

The Myth of Mata-Mata

From Chapter 5; the story continues in other chapters with other meanings

The story I told Tom there in the wet chaparro tree came from *abuelita*, who got it, she said, from her grandmother who was *Indio* and lived in ancient jungles. Mata-Mata returning to his jungle village from hunting found a stranger raping his wife. She had been digging cassava root when the man sprang upon her, and he had her pinned and helpless when Mata-Mata happened along. Enraged, Mata-Mata shot a poisoned arrow into the rapist's back, and the man died in minutes. Mata-Mata slashed the body to draw blood, then flung him into the river where cannibal fish in numbers large enough to make the water seem to boil stripped the man to a skeleton before he reached bottom.

Mata-Mata then turned his wrath on his wife. He beat her with the stick of his bow, took her home and tied her hands and feet with leather strips and beat her some more. When night came and Mata-Mata fell into a troubled sleep, he dreamed of the rape, and he awoke distraught. Terrible with anger, he choked his wife with his bow-string, then in stealth carried her body into the jungle and buried her, watched only by an armadillo hiding in the brush.

The next day, Niñato, the son of Mata-Mata, went searching for his mother. Armadillo who heard Niñato crying out for his mother, told the boy where the woman was buried. While the two dug her up, armadillo told about Mata-Mata's crime.

Because he had his father's temperament, Niñato's wrath was dreadful. He changed himself into a macaw, ate the seeds of a flowering thorn tree, and dropped his excrement on the shoulder of his father. From the shoulder of Mata-Mata sprung a huge tree, a burden that the macaw said he would carry forever. Groaning under the weight of the tree, Mata-Mata wandered far in the jungle. When he brooded in silence, the tree grew massive and heavy, making him stumble through the jungle at night, shrieking in pain from the burden, and where he walked rivers dried up and fruit trees shriveled. When he found people who would listen, he told his story of killing his wife, and the monstrous tree on his shoulder shrank in size, and banana trees and guava heavy with sweet fruit grew around him as he talked.

When I finished the tale, Tom said, "That's a weird story. Even

the magic in it makes no sense. A boy changing into a macaw. A man with a thorn tree growing from his shoulder. It's a wild and nonsensical kind of fantasy."

"The story is a folk myth, and it has some useful truth in it, some that perhaps applies to you."

"Truth in a story about absurd magic? None of that applies to me."