

Sacnik and the Yax Cacao

This is a story from the time of our fathers, when Ch'ulwitznal was a great city and our ancestors were wise and strong.

Here, then, is the young woman whose name is Sacnik, a farmer's daughter, living with her mother and her father at the edge of the city. The white flower was the sign of her birth, it was the sign of her name, and the world tree with its white flowers was the holy tree on the day she was born. All of her brothers were married, all of her sisters were married. She was the youngest child, and she alone remained in the hut of her parents.

This is how Sacnik was: she always remembered to pray at her family's shrines. On Ix days, she offered her blood to her ancestors and prayed for them to look after her mother and her father. On Manik days, she offered white flowers and chips of fragrant cedar. On K'awil days, she gave newly-kindled fire and bits of broken mirrors and thanked her ancestors for their blessings. On Ik' days, she burned the bright shells of the precious metal scarab, and she prayed for the health of the babies of her brothers and sisters. On Cimi days, Sacnik painted her face with soot and wept for those of her ancestors who had died wrongfully. Sacnik was not a daykeeper; it was not her task to observe the holy days



for her family. But on all those days she always went with her father and her mother to the shrines. That was just her way.

Because Sacnik was a farmer's daughter, she never went far from her father's house. She visited the family shrines, and she went to the market with her mother, and when the men of power held feasts, she went with her mother and father to see the dances and to meet the young women and men who lived in their part of the city. Sacnik always wore her brightest clothing to the feasts, but the young men hardly looked at her.

"She is too short," they said. "She is too thin. Where is her strength? How will she grind maize and make bread?" So no one came to speak with her father. No one brought gifts. In truth Sacnik was not too thin or too short. It was just that she was always thinking of her ancestors and the gods and the goddesses and the holy days, and so she seemed distant, and smaller than she really was. People just didn't see her.

At her family's lineage shrine, Sacnik prayed for a husband. She did not ask for a great man, only one with some strength, and a warm heart. That was all she asked for. Still no one came for her. Still she was alone. But Sacnik did not complain to her mother or father. Though her heart ached for a good husband, she did not surrender to the lords of despair.

Now we have one of the men of power of the city declaring



a feast. He was a t'aakin, a Speaker in the council meetings for all those farmers who live on the northern side of the city. On the day 13 lk the criers went into the markets, they went into the plazas, to give word of the feast. All the farmers and their wives and children were invited to the palace of the t'aakin, to the square outside his palace.

"The t'aakin is ending his year of sorrow," shouted the criers. "He is seeking a new wife. In twenty days a feast will be held, and the t'aakin will take gifts. The woman who brings the best gift will gain his attention. It is her parents who will receive a rich bride-price and who will be served for all their days."

"Who has ever heard of such a thing?" said the people. "He wants gifts given to him? He is the one who should be giving gifts! Even at sorrow's end, he is trying to become wealthier."

But those words did not stop women from preparing gifts, anyway. The t'aakin was a handsome man at the beginning of his strength, and everyone knew that he treated his first wife like a treasure. There are many women who wanted to be seen by him. Families brought ear spools of green jade and spear tips of red chert for their daughters to give as gifts. Fathers carved fine bone flutes and tobacco pipes, and mothers made headdresses with bright feathers and arm bands of beautiful hide. Some



women wove blankets of bright cotton for the Speaker, and others made painted vases and plates and bowls for his palace. Those women who were more mindful of the holy days made many balls of sweet copal incense and skeleton-faced incensarios for the t'aakin's family shrines. A few women went into the forests and coaxed delicious honey from the bees, and this was their gift. There were even women who made no gift but bathed themselves with the milk of the tapir and honeyed their hair and rubbed their skin with pumice stone for smoothness. Those were the ones who bargained for flowers for their hair and bright paint for their toenails and their faces. It was only little sheets of paper that they made for the t'aakin—small pieces of rolled bark paper with prayers written on them by the scribes. "It is this prayer which I have for him, and a woman's promise," were their words.

Sacnik and her mother were about to go walking when they hear the t'aakin's criers spread their words. They had water jars on their heads, they were going to the river, but they paused to talk about the t'aakin instead.

"Will you bring a gift to the feast?" Sacnik's mother asked her.

"Mother, you know I have nothing for such a lord," said Sacnik. In truth, her father and mother owned no jade, no



obsidian. They did not have silver, or cacao, or brilliant feathers from the mountains. They were just farmers, simple people.

"All great gifts begin with desire," said her mother. "Your desire will lead you."

In her heart, Sacnik did desire the t'aakin. She had seen him at other feasts, talking with the other Speakers from all the parts of the city. Weren't his hairs beginning to turn silver? Wasn't he a man of strength, who had already taken one wife and was wise with women? She knew the Speaker had never seen her, but she had seen him, and her heart knew the pain of wanting.

For twelve days, though, Sacnik could not look for a gift for the t'aakin. That was because of I 2 lx, I 2 lx was coming, and there were many preparations to make for the holy day. That was a day for honoring the flow of blood and spirit between female generations, and Sacnik made her gifts for the family lineage-shrine. When the day came, she and her mother took their balls of copal incense and their slips of paper soaked with their own blood to the shrine and made their offerings and prayers.

They burned their papers, and in the smoke their prayers rose to the gods. Sacnik's name is the name of the white blossom of life, and this was the blossom that burned in the shrine. As Sacnik said the Puksik'al prayers, in her heart she asked that her ancestors



might bring her face to the attention of the t'aakin. "I will find a suitable gift," were the words in her blood. "But men never see me. Only show him my face, only let him see me for a moment. This is all I ask."

There were feathers in the jungle, on the paths and in the ferns, and Sacnik walked along the trails for six days after 12 lx, gathering them. She went slowly, with her small basket only partly full. In it there were some fluffy white feathers and a few long black ones and three narrow red wing-feathers. There were a couple of fat yellow feathers and two twenties tiny blue ones which shimmered in the broken light that came down through the branches. Sacnik knew that she did not have enough feathers for a feather shield, which is what she wanted to make for the t'aakin. There were not even enough for a headband or a pair of armbands. It was only an idea she had, from her head, to make these things, and she can see that her idea was no good.

There were only two days until the feast, and she did not know what to make, and her family could not buy anything magnificent in the market. Sacnik stopped at the shore of the great river and turned over her basket so that the feathers fell onto the water and washed away. "I am no feather weaver," she

said. "The birds withhold their feathers from me, because they know my clumsy fingers will only waste their beauty." She sat on a boulder on the bank and wept. "All my brothers have married, and their children grow strong," she said aloud. She did that sometimes, talked to herself when she was thinking. Sometimes she talked to her ancestors, too. "All my sisters have married, and they have children. Am I to be fruitless while they blossom?" As she said those words the feathers spun down into the river. It was as though watery hands pulled them down.

There was a rustling of reeds behind Sacnik, and a strong woman's voice said, "What is this you are saying, girl? And what are you doing here, alone by the river? Don't you know that ain, the crocodile, lives in places such as this?"

Sacnik turned and saw a tall, old woman wearing a pik, a frock, of blue-green spider silk. Many strong-smelling pouches hung from her belt, and she carried a knife of green obsidian, like an herb-gatherer.

"Who are you, oh, grandmother?" said Sacnik.

"I am only one who has heard your words and come to see your face."

"I do not know you," said Sacnik. "How is it that you are out here in the jungle?"



The old woman only laughed. "You are afraid that I serve ah-Puch? Look at my belt. Do the servants of ah-Puch wear such pouches?"

"Truly, grandmother, I have never heard of them doing so."

"Then you know I do not serve the lord of murder. Now tell me, why are you weeping?"

"It is only a small thing," said Sacnik. "It was only a gift I wished to make, but there are not enough feathers."

"Then perhaps it is not feathers you need," said the old woman. "Perhaps you should seek something else."

Sacnik only said, "There is no time to weave anything good, and I have no other talents for making things. I am a farmer's daughter, not an artisan."

"Maybe there is more to you than you know. Walk with me," said the old woman. "Walk with me, Sacnik, and I will reveal to you another gift."

Now Sacnik stands on the shore of the river, looking at the strange old woman with the pik of spider silk and the pouches of herbs. Only a fool trusted a stranger met in the jungle. But the t'aakin's feast was in two days, and where would she find a gift, on her own?



Sacnik said, "What is your name, oh, grandmother? You know me, but when have we met?"

"For now, you may call me, 'grandmother,' as you have been doing. And who has not heard of the quiet young woman who remembers the holy days before all other things?"

"Oh," said Sacnik. She knew many people thought her too pious and disapproved of her spending so much time at her family's shrines.

"Walk," said the old woman, and she led Sacnik through the cattails and into the jungle. They did not go so far when they came to a circle of sacred ceiba trees, surrounded by thick brush and thorns. There was only one secret path which led to the grove within.

"Here is the gift," said the old woman, and she led Sacnik onto the path. It twisted many times before it came to a stand of cacao trees. There were thirteen trees growing there, under the shade of the ceibas, and each tree had thirteen ripe seed pods hanging from it. All those pods were an old, musky-scented green.

"I have never seen cacao pods like these," said Sacnik. "Shouldn't they be red and brown?"

"These are the cacao trees of Lady Chocolate herself," said



the old woman. "Their fruit is powerful. Anyone who drinks the chocolate made from their seeds will be free of sickness and disease for their entire life."

"How did you know of this place?" said Sacnik, for she had never heard of such a thing, so close to the city of our fathers. "And why are you showing it to me?"

The old woman smiled. "I am showing it to you because you always remember to say prayers for me, when you go to the lineage-shrine. I am showing you because you have always brought me sacrifices of honey and incense and sweet blood. My name is Chelna, and I was your mother's grandmother. As to this grove, many secret things become known to us, after we pass on to the garden of the gods."

"How?" said Sacnik. "How is it that you are here?"

"It was your prayers which opened the road for me. But I can stay no longer. I must tell you two more things, quickly. There is a guardian for this place, so do not rush in. I cannot say more; if you are not clever enough to defeat the guardian, then you must go to the feast without a gift. Also, take only two pods for the feast. Lady Chocolate does not like greed. Do not make the seeds into cacao yet, for the t'aakin should not get used to unmarried women preparing food for him. Make him marry, as



is proper!" That old woman laughed and went back down the trail and disappeared from this world.

Here at the end of the trail is Sacnik, picking up a pebble and tossing it onto the dead leaves of the grove. Right away someone jumped down from the branches to see what had happened. That was a tarantula, as big as Sacnik's hand. He jumped down and pierced the stone with his fangs and stabbed it with the sharp spines on his legs.

"Hmm," said the tarantula. "It is only a stone. How did this come to fall here, I wonder?" He said this because his eyes are weak, and he could not see Sacnik standing in the shadows of the trail.

Sacnik called out, "Good day, tarantula."

The tarantula spun around and raised his front legs toward her, as though he would attack her. "I see you now, skulking there in the shadows," he said. "Who are you, and what are you doing?"

"I am only a young woman who was seeking feathers for a gift," said Sacnik. "Then I saw your beautiful cacao trees. Never have I smelled such wonderful fruit."

"They are only some yax cacao, very green," said the tarantula.



"In this place, the goddess ix-Cacao shed thirteen drops of blood, and they grew into these trees."

"Oh," said Sacnik. "You must serve ix-Cacao, then."

"No, I found my own way here, so this grove is my home. And you are not welcome in it!"

"Well, it is a lovely place, anyway," said Sacnik. "May I take just two of these fruits? Their pulp must be so refreshing."

"You want to take a fruit?" said the spider. "But what will you give me?"

Sacnik said, "I am a farmer's daughter, I have no jade or silver for you."

"What would I do with jade or silver? Listen: in this grove there are only ix-Ai's children, the insects, for me to eat. I desire something more succulent, and tender. Bring me nine baby birds, still warm from their nest, and then you may take two of these fine pods."

Sacnik did not want to feed baby birds to the tarantula, and she said, "Nine is so many! Surely there must be some other thing which would be pleasing to you."

"That is what I desire," he said. "Do not step into this grove without my gift, or it shall be you who is pierced and poisoned!"

"Very well," said Sacnik, and she went down the trail and



back into the jungle.

There was a small sandy hill near the river, covered with stones of all sizes that washed there with the spring floods. Sacnik was walking up the hill and thinking about the tarantula's words. She wanted to go home to speak to her mother about the grove and the things that have happened, but if she leaves, will she ever find the grove again? From the hill she could still see the secret trail, and so it is there that she has stopped to ponder.

"I saw no she-tarantula in that grove," said Sacnik to herself. "Mister tarantula must be very lonely. Maybe he needs a wife. A special wife, to reward his nastiness. Pierce and poison me! Why, they're not even his cacao trees!"

So she took up handfuls of mud, and a large stone, and sticks. She made a spider of these things and stuck coconut hairs onto its legs and body with sweet tree sap. She used chips of black obsidian for its eyes. When she was finished she had a she-tarantula with sparkling eyes and a scented body. It was not a very beautiful spider, but the tarantula's eyes were not good, anyway. Then Sacnik picked up a second large stone and went back to the grove.

The tarantula was not there, under the cacao trees, but she



knew he was hiding in the branches. So she set down the false she-tarantula and stepped back onto the trail. It was only moments before the tarantula smelled the sweet sap on the false spider and jumped down to see who was there. He did a dance, the Dance of the Joyful Spider, and he said:

"From the top of that tree
I saw your eyes shining

From the top of that tree
I saw your legs prancing

From the high branches
I saw your soft hair swaying

I have come to make you mine."

He leaped forward to embrace the she-tarantula, and Sacnik dropped her other stone on his head. It just fell on him and knocked him right out. Only his legs stuck out from under that rock.

"I will leave this she-tarantula here for you," Sacnik said to the sleeping tarantula. "Perhaps her scent and shining eyes will make you happy." She stepped over him and went into the grove and carefully picked two of the freshest-smelling cacao pods. She



did not take three, or six. She took only two, and then she left that place and returned to her father's hut.

"Where did you get those?" asked her mother, and Sacnik told her of the strange grove in the jungle and of the thirteen cacao trees. She said nothing of Chelna's visit, for ancestors choose their visits carefully and do not like talk of their affairs.

"Once I walked away, the trail disappeared," said Sacnik.

"Well," said her mother, "It is as I said, your desire led you to a pleasing gift for the t'aakin. But, you shouldn't present these by themselves. I will weave a basket to put them in." So it was that a palm-frond basket was made for the cacao pods, and a blanket of soft grasses was laid down for them. So radiant was their scent that Sacnik's house was soon filled with the aroma, and even with the feast only two days away, everyone in that house rested easily and dreamed of pleasant things.

The day of the t'aakin's feast was 7 lk, a day set aside by the gods and the goddesses for feasting and honoring one's lineage, and Sacnik and her mother and father rose early to offer burnt incense and ground maize and prayers. There they are, the three of them, dressed in their finest clothing, with new reed sandals woven by Sacnik's mother, at the t'aakin's feast. There were four



thousand people there, eight thousand people, in the plaza around the palace of the Speaker. All the farmers were there, to be seen by the t'aakin and the other men of power, and their wives were there to talk and to barter for trinkets. And all their children ran and played in the plaza, around the legs of their parents.

At the center of the plaza stood long tables bearing the rich feast of the t'aakin. There were plates of bread and biscuits and sweet rolls. The roast flesh of ceh, the red deer, and haleu, the paca, was served with much chili pepper, and there were many vessels filled with the stewed flesh of ak', the snapping turtle. Blackened fish filled four hundred stew pots, scenting the plaza with their thick smell. There were broiled ears of maize, maize gruel, roast maize ears. Countless were the vessels of steaming maize drink. Fresh fruits from the valley and the swamps and the mountains were stacked in bowls on every table. Sacnik and her parents ate well at the feast, as did all the people. Everyone saw the wealth of the t'aakin, set out for their pleasure.

In the morning there were dances by entertainers, who did the Drunken Hawk and the Stilt Dance. They did the Weasel and the Three Jaguars and the Dance of the Children of the Sun. Then the people ate, and they spoke, until Father Sun reached the top of the sky and began down again. At that time the



t'aakin's criers shouted for attention.

"Today is the day when the t'aakin will receive gifts and turn his attention to gaining a new wife," said the criers. "Make ready to present your gifts, you women!"

All the women came forward then, those who wished to be seen by the t'aakin. There were three twenties eligible wives, three twenties gifts. All that afternoon the women presented their items to the t'aakin. He thanked each of them and gave the gifts to his bearers, saying no words in favor of any one woman or her present. Then Sacnik came before him, with her palm-frond basket and its precious pods. The t'aakin thanked her and took her basket, and so it was that he smelled the yax cacao, the jade-green pods in his hands. Now he saw the uniqueness of those fruits, and of the one who brought them. He said nothing, but he looked at Sacnik, and his eyes were warm.

It was five days later, 12 Manik, when the marriage-arranger came to the house of Sacnik's father. He was the oldest brother of the t'aakin, and his name was Yax Pak, or New Dawn. Once he was a warrior fighting the servants of ah-Puch, but when he grew older, he turned to arranging marriages. He brought with him many gifts for Sacnik's father—tobacco, and pipes, a pouch



of carved jade pebbles, three black obsidian blades, and good wine—and a pair of beautiful, painted vases for him and Sacnik's mother. All of these things Sacnik's father accepted, and so the way was opened for the marriage-arranger to present his lord's desire.

"With your permission, the t'aakin will present a gift to your daughter," said Yax Pak.

"I see," said her father. "Yet, it is not her birthday, Yax Pak." He knew why Yax Pak was there, everyone knew, but only fools rush at such important times.

"It is not a birthday gift, though be assured that the t'aakin knows the birthdays of all the people of his district," said the marriage arranger. "I am afraid it is with a taking face that my lord presents himself today. There is something precious which he desires. But, all people belong to themselves, do they not? Would his gift be welcomed?"

Sacnik heard all these words, from her room behind a woven curtain, and it was only because of custom that she did not go out to see the t'aakin's marriage-arranger and his gift. It is terrible luck for a young woman to interrupt marriage negotiations, and Sacnik did not want to offend the gods and the goddesses.

Sacnik's father said, "The gifts of the t'aakin will find favor



with my daughter, I believe."

"Very good," said Yax Pak. "Here is what he has sent: two aromatic pods from a cacao tree, and this mano and metate. If your daughter finds the t'aakin's attention to be pleasing, she is to dry the cacao seeds and grind them into chocolate, and together she and the t'aakin will drink a frothy toast to their marriage."

"I understand," said Sacnik's father. Then the marriage-arranger left them, and Sacnik came out to admire the t'aakin's black granite mano and metate. She dried the seeds from the yax cacao in Father Sun's strong light and ground them into chocolate powder and mixed them with fresh vanilla, for flavor. She did this quickly, for it was only six days until her wedding. That way the ceremony was on 5 Ben, a day for new marriages. For Sacnik and her mother, those were six days of rushing and buying and arranging. Sacnik's grandmother, for whom the shuttle was a live thing, made for her a most beautiful pik and a k'ub, an overblouse, which set her out among women. Sacnik's mother bought for her a bridal necklace of fine jade pebbles. Her father spoke to her godparents, her embracers, and from them received the cup and the plate of marriage. All these things happened swiftly, after the marriage-arranger came to the house of Sacnik's father. The ceremony and the feast were prepared by the t'aakin



and his people, as it has always been.

On the marriage day, on 5 Ben, Yax Pak came and took Sacnik and the chocolate to the palace of the t'aakin. There Sacnik and the t'aakin, with Sacnik's parents and the Speaker's parents and all the people to witness, drank the chocolate and so began their marriage. As Chelna had promised, the chocolate from the yax cacao was a potent medicine for the Speaker and Sacnik, so that for all their lives they were never sick, never weak or feverish. And when they had many children, it is said that their children, too, were blessed with strength for all their days.

No one knows if the t'aakin ever sent people to find the grove of the yax cacao. Maybe that place is still there today, near the shore of the great river, hidden behind a circle of ceiba trees and walls of thorns. Only the gods and the goddesses know for certain.

