No—stay! Is that all? You will pardon me if I seem cynical, but it is so simple it almost smells of mercy. Our beliefs condone this form of royal suicide?"

"*Her* hand must be upon the knife that takes your life." His face revealed nothing.

"And if she should refuse?"

"I would do for both." He held up his hand, the edge of his palm towards me. "But your line would perish."

"Both sons and daughters?" He nodded, biting his lip as if to say something else, but he did not. I said to him, "You would like to know if anything of that sort is a distinct possibility? Let us conclude. You, too, will have to await the morrow."

So am I to be blamed for telling her? I watched her kiss the children into sleep, and afterwards, knowing how long our torn flesh would dictate abstinence, we came together as man and wife, but it would not work. "Do you see," she said, "how this single yearly act colors our existence?"

"This is the eve of the event. It is to be expected. We have our days of pleasure."

"At too great a price."

"We may not choose—we serve the state." I pulled her towards me again, to whisper into the tracery of her ear. "Tell me now that you were but embroidering an idle thought. You shall not refuse?"

Her hand rested as lightly and briefly on my arm as a butterfly on a flower. "Of all people I would not lie to you. I am resolved—but I am afraid."

I told her then, that it would be I who would have to remove her heart from the narrow cavity of her chest, and if I refused, my death too, and the children's. Should I not have done so? How few martyrs there would be if they understood the complexity of their acts. She said nothing but I felt her hot tears on my arm. "You know," I said, "that I would die for you, but would you ask more from me, that I choose between you and the children?" She tried to speak, but I placed my hand upon her lips. "I know what the mother would say, but what if I were to prefer to die than to live without you? Or, what is worse, what if, coward at the last, I should conceal my fear of death under the guise of protecting our children? How would I then live, knowing that I preferred your death to mine? Oh, do not force this choice upon me—I, too, am afraid!"

She turned away, and once again we lay a long time in silence, until she rose and went to the door to gaze up at the moon. The parrot stirred in its cage. "So we are caught," she said, finally, her voice so soft that it seemed but a memory, "trapped in that cyclic ritual of violence . . ." She paused and then went on. "I feel, now, its thorny bands upon my flesh. How to escape? The people must be shown that something else is possible."

"What they will see and remember and tell their children, is more blood, the blood of royal hearts."

"Perhaps they will choke upon a surfeit."

"When has that happened? Unless we are bound by this ritual of mortification and the death of our enemies, whom we call non-men, the rivers will run red with blood. Men will discover, in their lawless-

ness, that they loathe life, their own perhaps just slightly less than the sum of the rest. Depend upon it."

"If I, we, for I trust you to preserve our children, can make this sacrifice, then others can. If one can, then all can."

It was my turn to fall silent, because I felt that further argument would only stiffen her resolve. In any case, what could I reply? That every flower is unique, that there can be no other quite like it? She would have replied, then, "Close will do." and we should have come to logic chopping. She did not sleep again and neither did I, and now the moment has come.

Below, the city gathered, murmurous like the wind in the trees, the midday sun heavy upon their dark upturned faces, and here above, we two, children, priests, and the chained captives, their eyes upon the ground. These non-men look strangely like men, act like men in their passive acceptance of the necessity for dying. Perhaps for them, as for us, the drama is all, and the remainder, sun and trees and the restless multitude, is illusion. They sweat and tremble, however, despite themselves.

She knows that I, too, have simulated the chewing of the leaves, as does the chief priest. His eyes, as well as hers, are quick, and quick also to glance down at the edge of flint he must use. I should have questioned him further: perhaps he, also, must offer his flesh to the heavy-bodied vulture for the sin of having let the royal blood. And she—does my abstinence make her hope or fear? I cannot answer, for all depends upon her act.

Our hands touch as we take up the spines, mine, one of four that I must use, and quickly so that I may see what she has done. The poor shrivelled thing, like a rotten fruit, opens easily under the press of my fingers, but the pain is strong and hard as obsidian and, for a moment, mists my sight, so that when I look up her face glistens like the sun upon moving water, and I must blink to see the blood well from the channel of her tongue and drip into the bowl which a priest holds up before her. Scattered drops stain the whiteness of her robe and glisten on the skin of her breast. The chief priest cups her hand in his and places in it the thorn-tipped chain and closes her fingers about it.

Quickly, now, I take up another spine, but before I thrust it in, I hold it up before her face, still, while the seconds flee, still, to catch her eyes, and then I push it through and wait until my vision clears to look up.

Her hands are at her sides, the barbed chain dangles, almost long enough to brush the ground. She waits until my gaze falls upon hers, and then she lifts the chain and inserts the thorn, threading her tongue,

and begins to pull the clusters of barbs through the bloody, starred hole. What do I read in those emerald eyes? Defeat, despair? Have I, we, lost her, extinguished in her the purest, the most concentrated spark of all that is best in humankind, turning, again, each new year into the old, a measured space of death and dying, before it has begun? Or has she won a victory, a victory over the self which prevented her from joining us in the knowledge of our common bond of suffering? Or is it, finally, simply resignation, and shall I find her this eve, and for all the days of our lives, a puppet or doll, swaying in the hammock under my hand?