

Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Book Start

Version 2007.01.13

Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner**

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FRONT FLAP

\$14.95 7828

Shabono

"From across the river, out of the distant darkness, the wind carried the **Iticoteri**'s laughter... The voice rustled through the ancient trees, then vanished, like the silvery ripples on the water."

So writes **Florinda Donner** in this truly remarkable book. Like "The Children of **Sanchez**" by Oscar Lewis, "**Shabono**" breaks new ground in revealing the life of another culture by drawing the reader into its strange and unique world. **Ms. Donner**, an anthropologist, traveled into the deep jungle between Venezuela and Brazil to study the "curing," or witchcraft practices, of certain Indian tribes. **Shabono** is the story of her total immersion in a primitive society and its exotic way of life.

For days **Florinda Donner** follows an old Indian woman and her son into the steamy undergrowth to their village, or **shabono**. As day becomes night and night day, time loses all meaning, and her sojourn among the people she calls the **Iticoteri** extends to a year. Adopted by a native couple, she goes beyond observation; she begins to absorb their totems and taboos as her own.

(continued on back, flap)

DELACORTE PRESS/NEW YORK

BACK FLAP

(continued from front flap)

Behind the hardness of life in the jungle is an exquisite magic, a world in which the **Iticoteri** are born, undergo grueling rites of passage, marry, make war, and die. A world where they feast on ripe plantain and fresh fish. Where there are ceremonies in which men sniff **epena** and dance wildly in costumes made from the feathers of exotic birds to become **shapori**, or witch doctors. There is a civilization in which illness is cured by the rhythmic chanting of **shapori**, where fire releases the soul from the body, and the soul rises to the house of thunder.

With amazing warmth the **Iticoteri** accept **Florinda Donner** as one of their own, gently teaching her their religion, their customs, even their language. Reluctantly they guide her to the edge of the jungle at the end of her year with them.

In prose that is enchanting, almost sensual, **Florinda Donner** combines the storytelling appeal of a novel with the very real facts of her stay in the **shabono**. The result is as unusual as it is irresistible, a book that will fascinate equally readers of fiction and nonfiction.

FLORINDA DONNER is an anthropologist whose specialty is the study of Indian tribes.

Jacket design and illustration copyright 1982 by **Judith Leeds**

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BACK COVER

"There is no doubt in my mind that **Shabono** is a masterpiece. For me, it is at once art, magic, and social science, and so skillfully balanced that I

cannot assess which takes the lead.

"It is superb social science because with an unerring sense of choice in describing her experiences among the Indians of the Venezuelan jungle, **Florinda Donner** literally plummets the reader into an unknown but very real world. The ethnographic data are there but presented in a rich, alive, and functional way.

"At the same time the author's haunting arid utterly powerful narrative succeeds in communicating to the reader a most peculiar sense of awe. Thus, **Shabono** is sheer magic because it sustains, all the way through, the overpowering and forbidden aura of a mysterious and enchanting world.

"And finally **Shabono** is art because of a masterly arrangement of words and ideas. **Florinda Donner**'s artistry is to strike with words; to create fleeting images of supreme poignancy and then string them and connect them until they achieve a final result: a catharsis of feeling."

- by **CARLOS CASTANEDA**, author of "The Eagle's Gift" and "The Teachings of Don **Juan**"

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OPENING PAGE

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FOR THE FIVE-LEGGED SPIDER THAT CARRIES ME ON ITS BACK

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[Shabono](#): A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

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Author's Note

The [Yanomama](#) Indians, also known in anthropological literature as the [Waika](#), [Shamatari](#), [Barafiri](#), [Shirishana](#), and [Guaharibo](#), inhabit the most isolated portion of the border between southern Venezuela and northern Brazil. It has been roughly estimated that there are between ten and twenty thousand of them, occupying an area of approximately seven thousand square miles. This territory encompasses the headwaters of the [Orinoco](#), [Mavaca](#), [Siapo](#), [Ocamo](#), [Padamo](#), and [Ventuari](#) rivers in Venezuela; and the [Uraricoera](#), [Catrimani](#), [Dimini](#), and [Araca](#) rivers in Brazil.

The [Yanomama](#) live in hamlets of palm-thatched dwellings called [shabonos](#), which are scattered throughout the forest. The number of individuals residing in each of these widely dispersed hamlets varies between sixty and a hundred people. Some of the [shabonos](#) are located close to Catholic or Protestant missions or in other areas accessible to the white man: Others have withdrawn deeper into the jungle. Hamlets still exist in remote parts of the forest that have not been contacted by outsiders.

My experience with the [Iticoteri](#), the inhabitants of one of these unknown [shabonos](#), is what this book is about. It is a subjective account of the surplus data, so to speak, of anthropological field research I conducted on curing practices in Venezuela.

The most important part of my training as an anthropologist emphasized the fact that objectivity is what gives validity to anthropological work. It happened that throughout my stay with this [Yanomama](#) group I did not keep the distance and detachment required of objective research. Special links of gratitude and friendship with them made it impossible for me to interpret facts or draw conclusions from what I witnessed and learned. Because I am a woman; and because of my physical appearance, and a certain bent of character, I posed no threat to the Indians. They accepted me as an amenable oddity, and I was able to fit, if only for a moment in time, into the peculiar rhythm of their lives.

In my account I have made two alterations of my original notes. The first has to do with names: The name [Iticoteri](#) as well as the names of the

persons portrayed are imaginary.

The second has to do with style: For dramatic effect I have altered the sequence of events, and for narrative purposes I have rendered conversations in the proper English syntax and grammatical structure. Had I literally translated their language, I could not have done justice to its complexity, flexibility, and its highly poetic and metaphoric expressions. The versatility of suffixes and prefixes gives the [Yanomama](#) language delicate shades of meaning that have no real equivalent in English.

Even though I was patiently drilled until I could differentiate and reproduce most of their words, I never became a fluent speaker. However, my inability to command their language was no obstacle in communicating with them. I learned to "talk" with them long before I had an adequate vocabulary. Talking was more of a bodily sensation than an actual interchange of words. How accurate our interchange was is another matter. For them and for me it was effective. They made allowances when I could not explain myself, or when I could not understand the information they were conveying about their world: After all, they did not expect me to cope with the subtleties and intricacies of their language. The [Yanomama](#), just like ourselves, have their own biases: They believe whites are infantile and thus less intelligent.

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Principal [Iticoteri](#) ([EETEE CO TEH REE](#)) Characters

ANGELICA (An [geh lee ca](#)) An old Indian woman at the Catholic mission who sets up the journey to the [Iticoteri](#) country

[ARASUWE](#) ([Arah suh weh](#)) [Milagros](#)'s brother-in-law, headman of the [Iticoteri](#)

[ETEWA](#) ([Eh teh wuh](#)) [Arasuwe](#)'s son-in-law

[HAYAMA](#) ([Hah yah muh](#)) Angelica's oldest living sister, mother-in-law of [Arasuwe](#), grand-mother of [Ritimi](#)

[HOAXIWE](#) (How [bashee weh](#)) [Tutemi](#)'s and [Etawa](#)'s newborn son

[IMAWAAMI](#) () The legendary woman [shapori](#).

[IRAMAMOWE](#) ([Eerah mah moh weh](#)) [Arasuwe](#)'s brother, a shaman at the [Iticoteri](#) settlement

[KAMOSIWE](#) ([Kah moh see weh](#)) Angelica's father

[MATUWE](#) ([Mah tuh weh](#)) [Hayama](#)'s youngest son

[MILAGROS](#) ([Mee la gros](#)) Angelica's son, a man who belongs to both worlds, the Indian's and the white man's

[MOCOTOTERI](#) ([Moh coh toh teh ree](#)) The inhabitants of a nearby [shabono](#)

[PURIWARIWE](#) ([Puh ree wahree weh](#)) Angelica's brother, an old shaman at the [Iticoteri](#) settlement

[RITIMI](#) ([Ree tee mee](#)) [Arasuwe](#)'s daughter, first wife of [Etawa](#)

[SISIWE](#) (See see [weh](#)) [Ritimi](#)'s and [Etawa](#)'s six-year-old son

[TEXOMA](#) ([Teh shomuh](#)) [Ritimi](#)'s and [Etawa](#)'s four-year-old daughter

[TUTEMI](#) ([Tuh teh mee](#)) [Etawa](#)'s young second wife

[XOTOMI](#) ([Shoh toh mee](#)) [Arasuwe](#)'s daughter, [Ritimi](#)'s half-sister

XOROWE (Shoh roh web) Iramamowe's son

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Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Chapter 1

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 1

I was half asleep. Yet I could sense people moving around me. As if from a great distance, I heard the soft rustle of bare feet over the packed dirt of the hut; the coughing and clearing of throats, and the faint voices of women. Leisurely I opened my eyes. It was not quite dawn. In the semidarkness I could see **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**, their naked bodies bent over the hearths where the embers of the night's fires still glowed.

Tobacco leaves, water-filled gourds, quivers with poisoned arrowheads, animal skulls, and bundles of green **plantains** hung from the palm-frond ceiling, appearing to be suspended in the air below the rising smoke.

Yawning, **Tutemi** stood up. She stretched, then bent over the hammock to lift **Hoaxiwe** into her arms. Giggling softly, she nuzzled her face against the baby's stomach. She mumbled something unintelligible as she pushed her nipple into the boy's mouth. Sighing, she eased herself back into her hammock.

Ritimi pulled down some dried tobacco leaves. She soaked them in a calabash bowl filled with water, then took one wet leaf and, before rolling it into a **wad**, sprinkled it with ashes. Placing the quid between her gum and lower lip, she sucked at it noisily while preparing two more. She gave one to **Tutemi**, then approached me. I closed my eyes, hoping to give the impression that I was asleep. Squatting at the head of my hammock, **Ritimi** ran her tobacco-soaked finger, wet with her saliva, between my gum and lower lip, but did not leave a quid in my mouth. Chuckling, she edged toward **Etewa**, who had been watching from his hammock. She spat her **wad** into her palm and handed it to him. A soft moan escaped her lips as she placed the third quid in her mouth and lowered herself on top of him.

The fire filled the hut with smoke, gradually warming the chilly damp air. Burning day and night, the hearth fires were the center of each dwelling. The smoke stains they left on the thatch ceiling set one household apart from the next, for there were no dividing walls between the huts. They stood so close together that adjacent roofs overlapped each other, giving the impression of one enormous circular dwelling. There was a large main entrance to the entire compound with a few narrow openings between some huts. Each hut was supported by two long and two shorter poles. The higher side of the hut was open and faced a clearing in the middle of the circular structure, while the lower, exterior side of the hut was closed with a wall of short poles wedged against the roof.

HTML EDITOR:

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First Photo - From web-page

<http://www.rainforests.net/antoniomari.htm>

Second Photo - From web-page

<http://www.valdosta.edu/~kstewart/world.htm>

END **HTML** EDITOR

A heavy mist shrouded the surrounding trees. The palm fronds, hanging over the interior edge of the hut, were silhouetted against the grayness of the sky. **Etewa's** hunting dog lifted its head from under its curled-up body, and without quite waking, opened its mouth in a wide yawn. I closed my eyes, dozing off to the smell of green **plantains** roasting in the fires. My back was stiff, and my legs ached from having squatted for hours the day before, digging weeds in the nearby gardens.

I opened my eyes abruptly as my hammock was vigorously rocked back and forth, and I gasped as a small knee pressed into my stomach. Instinctively I pulled the hammock's sides over me to protect myself from the cockroaches and spiders that invariably fell from the thick palm-thatched roof whenever the poles holding up the huts were shaken.

Giggling, the children crawled on top and around me. Their brown naked bodies were soft and warm against my skin. As they had done almost every morning since I had first arrived, the children ran their chubby hands over my face, breasts, stomach, and legs, coaxing me to identify each part of my anatomy. I pretended to sleep, snoring loudly. Two little boys snuggled against my sides, and the little girl on top of me pressed her dark head under my chin. They smelled of smoke and dirt.

I had not known a word of their language when I first arrived at their settlement deep in the jungle between Venezuela and Brazil. Yet that had not been an obstacle to the eighty or so people occupying the **shabono** in accepting me. For the Indians, not to understand their language was tantamount to being **aka boreki**- dumb. As such, I was fed, loved, and indulged: My mistakes were excused or overlooked as if I were a child. Mostly my blunders were acknowledged by boisterous outbursts of laughter that shook their bodies until they rolled on the ground, tears brimming in their eyes.

The pressure of a tiny hand against my cheek stopped my reveries. **Texoma**, **Ritimi's** and **Etewa's** four-year-old daughter, lying on top of me, opened her eyes and, moving her face closer, began to flutter her stubby eyelashes against mine. "Don't you want to get up?" the little girl asked, running her fingers through my hair. "The **plantains** are ready."

I had no desire to abandon my warm hammock. "I wonder- how many months have I been here?" I asked.

"Many," three voices answered in unison.

I could not help smiling. Anything beyond three was expressed as many, or more than three. "Yes, many months," I said softly.

"**Tutemi's** baby was still sleeping inside her belly when you first arrived," **Texoma** murmured, snuggling against me.

It was not that I had ceased being aware of time, but the days, weeks, and months had lost their precise boundaries. Here only the present mattered. For these people only what happened each day amidst the immense green shadows of the forest counted. Yesterday and tomorrow, they said, were as undetermined as a vague dream; as fragile as a spider's web, which was visible only when a streak of sunlight sears through the leaves.

Measuring time had been my obsession during the first few weeks. I wore my self-winding watch day and night and recorded each sunrise in a diary as if my very existence depended on it. I cannot pinpoint when I realized that a fundamental change had taken place within me. I believe it

all started in a small town in eastern Venezuela where I had been doing research on healing practices even before I arrived at the **Iticoteri** settlement.

After transcribing, translating, and analyzing the numerous tapes and hundreds of pages of notes gathered during months of field work among three **curers** in the **Barlovento** area, I had seriously begun doubting the validity and purpose of my research. My endeavor to organize the data into a meaningful theoretical framework proved to be futile, in that the material was ridden with inconsistencies and contradictions.

The emphasis of my work had been directed toward discovering the meaning that curing practices have for the healers and for their patients in the context of their everyday life activities. My concern had been in discerning how social reality, in terms of health and illness, was created out of their interlocked activity. I reasoned that I needed to master the manner in which practitioners regard each other and their knowledge, for only then would I be able to operate in their social setting and within their own system of interpretation. And thus the analysis of my data would come from the system in which I had been operating and would not be superimposed from my own cultural milieu.

While in the field I lived in the home of dona **Mercedes**, one of the three **curers** I was working with. Not only did I record, observe, and interview the **curers** and their numerous patients, but I also participated in the curing sessions, immersing myself totally in the new situation.

Yet I was faced day to day with blatant inconsistencies in their curing practices and their explanations of them. Dona **Mercedes** laughed at my bewilderment and what she considered my lack of fluidity in accepting changes and innovations.

"Are you sure I said that?" she asked upon listening to one of the tapes I insisted on playing for her.

"It's not me speaking," I said tartly, and began reading from my typed notes, hoping she would become aware of the contradictory information she had given me.

"That sounds wonderful," dona **Mercedes** said, interrupting my reading. "Is that really me you are talking about? You have converted me into a real genius. Read me your notes on your sessions with **Rafael** and **Serafino**."

These were the other two **curers** I was working with.

I did as she asked, then turned on the tape recorder once more, hoping she would help me with the conflicting information. However, dona **Mercedes** was not interested at all in what she had said months earlier. To her that was something in the past and thus had no validity. Boldly she gave me to understand that the tape recorder was at fault for having recorded something she had no memory of having said. "If I really said these things, it's your doing. Every time you ask me about curing I start talking without really knowing what I am saying. You always put words into my mouth. If you knew how to cure, you **wouldn't** bother writing or talking about it. You would just do it."

I was not willing to believe that my work was useless. I went to see the other two **curers**. To my great chagrin they were not much help either. They acknowledged the inconsistencies and explained them much as dona **Mercedes** had.

In retrospect my despair over this failure seems comical. In a fit of

rage, I dared dona **Mercedes** to burn my notes. She willingly complied, burning sheet after sheet over the flame of one of the candles illuminating the statue of the Virgin Mary on the altar in her curing room. "I really can't understand why you get so upset about what your machine says and what I say," dona **Mercedes** observed, lighting another candle on the altar. "What difference does it make about what I do now and what I did a few months ago? All that matters is that the patients get well. Years ago, a psychologist and a sociologist came here and recorded everything I said on a machine like yours. I believe it was a better machine: It was much larger. They were only here for a week. With the information they got, they wrote a book about curing."

"I know the book," I snapped. "I don't think it's an accurate study. It's simplistic, superficial, and lacks a true understanding."

Dona **Mercedes** peered at me quizzically, her glance half pitying, half deprecatory. In silence I watched the last page turn to ashes. I was not bothered by what she had done; I still had the English translation of the tapes and notes. She got up from her chair and sat next to me on the wooden bench. "Very soon you'll feel that a heavy load has been lifted off your back," she consoled me.

I was compelled to go into a lengthy explanation concerning the importance of studying non-Western healing practices. Dona **Mercedes** listened attentively, a mocking smile on her face.

"If I were you," she suggested, "I would accept your friend's offer to go hunting up the **Orinoco** River. It would be a good change for you."

Although I had intended to return to **Los Angeles** as soon as possible in order to conclude my work, I had seriously considered accepting a friend's invitation for a two-week trip into the jungle. I had no interest in hunting but believed I might have the opportunity of meeting a shaman, or witnessing a curing ceremony, through one of the Indian guides he planned to hire upon arriving at the Catholic mission, which was the last outpost of civilization.

"I think I should do that," I said to dona **Mercedes**. "Maybe I'll meet a great Indian curer who will tell me things about healing that not even you know."

"I'm sure you'll hear all kinds of interesting things," dona **Mercedes** laughed. "But don't bother to write them down- you won't do any kind of research."

"Oh, really. And how do you know that?"

"Remember I'm a **bruja**," she said, patting my cheek. There was an expression of ineffable gentleness in her dark eyes. "And don't worry about your English notes safely tucked away in your desk. By the time you return, you won't have any use for your notes."

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Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Chapter 2
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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 2

A week later I was on my way in a small plane to one of the Catholic missions on the upper **Orinoco** with my friend. There we were to meet the other members of the party, who had set out by boat a few days

earlier with the hunting gear and the necessary provisions to last us two weeks in the jungle.

My friend was eager to show me the wonders of the muddy, turbulent **Orinoco** River. He maneuvered the small aircraft with daring and skill. At one moment we were so close to the water's surface that we scared the alligators sunning themselves on the sandy bank. The next instant we were up in the air, above the seemingly endless, impenetrable forest. No sooner had I relaxed than he would dive once again- so low that we would see the turtles basking on logs at the edge of the river.

I was shaking with dizziness and nausea when we finally landed on the small clearing near the cultivated fields of the mission. We were welcomed by Father **Coriolano**, the priest in charge of the mission, the rest of our party who had arrived the day before, and a group of Indians who cried excitedly as they scrambled into the small plane.

Father **Coriolano** led us through the plots of maize, manioc, **plantains**, and sugar cane. He was a thin man with long arms and short legs. Heavy eyebrows almost hid his deep-set eyes and a mass of unruly beard covered the rest of his face. At odds with his black cassock was his torn straw hat, which he kept pushing back so that the breeze could dry his sweat-covered forehead.

My clothes clung damply to my body as we walked past a makeshift pier of piles driven into the mud at the bank of the river where the boat was tied. We stopped and Father **Coriolano** began discussing our departure the next day. I was encircled by a group of Indian women who did not say a word, but only smiled shyly at me. Their ill-fitting dresses came up in front and dipped in back, giving the impression that they were all pregnant.

Among them was an old woman so small and wrinkled she reminded me of an ancient child. She did not smile like the others. There was a silent plea in the old woman's eyes as she held her hand out to me. My feelings were strange as I watched her eyes fill with tears: I did not want to see them roll down her clay-colored cheeks. I placed my hand in hers. Smiling contentedly, she led me toward the fruit trees surrounding the long, one-story mission.

In the shade, underneath the wide overhang of the building's asbestos roof, squatted a group of old men holding enameled tin cups in their trembling hands. They were dressed in khaki clothes, their faces partly covered by sweat-stained straw hats. They laughed and talked in high-pitched voices, smacking their lips over their rum-laced coffee. A noisy pair of macaws, their brightly colored wings clipped, perched on one of the men's shoulders.

I could not see the men's features, nor the color of their skin. They seemed to be Speaking in Spanish, yet their words sounded unintelligible to me. "Are those men Indians?" I asked the old woman as she led me into a small room at the back of one of the houses fringing the mission.

The old woman laughed. Her eyes, scarcely visible between the slits of her lids, came to rest on my face. "They are **racionales**. Those who are not Indians are called **racionales**," she repeated. "Those old men have been here for too long. They came to look for gold and diamonds."

"Did they find any?"

"Many of them did."

"Why are they still here?"

"They are the ones who cannot return to where they came from," she said, resting her bony hands on my shoulders. I was not surprised by her gesture. There was something cordial and affectionate in her touch. I just thought she was a bit crazy. "They have lost their souls in the forest." The old woman's eyes had grown wide; they were the color of dried tobacco leaves.

Not knowing what to say, I averted my eyes from her penetrating gaze, and looked around the room. The blue-painted walls were faded from the sun and peeling from the dampness. Next to a narrow window stood a crudely constructed wooden bed. It looked like an oversized crib on which mosquito wire had been nailed all around. The more I looked at it, the more it reminded me of a cage that could be entered only by lifting the heavy mosquito-screened top.

"I am Angelica," the old woman said, peering at me. "Is this all you have brought with you?" she asked, removing the orange knapsack from my back.

Speechless and with a look of complete astonishment, I watched her take out my underwear, a pair of jeans, and a long **T**-shirt. "That's all I need for two weeks," I said, pointing to my camera and the toilet **kit** at the bottom of the knapsack.

Carefully, she removed the camera and unzipped the plastic toilet **kit** and promptly emptied its contents on the floor. It contained a comb, nail clipper, toothpaste and brush, a bottle of shampoo, and a bar of soap. Shaking her head in disbelief, she turned the knapsack inside out. Absentmindedly, she brushed away the dark hair sticking to her forehead. There was a vague air of dreamy recollection in her eyes as her face wrinkled into a smile. She put everything back into the knapsack and without a word led me back to my friends.

Long after the mission was dark and silent I was still awake, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of the night coming through the opened window. I don't know whether it was because of my fatigue or the relaxed atmosphere at the mission, but before retiring that evening I had decided not to accompany my friends on their hunting expedition. Instead I was going to stay the two weeks in the mission. Happily, no one minded. In fact, everybody seemed relieved. Although they had not voiced it, some of my friends believed that a person who did not know how to use a gun had no business going on a hunt.

Spellbound, I watched the blue transparency of the air dissolve the shadows of the night. A softness spread over the sky, revealing the contours of the branches and leaves waving with the breeze outside my window. The solitary cry of a howler monkey was the last thing I heard before falling into a deep sleep.

"So you are an anthropologist," Father **Coriolano** said at lunch the next day. "The anthropologists I have met were all loaded with recording and filming equipment, and who knows what other gadgets." He offered me another serving of baked fish and corn on the **cob**. "Are you interested in the Indians?"

I explained to him what I had been doing in **Barlovento**, touching upon the difficulties I had encountered with the data. "I would like to see some curing sessions while I'm here."

"I'm afraid you won't see much of that around here,"

Father **Coriolano** said, picking out crumbs of cassava bread lodged in

his beard. "We have a well-equipped dispensary. Indians come from far away to bring their sick. But perhaps I can arrange for you to visit one of the nearby settlements, where you could meet a shaman."

"I would be very grateful if that were possible," I said. "Not that I came to do field work, but it would be interesting to see a shaman."

"You don't look like an anthropologist." Father **Coriolano**'s heavy eyebrows arched and met. "Of course most of the ones I have met were men; but there've been a few women." He scratched his head. "Somehow you don't match my description of a woman anthropologist."

"You can't expect us to all look alike," I said lightly, wondering whom he had met.

"I suppose not," he said sheepishly. "What I mean is that you don't look fully grown. This morning, after your friends left, I was asked by various people why the child was left with me."

His eyes were lively as he joked about how the Indians expected a fully grown white adult to tower over them. "Especially if they are blond and blue eyed," he said. "Those are supposed to be veritable giants."

That night I had the most terrifying nightmare in my mosquito-netted crib. I dreamt that the top had been nailed shut. All my efforts to extricate myself proved futile against the pressure of the lid. Panic overtook me. I screamed and shook the frame until the whole contraption tumbled over. I was still half asleep as I lay on the floor, my head resting against the small bulge of the old woman's hanging breasts. For a moment I could not remember where I was. A childish fear made me press closer to the old Indian, knowing that I was safe.

The old woman rubbed the top of my head and whispered incomprehensible words into my ear until I was fully awake. I felt reassured by her touch and the alien, nasal sound of her voice. I was not able to rationalize this feeling, but there was something that made me cling to her. She led me to her room, back of the kitchen. I lay next to her in a heavy hammock fastened to two poles. Protected by the presence of the strange old woman, I closed my eyes without fear. The faint beat of her heart and the drip of water filtering through an earthen water jar put me to sleep.

"It will be much better if you sleep here," the old woman said the following morning as she hung a cotton hammock next to hers.

From that day on Angelica hardly ever left my side. Most of the time we stayed by the river, talking and bathing by its bank, where the gray-red sand was the color of ashes mixed with blood. Completely at peace, I would sit for hours watching the Indian women wash their garments, and listen to Angelica's tales of her past. Like clouds wandering about the sky, her words intermingled with the images of women rinsing their clothes in the water and spreading them out on the stones to dry.

Angelica was not a **Maquiritare** like most of the Indians at the mission. She had been given to a **Maquiritare** man when she was very young. He had treated her well, she was fond of saying. Quickly she had learned their way of life, which had not been so different from the ways of her own people. She had also been to the city. She never told me which city. Neither did she tell me her Indian name, which according to the customs of her tribe was not to be said aloud.

Whenever she talked about her past, her voice sounded foreign to my ears. It became very nasal and often she would switch from Spanish into

her own language, mixing up time and place. Frequently she stopped in the middle of a sentence: Hours later, or even the following day, she would resume the conversation at the exact spot where she had left off, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to converse in that fashion.

"I will take you to my people," Angelica said one afternoon. She looked at me, a flickering smile on her lips. I had the feeling she had been about to say something else, and I wondered if she knew about Father **Coriolano**'s arrangement with **Mr. Barth** to take me to the nearby **Maquiritare** settlement.

Mr. Barth was an American miner who had been in the Venezuelan jungle for over twenty years. He lived down-river with an Indian woman, and many an evening he invited himself to the mission for dinner. Although he had no desire to return to the States, he greatly enjoyed hearing about them.

"I will take you to my people," Angelica said again. "It will take many days to get there. **Milagros** will guide us through the jungle."

"Who is **Milagros**?"

"He's an Indian like me. He speaks Spanish well." Angelica rubbed her hands with glee. "He was supposed to accompany your friends, but he decided to stay behind. Now I know why."

Angelica spoke with an odd intensity; her eyes sparkled and I had the same feeling I had had when I first arrived, that she was a bit crazy. "He knew all along that I would need him to accompany us," the old woman said. Her lids closed as if she no longer had the strength to lift them. Abruptly, as if fearing to fall asleep, she opened her eyes wide. "It **doesn't** matter what you say to me now. I know that you will come with me."

That night I lay awake in my hammock. By the sound of Angelica's breathing I knew that she was asleep. I prayed that she would not forget her offer to take me into the jungle. Dona **Mercedes**'s words ran through my head. "By the time you return you won't have any use for your notes." Perhaps I would do some field work among the Indians. The thought amused me. I had not brought a tape recorder; neither did I have paper and pencils- only a small diary and a ball-point pen. I had brought my camera but only three rolls of film.

Restlessly I turned in my hammock. No, I had no intention of going into the jungle with an old woman, whom I believed to be a bit mad, and an Indian whom I had never seen. Yet there was something so tempting about a trip through the jungle. I could easily take some time off. I had no deadlines to meet; there was no one waiting for me. I could leave a letter for my friends explaining my sudden decision. They would not think much of it. The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. Father **Coriolano**, no doubt, would be able to supply me with enough paper and pencils. And yes, perhaps dona **Mercedes** had been right. I would have no use for my old notes on curing when- and if, the thought intruded ominously- I returned from such a journey.

I got out of my hammock and looked at the frail old woman while she slept. As if she were sensing my presence, her lids fluttered, her lips began to move. "I will not die here but among my own people. My body will be burned and my ashes will remain with them." Her eyes slowly opened; they were dull, befogged by sleep, and they expressed nothing, but I sensed a deep sadness in her voice. I touched her hollowed cheeks.

She smiled at me, but her mind was clearly elsewhere.

I awoke with the feeling I was being watched. Angelica told me that she had been waiting for me to wake up. She motioned me to look at a box, the size of a vanity case, made out of tree bark, standing next to her. She opened the tightly fitting lid and with great relish proceeded to show me each item, breaking into loud exclamations of joy and surprise; as if it were the first time she had seen each article. There was a mirror, a comb, a necklace made out of plastic pearls, a few empty Pond's cold cream jars, a lipstick, a pair of rusted scissors, a faded blouse and skirt.

"And what do you think this is?" she asked, holding something behind her back.

I confessed my ignorance and she laughed. "This is my writing book." She opened her notebook, its pages yellow with age. On each page were rows of crooked letters. "Watch me." Taking out a chewed-up pencil from the box, she began to print her name. "I learned to do this at another mission. A much larger one than this one. It also had a school. That was many years ago, but I haven't forgotten what I learned." Again and again she printed her name on the faded pages. "Do you like it?"

"Very much." I was bewildered by the sight of the old woman squatting on the floor with her body bent forward, her head almost touching the notebook on the ground. Yet she was perfectly balanced as she painstakingly traced the letters of her name.

Suddenly she straightened up, closing her notebook. "I have been to the city," she said, her eyes fixed on a spot beyond the window. "A city full of people that looked all the same. At first I liked it, but I grew tired of it very fast. There was too much for me to watch. And it was so noisy. Not only people talked, but things talked as well." She paused, scowling in a tremendous effort to concentrate, all the lines in her face deepened. Finally she said, "I didn't like the city at all."

I asked her which city she had been to, and at which mission she had learned to write her name. She looked at me as if she had not heard what I asked, then continued with her tale. As she had done before, she began to mix up time and place, relapsing into her own language. At times she laughed, repeating over and over, "I will not go to Father Coriolano's heaven."

"Are you really serious about going to see your people?" I asked. "Don't you think it's dangerous for two women to go into the forest? Do you actually know the way?"

"Of course I know the way," she said, snapping out of her almost trancelike state. "An old woman is always safe."

"I m not old."

She stroked my hair. "You aren't old, but your hair is the color of palm fibers and your eyes the color of the sky. You ll be safe too."

"I m sure we ll get lost," I said softly. "You can't even remember how long ago it was you last saw your people. You told me they always move farther into the forest."

"Milagros is going with us," Angelica said convincingly. "He knows the forest well. He knows about all the people living in the jungle." Angelica began putting her belongings into the bark box. "I better find him so we can leave as soon as possible. You ll have to give him something."

"I haven't got anything he'd want," I said. "Maybe I can arrange for

my friends to leave the machetes they brought with them at the mission tor Milagros."

"Give him your camera," Angelica suggested. "I know he wants a camera as much as he wants another machete."

"Does he know how to use a camera?"

"I don't know." She giggled, holding her hand over her mouth. "He told me once that he wants to take pictures of the white people who come to the mission to look at the Indians."

I was not keen on parting with my camera. It was a good one and very expensive. I wished I had brought a cheaper one with me. "I ll give him my camera," I said, hoping that once I explained to Milagros how complicated it was to operate, he would prefer a machete.

"The less you have to carry, the better," Angelica said, closing the lid on her box with a bang. "I m going to give all this to one of the women here. I won't need it anymore. If you go empty-handed, no one will expect a thing from you."

"I d like to take the hammock you gave me," I said in jest.

"That might be a good idea." Angelica looked at me, nodding her head. "You're a fussy sleeper and probably won't be able to rest in the fiber hammocks my people use." She picked up her box and walked out of the room. "I ll be back when I find Milagros"

As Father Coriolano drank his coffee, he looked at me as though I were a stranger. With great effort he got up, steadying himself against a chair. Seemingly disoriented, he gazed at me without saying a word. It was the silence of an old man. As he ran his stiff, gnarled fingers across his face, I realized for the first time how frail he was.

"You're crazy to go into the jungle with Angelica," he finally said. "She is very old; she won't get very far. Walking through the forest is no excursion."

"Milagros will accompany us."

Father Coriolano turned toward the window, deep in thought. He kept pushing his beard back and forth with his hand. "Milagros refused to go with your friends. I m sure he will not accompany Angelica into the jungle."

"He will." My certainty was incomprehensible. It was a feeling completely foreign to my everyday reason.

"Although he is a trustworthy man, he is strange," Father Coriolano said thoughtfully. "He has acted as a guide to various expeditions. Yet..." Father Coriolano returned to his chair and, leaning toward me, continued. "You aren't prepared to go into the jungle. You cannot begin to imagine the hardships and dangers entailed in such an adventure. You haven't even got the proper shoes."

"I have been told by various people who have been in the jungle that tennis shoes are the best thing to wear. They dry fast on your feet without getting tight and they don't cause blisters."

Father Coriolano ignored my comment. "Why do you want to go?" he asked in an exasperated tone. "Mr. Barth will take you to meet a Maquiritare shaman: You will get to see a curing ceremony without having to go very far."

"I don't really know why I want to go." I looked at him helplessly. "Maybe I want to see more than a curing ceremony. In fact, I wanted to ask you to let me have some writing paper and pencils."

"What about your friends? What am I supposed to tell them? That you just disappeared with a senile old woman?" he asked as he poured himself another cup of coffee. "I've been here for over thirty years, and never have I heard of such a preposterous plan."

It was past siesta time, yet the mission was still quiet as I stretched in my hammock hanging under the shade of the twisted branches and jagged leaves of two poma-rosa trees. In the distance I saw the tall figure of Mr. Barth approaching the mission clearing. Strange, I thought, for he usually came in the evening. Then I guessed why he was here.

Stopping by the steps leading up to the veranda, close to where I lay, he squatted on the ground, and lit one of the cigarettes my friends had brought him.

Mr. Barth seemed uneasy. He stood up, and walked back and forth as if he were a sentry guarding the building. I was about to call out to him when he began talking to himself, his words pouring out with the smoke. He rubbed the white stubble on his chin, and scraped one boot against the other in an effort to get rid of the mud. Squatting once more, he began to shake his head as if in that way he could rid himself of what was going through his mind.

"You have come to tell me about the diamonds you have found in the Gran Sabana," I said as a way of greeting, hoping to dispel the melancholy expression in his gentle brown eyes.

He drew on the cigarette, and blew the smoke out through his nose in short bursts. After spitting out a few particles of tobacco that had stuck to the tip of his tongue, he asked, "Why do you want to go with Angelica into the forest?"

"I already told Father Coriolano, I don't really know."

Mr. Barth softly repeated my words, making a question out of them. Lighting another cigarette, he exhaled slowly, gazing at the spiral of tobacco smoke melting into the transparent air. "Let's go for a walk," he suggested.

We strolled along the river's bank where vast, interwoven roots emerged from the earth like sculptures of wood and mud. Quickly the warm, sticky dampness permeated my skin. From under a layer of branches and leaves, Mr. Barth pulled out a canoe, pushed it into the water, then motioned me to climb in. He steered the craft right across the river, making for the shelter of the left-hand bank, which offered some protection from the full strength of the current. With precise, strong movements, he guided the canoe upstream until we reached a narrow tributary. The bamboo thicket yielded to a dark heavy growth, an endless wall of trees standing trunk to trunk at the very edge of the river. Roots and branches overhung the water; vines climbed down the trees, winding themselves around their trunks like snakes crushing them in a tight embrace.

"Oh, there it is," Mr. Barth said, pointing to an opening in that seemingly impenetrable wall.

We pulled the boat across the marshy bank and tied it securely around a tree trunk. The sun hardly penetrated through the dense foliage; the light faded to a tenuous green as I followed Mr. Barth through the thicket. Vines and branches brushed against me like things alive. The heat was not so intense anymore, but the sticky dampness made my clothes cling to me like slime. Soon my face was covered with grimy

vegetable dust and spiderwebs that smelled of decay.

"Is this a path?" I asked incredulously, almost stumbling into a greenish puddle of water. Its surface quivered with hundreds of insects that were hardly more than pulsating dots in the turbid liquid. Birds flew away and amidst the greenness I could not discern their color or size but only heard their furious screeches, protesting our intrusion. I understood Mr. Barth was trying to frighten me. The thought that he might be taking me to another Catholic mission also crossed my mind. "Is this a path?" I asked again.

Abruptly Mr. Barth stopped in front of a tree, so tall its upper branches seemed to reach into the sky. Climbing plants twisted and turned upward around the trunk and branches. "I intended to give you a lecture and scare the devil out of you," Mr. Barth said with a sulky expression. "But whatever I rehearsed to say seems foolish now. Let's rest for a moment and then we'll go back."

Mr. Barth let the boat drift with the current, paddling only whenever we got too close to the bank. "The jungle is a world you cannot possibly imagine," he said. "I can't describe it to you even though I have experienced it so often. It's a personal affair- each person's experience is different and unique."

Instead of returning to the mission, Mr. Barth invited me to his house. It was a large round hut with a conical roof of palm leaves. It was quite dark inside, the only light coming from a small entrance and the rectangular window in the palm-thatched roof, operated by means of a rawhide pulley. Two hammocks hung in the middle of the hut. Baskets filled with books and magazines stood against the whitewashed walls: Above them hung calabashes, ladles, machetes, and a gun.

A naked young woman got up from one of the hammocks. She was tall, with large breasts and broad hips, but her face was that of a child, round and smooth, with slanted dark eyes. Smiling, she reached for her dress, hanging next to a woven fire fan. "Coffee?" she asked in Spanish as she sat on the ground in front of the hearth next to the aluminum pots and pans.

"Do you know Milagros well?" I asked Mr. Barth after he had introduced me to his wife, and we were all seated in the hammocks, the young woman and I sharing one.

"That's hard to say," he said, reaching for his coffee mug on the ground. "He comes and goes: He's like the river. He never stops, never seems to rest. How far Milagros goes, how long he stays anywhere, no one knows. All I've heard is that when he was young he was taken from his people by white men. He is never consistent with his story. At one time he says they were rubber collectors, at another time they were missionaries, the next time he says they were miners, scientists. Regardless of who they were, he traveled with them for many years."

"To which tribe does he belong? Where does he live?"

"He is a Maquiritare," Mr. Barth said. "But no one knows where he lives. Periodically he returns to his people. To which settlement he belongs, I don't know."

"Angelica went to look for him. I wonder if she knows where to find him."

"I'm sure she does," Mr. Barth said. "They are very close. I wonder if they are related." He deposited the mug on the ground, and got up from

his hammock, momentarily disappearing in the thick bush outside the hut. **Mr.** Barth reappeared seconds later with a small metal box. "Open it," he said, handing me the box.

Inside was a brown leather pouch. "Diamonds?" I asked, feeling its contents.

Smiling, **Mr.** Barth nodded, then motioned me to sit down beside him on the dirt floor. He took off his shirt, spread it on the ground, then asked me to empty the pouch on the cloth surface. I could barely hide my disappointment. The stones did not sparkle; they rather looked like opaque quartz.

"Are you sure these are diamonds?" I asked.

"Absolutely sure," **Mr.** Barth said, placing a stone the size of a cherry tomato in my palm. "If it's cut properly, it'll make a most handsome ring."

"Did you find these diamonds here?"

"No," **Mr.** Barth laughed. "Near the Sierra **Parima**, years ago." Half closing his eyes, he rocked back and forth. His cheeks were ruddy with little veins, and the stubble on his chin was damp. "A long time ago my only interest in life was to find diamonds in order to return home a wealthy man." **Mr.** Barth sighed heavily, his gaze lost on some place beyond the hut. "Then one day I realized that my dream to become rich had dried out, so to speak: It no longer obsessed me, and neither did I want to return to the world I had once known. I remained here." **Mr.** Barth's eyes shone with unshed tears as he gestured to the diamonds. "With them." He blinked repeatedly, then looked at me and smiled. "I like them as I like this land."

I wanted to ask him so many questions, but was afraid to distress him. We remained silent, listening to the steady, deep murmur of the river.

Mr. Barth spoke again. "You know, anthropologists and missionaries have a lot in common. Both are bad for this land. Anthropologists are more hypocritical; they cheat and lie in order to get the information they want. I suppose they believe that in the name of science all is fair. No, no, don't interrupt me," **Mr.** Barth admonished, shaking his hand in front of my face.

"Anthropologists," he continued in the same harsh tone, "have complained to me about the arrogance of the missionaries, about their high-handedness and paternalistic attitude toward the Indians. And look at them, the most arrogant of them all, prying into other people's lives as if they had every right to do so." **Mr.** Barth sighed loudly as if exhausted by his outburst.

I decided not to defend anthropologists, for I feared another outburst, so I contented myself with examining the diamond in my hand. "It's very beautiful," I said, handing him the stone.

"Keep it," he said, then picked up the remaining stones. One by one he dropped them into the leather pouch.

"I'm afraid I can't keep such a valuable gift." I began to giggle and added as an excuse, "I never wear jewelry."

"Don't think of it as a valuable gift. Regard it as a talisman. [* talisman- a trinket or piece of jewellery thought to be a protection against evil] Only people in the cities regard it as a jewel," he said casually, closing my fingers over the stone. "It will bring you luck." He got up, brushing the dampness off the seat of his pants with his hands, then

stretched in his hammock.

The young woman refilled our mugs. Sipping the heavily sweetened black coffee, we watched the whitewashed walls turn purple with twilight. Shadows had no time to grow, for in an instant it was dark.

I was awakened by Angelica whispering into my ear. "We're going in the morning."

"What?" I jumped out of my hammock fully awake. "I thought it would take you a couple of days to find **Milagros**. I better get packed."

Angelica laughed. "Packed? You haven't got anything to pack. I gave your extra pair of pants and a top to an Indian boy. You won't need two pairs. You better go back to sleep. It will be a long day tomorrow. **Milagros** is a fast walker."

"I can't sleep," I said excitedly. "It'll be dawn soon. I'll write a note to my friends. I hope the hammock and the thin blanket will fit in my knapsack. What about food?"

"Father **Coriolano** put sardines and cassava bread aside for us to pack in the morning. I will carry it in a basket."

"Did you talk to him tonight? What did he say?"

"He said it's in the hands of God."

I was all packed when the chapel bell began to chime. For the first time since I had arrived at the mission, I went to mass. Indians and **racionales** filled the wooden benches. They laughed and talked as if they were at a social gathering. It took Father **Coriolano** a long time to silence them before he could say mass.

The woman sitting next to me complained that Father **Coriolano** always managed to wake her baby with his loud voice. The infant indeed began to cry, but before his first great shriek was heard, the woman uncovered her breast and pressed it against the baby's mouth.

Kneeling down, I raised my eyes to the Virgin above the altar. She wore a blue cloak embroidered in gold. Her face was tilted heavenward, her eyes were blue, her cheeks pale, and her mouth a deep red. In one arm she held the infant Jesus: The other arm was extended, its hand white and delicate, reaching out to the strange heathens at her feet.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono](#): Chapter 3

Version 2007.02.09

[Shabono](#): A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American [Rainforest](#) - 1982 by [Florinda Donner-Grau](#)

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Machete in hand, **Milagros** led the way on the narrow path bordering the river. His muscular back showed through his torn red shirt. The khaki pants, rolled halfway up his calves and fastened above his waist with a cotton string, made him look shorter than his medium height. He walked at a fast pace, supporting his weight on the outer edge of his feet, which were narrow at the heel and spread like an open fan at the toes. His short-trimmed hair and the wide tonsure [* tonsure- the shaved crown of a monk's or priest's head] on the crown of his head reminded me of a monk.

I stopped and turned around before following on the trail leading into the forest. Across the river, almost hidden around a bend, lay the mission. Shrouded in the early morning sunlight, it seemed like something already

out of touch. I felt oddly removed, not only from the place and the people I had been with for the past week, but from all familiar things. I sensed some change within me, as if crossing the river marked the end of a phase, a turning point. Something of this must have shown in my face for when I looked to my side and caught Angelica's gaze there was understanding in it.

"Already far away," **Milagros** said, stopping next to us. Folding his arms across his chest, he let his gaze wander along the river. The morning light dazzling over the water reflected in his face, tinting it with a golden sheen. It was an angular, bony face in which the small nose and full lower lip added an unexpected vulnerability that contrasted sharply with the deep circles and wrinkles around his slanted brown eyes. They were uncannily similar to Angelica's eyes, with that same timeless expression in them.

In absolute silence we walked beneath the towering trees, along trails hidden by massive bushes entangled with vines, branches and leaves, creepers and roots. **Spiderwebs** clung to my face like an invisible veil. Greenness was all I could see, and dampness all I could smell. We went over and around logs, across streams and swamps shaded by immense bamboo growths. Sometimes **Milagros** was in front of me; at other times Angelica was, with her **U**-shaped basket on her back, held in place by a tumpline of bark that went around her head. The basket was filled with gourds, cassava bread, and cans of sardines.

I had no sense of which direction we were going. I could not see the sun- only its light, filtering through the dense foliage. Soon my neck was stiff from looking up at the incredible height of the motionless trees. Only the straight palms, undefeated in their vertical thrust toward the light, seemed to sweep the few visible patches of sky with their silver-shaded fronds.

"I've got to rest," I said, sitting down heavily on a fallen tree trunk. By my watch it was already after three in the afternoon. We had walked nonstop for over six hours. "I'm famished."

Handing me a calabash from her basket, Angelica sat next to me. "Fill it," she said, motioning with her chin to the nearby shallow stream.

Squatting in the river, with his legs apart, palms resting on his thighs, **Milagros** bent forward until his lips touched the water. He drank without getting his nose wet. "Drink," he said, straightening up. He must be nearly fifty, I thought. Yet the unexpected grace of his flowing movements made him seem much younger. He smiled briefly, then waded downstream.

"Watch out or you'll be taking a bath!" Angelica exclaimed, smiling mockingly.

Startled by her voice, I lost my balance and toppled over headfirst into the water; "I'm no good at drinking water the way **Milagros** does," I said casually, handing her the filled gourd. "I think I'll just stick to the calabash." Sitting next to her, I took off my soaked tennis shoes.

"Whoever said that sneakers were the best thing for the jungle never walked for six hours in them." My feet were red and blistered, my ankles scratched and bleeding.

"It's not too bad," Angelica said, examining my feet. She ran her fingers gently over my soles and the blistered toes. "You have pretty good calluses. Why don't you walk barefoot? Wet shoes will only soften your feet more."

I looked at the bottoms of my feet; they were covered by thick calloused skin that I had acquired from practicing karate **for** years. "What if I step on a snake?" I asked. "Or on a thorn?" Although I had not yet seen a single reptile, I had watched **Milagros** and Angelica stop at various times to pull thorns out of their feet.

"One has to be pretty stupid to step on a snake," she said, pushing my feet off her lap. "Compared to mosquitoes, thorns are not too bad. You are lucky the little devils don't bite you the way they do the **racionales**." She rubbed my arms and hands as if expecting to find a clue there. "I wonder why?"

Angelica had already marveled at the mission that I slept like the Indians, without mosquito netting. "I've got evil blood," I said, grinning. Seeing her puzzled look, I explained that as a child I had often gone with my father to the jungle to look for orchids. Invariably, he would be stung by mosquitoes, flies, and whatever biting insects were around. Somehow they never bothered me. Once my father had even been bitten by a snake.

"Did he die?" Angelica asked.

"No. It was a most curious incident. The same snake bit me too. I cried out right after my father did. He thought I was making fun of him until I showed him the tiny red spots on my foot. Only it **didn't** swell and turn purple the way his did. We were driven by friends to the closest town, where my father was given antivenin serum. He was ill for days."

"And you?"

"Nothing happened to me," I said, and told her it was his friends who said half jokingly that I had evil blood. They did not believe, as the doctor did, that the snake had exhausted its supply of poison on the first bite and whatever it had left had been insufficient to have any effect on me. I told Angelica that on one occasion I was bitten by seven wasps, the ones they call **mata caballo**- horse killer. The doctor thought I was going to die. I only developed a fever and in a few days I was fine.

I had never seen Angelica so attentive, listening with her head slightly bent as if afraid to miss a single word. "I was also bitten by a snake once," she said. "People believed I was going to die." She was quiet for a moment, deep in thought, then a timid smile creased her face. "Do you think it spent its poison on someone else first?"

"I'm sure it did," I said, touching her withered hands.

"Maybe I have evil blood too," she said, smiling. She looked so frail and old. For an instant I had the feeling she might disappear amidst the shadows.

"I'm ancient," Angelica said, looking at me as though I had expressed my thoughts out loud. "I should have died a long time ago. I've kept death waiting." She turned to watch a row of ants demolish a bush as they cut away squares of leaves and carried them off in their mouths. "I knew it was you who would take me to my people- I knew it the moment I saw you." There was a long pause. She either did not want to say anything else or was trying to find the appropriate words. She was watching me, a vague smile on her lips. "You also knew it- otherwise you **wouldn't** be here," she finally said with utter conviction.

I giggled nervously; she always succeeded in making me uneasy with that intense glint in her eyes. "I'm not sure what I'm doing here," I said. "I don't know why I'm going with you."

"You knew you were meant to come here," Angelica insisted.

There was something about Angelica's sureness that made me feel argumentative. It would have been so easy to agree with her, especially since I did not know myself why I was in the jungle on my way to God knows where. "To tell you the truth, I had no intention of going anywhere," I said. "Remember, I **didn't** even accompany my friends up-river to hunt alligators as I had planned."

"But that's exactly what I'm saying," she assured me as if she were speaking to a stupid child. "You found an excuse to cancel your trip so you could come with me." She laid her bony hands on my head. "Believe me, I **didn't** have to think much about it. Neither did you. The decision was made the moment I laid eyes on you."

I buried my head in the old woman's lap to hide my laughter. There was no way to argue with her. Besides, she might be right, I thought. I had no explanation myself.

"I waited a long time," Angelica went on. "I had almost forgotten that you were supposed to come to me. But when I saw you I knew that the man had been right. Not that I ever doubted him, but he had told me so long ago that I believed I had missed my chance."

"What man?" I asked, lifting my head from her lap. "Who told you I was coming?"

"I'll tell you another time." Angelica pulled the basket closer and picked out a large piece of cassava bread. "We better eat," she added, and opened a can of sardines.

There was no point in insisting. Once Angelica had decided not to talk, there was no way to make her change her mind. My curiosity unsatisfied, I contented myself in examining the neat row of fat sardines lying in the thick tomato sauce. I had seen that kind in the supermarket in **Los Angeles**; a friend of mine used to buy them for her cat. I took one out with my finger and spread it on the piece of flat white bread.

"I wonder where **Milagros** is," I said, biting into the sardine sandwich. It tasted quite good.

Angelica did not answer; neither did she eat. From time to time she sipped water from the gourd. A faint smile lingered at the corners of her mouth and I wondered what it was that the old woman was thinking about that created such a look of longing in her eyes. All of a sudden she stared at me as if awakening from a dream. "Look," she said, nudging my arm.

In front of us stood a man, naked except for the red cotton strands around his upper arms and a string around his waist that circled his foreskin, tying his penis against his abdomen. His whole body was covered with brownish-red designs. In one hand he held a long bow and arrows, in the other a machete.

"**Milagros**?" I finally managed to mumble, recovering from my initial shock. Still, I barely recognized him. It was not only that he was naked; he seemed taller, more muscular. The red zigzag lines running from his forehead down to his cheeks, across his nose, and around his mouth sharpened the contours of his face, erasing its vulnerability. There was something else besides the physical change, something I could not pinpoint. It was as though by discarding the clothes of a **racional**, he had shed some invisible weight.

Milagros began to laugh in a loud, uproarious manner. A laughter that sprang from deep inside him, it shook his whole body. Echoing and

booming through the forest, it mingled with the startled cries of a flock of parrots that had taken flight. Squatting before me, he stopped abruptly and said, "You almost **didn't** recognize me." He thrust his face so close to mine that our noses touched, then asked, "Do you want me to paint your face?"

"Yes," I said, taking the camera from my knapsack. "But can I take a picture of you first?"

"That's my camera," he said emphatically, reaching for it. "I thought you had left it at the mission for me."

"I would like to use it while we're at the Indian settlement." I began demonstrating to him how the camera worked by first putting in a roll of film. He was very attentive to my explanation, nodding his head every time I asked if he understood. I hoped to confuse him by pointing out all the intricacies of the gadget. "Now let me take a picture of you, so you can see how the camera should be held."

"No, no." He was quick to stop me, taking the camera from my hands. Without any difficulty he opened the back cover and lifted out the film, exposing it to the light. "It's mine, you promised. Only I can take pictures with it."

Speechless, I watched him, hang the camera over his chest. It looked so incongruous against his nakedness I was unable to repress my laughter. With exaggerated gestures he began to focus, adjust, and point the camera all around him, talking to imaginary subjects, telling them to smile, to stand closer or to move farther apart. I had the strong urge to pull at the cotton string around his neck that held the arrow-point quiver and the fire drill swinging from his back.

"You won't get any pictures without film," I said, handing him the third and last roll.

"I never said I wanted to take pictures." Gleefully he exposed the film to the light, then very deliberately put the camera in its leather case. "Indians don't like to be photographed," he said seriously, then turned toward Angelica's basket on the ground and searched through its contents until he found a small gourd sealed with a piece of animal skin. "This is **onoto**," he said, showing me a red paste. It was greasy and had a faint aromatic odor I was unable to define. "This is the color of life and joy," he said.

"Where did you leave your clothes?" I asked him as he cut a piece of vine, the length of a pencil, with his teeth. "Do you live nearby?"

Busying himself with chewing one end of the vine until it resembled a makeshift brush, **Milagros** did not bother to answer. He spat on the **onoto**, then stirred the red paste with the brush until it was soft. With a precise, even hand he drew wavy lines across my forehead, down my cheeks, chin, and neck, circled my eyes, and decorated my arms with round spots.

"Is there an Indian settlement around here?"

"No."

"Do you live by yourself?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?" The expression of annoyance, heightened by the sharp lines of his painted face, matched the irritated tone of his voice.

I opened my mouth, uttered a sound, then hesitated to say that it was important for me to know about him and Angelica- that the more I knew,

the better I would feel. "I was trained to be curious," I said after a while, sensing he would not understand the fleeting anxiety that I tried to alleviate by asking questions. Knowing about them, I thought, would give me some sense of control.

Smiling, totally oblivious to what I had said, **Milagros** looked at me askance, examined my painted face, then burst into loud guffaws. It was a cheerful, hilarious laugh, like that of a child. "A blond Indian," he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

I laughed with him, all my momentary apprehension dispelled. Stopping abruptly, **Milagros** leaned toward me, and whispered an incomprehensible word into my ear. "That's your new name," he said seriously, putting his hand over my lips to prevent me from repeating it out loud. Turning toward Angelica, he whispered the name into her ear.

As soon as **Milagros** had eaten, he motioned us to follow him. Disregarding my blisters I quickly put on my shoes. I could discern nothing but green as we climbed up hills and down plains- an unending green of vines, branches, leaves, and prickly thorns; where all the hours were hours of twilight. I no longer lifted my head to catch glimpses of the sky through patches of leaves but was content to see its reflection in puddles and streams.

Mr. Barth had been right when he told me that the jungle was a world impossible to imagine. I could not believe it was I walking through this unending greenness on my way to an unknown destination. My mind ran wild with anthropologists' descriptions of fierce and belligerent Indians belonging to **unacculturated** tribes.

My parents had been acquainted with some German explorers and scientists who had been in the Amazon jungle. As a child I had been bewildered by their tales of head-hunters and cannibals: A all of them told of incidents where they had escaped a sure death by saving the life of a sick Indian, usually a tribal chief or one of his relatives. A German couple and their small daughter, who had returned from a two-year journey through the South American jungle, made the deepest impression on me. I was seven when I saw the cultural artifacts and life-size photographs they had collected during their travels.

Totally captivated by their eight-year-old daughter, I followed her through the palm-decorated room in the foyer of the Sears building in **Caracas**. I hardly had a chance to look at the assortment of bows and arrows, baskets, quivers, feathers, and masks hanging on the walls as she hurried me into a darkened alcove. Squatting on the floor, she pulled out a red-dyed wooden box from under a pile of palm fronds, and opened it with a key hanging from her neck. "This was given to me by one of my Indian friends," she said, taking out a small wrinkled head. "It's a **tsantsa**, a shrunken enemy head," she added, caressing the long dark hair as if it were a doll.

I was awed as she told me that she had not been frightened to be in the jungle, and that it had not been at all the way her parents described it. "The Indians **weren't** horrifying or fierce," she had said very earnestly. Not for an instant did I doubt her words as she looked at me with her large serious eyes. "They were gentle and full of laughter- they were my friends."

I could not remember the girl's name, who having lived through the same events as her parents had not experienced them with the same

prejudices and fears. I chuckled to myself, almost falling over a gnarled root covered by slippery moss.

"Are you talking to yourself?" Angelica's voice cut into my reveries. "Or to the spirits of the forest?"

"Are there any?"

"Yes. Spirits dwell in the midst of all this," she said softly, gesturing around her. "In the thick of the creeping lianas, in company with the monkeys, snakes, spiders, and jaguars."

"No rain tonight," **Milagros** asserted, sniffing the air as we stopped by some boulders bordering a shallow river. Its calm, clear waters were strewn with pink flowers from the trees standing like sentries on the opposite bank. I took off my shoes, letting my sore feet dangle in the soothing coolness, and watched the sky, a golden crimson, turn gradually to orange, to vermilion, and finally into a deep purple. The dampness of the evening filled my nose with the scent of the forest, a smell of earth, of life, of decay.

Before the shadows closed in around us completely, **Milagros** had made two hammocks from strips of bark, knotted on either end to a suspension rope of vines. I could not disguise my delight when he hung my cotton hammock between the two uncomfortable-looking bark cradles.

Full of anticipation, I followed **Milagros**'s movements as he loosened the quiver and fire drill from his back. My disappointment was immense when, upon removing the piece of monkey fur sealing the quiver, he took out a box of matches and lit the wood Angelica had gathered.

"Cat food," I said peevishly as **Milagros** handed me an open can of sardines. I had envisioned my first dinner in the jungle consisting of freshly hunted tapir or armadillo meat roasted to perfection over a crackling fire. All the smoldering twigs did was to send a thin line of smoke into the air, its low flames barely illuminating our surroundings.

The scant light of the fire dramatized Angelica's and **Milagros**'s features, filling hollows with shadows; adding a shine to their temples, above their protruding eyebrows, along their short noses and their high cheekbones. I wondered why the fire made them look so much alike.

"Are you related?" I finally asked, puzzled by the resemblance.

"Yes," **Milagros** said. "I'm her son."

"Her son!" I repeated in disbelief. I had expected him to be a younger brother or a cousin; he looked as if he was in his fifties. "Then you are only half **Maquiritare**?"

They both began to giggle, as if enjoying a secret joke. "No, he **isn't** half **Maquiritare**," Angelica said in between fits of laughter. "He was born when I was still with my people." She did not say another word, but moved her face close to mine with an expression at once challenging and bemused.

I shifted nervously under her piercing gaze, wondering if my question had offended her. Curiosity must be a learned trait, I decided. I was anxious to know everything about them, yet they never asked me anything about myself. All that seemed to matter to them was that we were together in the forest. At the mission Angelica had shown no interest in my background. Neither was she willing to let me know about hers, except for the few stories regarding her life at the mission.

Our hunger satisfied, we stretched in our hammocks.

Angelica's and mine hung close to the fire. She was soon asleep, her legs tucked under her dress. The air felt chilly and I offered the thin blanket I had brought with me to **Milagros**, which he gladly accepted.

Glowworms, like dots of fire, lit up the dense darkness. The night pulsed with the cries of crickets and the croaking of frogs. I could not sleep: **E-xhaustion** and nervousness prevented me from relaxing. I watched the hours move by on my illuminated wristwatch and listened to the sounds in the jungle that I could no longer identify. There were creatures that growled, whistled, creaked, and howled. Shadows slithered beneath my hammock, moving soundlessly as time itself.

In an effort to see through the darkness I sat up, blinking, not sure if I was asleep or awake. Monkeys with phosphorescent eyes darted from behind ferns. Beasts with snarling mouths gaped at me from the branches overhead, and giant spiders crawling on legs as fine as hair spun silver webs over my eyes.

The more I watched, the more frightened I became. A cold sweat trickled from my neck to the base of my spine as I beheld a naked figure with bow drawn, aiming at the black sky. When I clearly heard the hissing sound of the arrow I put my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream.

"Don't be afraid of the night," **Milagros** said, laying his hand on my face. It was a fleshy, calloused hand; it smelled of earth and roots. He fastened his hammock above mine, so close I could feel the warmth of his body through the strips of bark. Softly he began to talk in his own language, a procession of rhythmical, monotonous words that shut off all the other sounds of the forest. A feeling of peace crept into me, and my eyes began to close.

Milagros's hammock no longer hung above mine when I awoke. The sounds of night, now very faint, still lingered between the misty palms, the bamboo, the nameless vines, and parasitic growths. There was no color in the sky yet- only a vague clarity, forecasting a rainless day.

Crouching over the fire, Angelica stoked and blew on the embers, bringing them to life again. Smiling, she motioned me to join her. "I heard you in my sleep," she said. "Were you afraid?"

"The forest is so different at night," I said, a little embarrassed. "I must have been overly tired."

Nodding her head, she said, "Watch the light- see how it reflects from leaf to leaf until it descends to the ground, to the sleeping shadows. That's the way dawn puts to sleep the spirits of the night." Angelica began to caress the leaves on the ground. "During the day the shadows sleep. At night they dance in the darkness."

I smiled sheepishly, not quite knowing what to say. "Where did **Milagros** go?" I asked after a while.

Angelica did not answer: She rose, looking around her. "Don't be afraid of the jungle," she said. Lifting her arms above her head, she began to dance with little jerky steps and to chant in a low monotonous tone that abruptly changed to a very high pitch. "Dance with the night shadows and go to sleep lighthearted. If you let the shadows frighten you, they will destroy you." Her voice faded to a murmur. She turned her back to me and slowly walked toward the river.

The water was cold as I squatted naked in the middle of the stream: Its placid pools held the first morning light. I watched Angelica collect wood, placing each branch in the crook of her arm as if she were holding

a child. She must be stronger than she looks, I thought, rinsing the shampoo out of my hair. But then she might not be as old as she appeared either. Father **Coriolano** had told me that by the time an Indian woman is thirty she is often a grandmother. If they reach forty they have attained old age.

I washed the clothes I had worn, impaled them on a stick close to the fire, then put on a long **T**-shirt that reached almost to my knees. It was much more comfortable than my tight jeans.

"You smell good," Angelica said, running her fingers through my wet hair. "Does it come from the bottle?"

I nodded. "Do you want me to wash your hair?"

She hesitated for a moment, then rapidly took off her dress. She was so wrinkled that not an inch of smooth skin was left on her. She reminded me of one of the frail trees bordering the path, with their thin gray trunks, almost withered, yet supporting branches with green leaves. I had never seen Angelica naked before, for she wore her cotton dress day and night. I was certain then that she was more than forty years old- ancient, in fact, as she had told me.

Sitting in the water, Angelica shrieked and laughed with delight as she splashed around, spreading the suds from her head all over her body. With a broken gourd I rinsed off the soap, and after drying her with the thin blanket, I combed her dark short hair, shaping the bangs at an angle. "Too bad we don't have a mirror," I said. "Do I still have the red paint on?"

"Just a little bit," Angelica said, moving close to the fire. "**Milagros** will have to paint your face again."

"In a moment we'll be smelling like smoke," I said, turning toward Angelica's bark hammock. Easing myself inside, I wondered how she could have slept there without falling out. It was barely long enough for me and so narrow that I could not turn to the side. Yet, in spite of the itchy bark against my back and head, I found myself dozing off as I watched the old woman break the gathered wood into even-sized twigs.

An odd heaviness kept me between that crack of consciousness that is neither wakefulness nor sleep. I could feel the red of the sun through my closed lids. I was aware of Angelica to my left, mumbling to herself as she fed the fire, and of the forest around me, pulling me deeper and deeper into its green caverns. I called the old woman's name, but no sound escaped my lips. I called again and again, but only soundless forms glided out of me, rising and falling **Tyith** the breeze like dead butterflies. The words began to speak without lips, mocking my desire to know, asking a thousand questions. They exploded in my ears, their echoes reverberating around me like a flock of parrots crossing the sky.

I opened my eyes, aware of the smell of singed hair. On a crudely built roasting platform, about a foot above the fire, lay a monkey, complete with tail, hands, and feet. Wistfully, I eyed Angelica's basket, still replete with cans of sardines and cassava bread.

Milagros lay in my hammock asleep, his bow leaning against a tree trunk, his quiver and machete on the ground, within reach.

"Is this all he killed?" I asked Angelica, getting out of the hammock. Hoping it would never be ready, I added, "How long will it take until it's done?"

Angelica looked at me with a rapt smile of unmistakable glee. "A bit

longer," she said. "You'll like it better than sardines."

Milagros dismembered the monkey by hand, serving me the choicest part, the head, considered a delicacy. Unable to bring myself to suck out the brain from the cracked skull, I opted for a piece of the well-done thigh. It was stringy and tough and tasted like an old gamy bird, slightly bitter. Finishing the monkey's brain with rather exaggerated relish, **Milagros** and Angelica proceeded to eat the inner organs, which had been cooking in the embers, each individually wrapped in strong, fan-shaped leaves. They dipped each morsel in the ashes before they put them in their mouths. I did likewise with the pieces of thigh and was surprised to notice the added saltiness of the meat. What we did not finish was wrapped in leaves, tied securely with vines, and placed in Angelica's basket for our next meal.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono](#): Chapter 4

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

American [Rainforest](#) - 1982 by [Florinda Donner-Grau](#)

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Chapter 4

The next four days and nights seemed to melt into each other as we walked, bathed, and slept. They had a dream-like quality, in which oddly shaped trees and vines repeated themselves like images endlessly reflected in invisible mirrors- images that vanished upon emerging into a clearing of the forest or by a river beach where the sun shone fully on us.

By the fifth day my feet were no longer blistered. **Milagros** had cut up my sneakers, attaching softened pieces of vegetable fiber to the soles. Each morning he tied the makeshift sandals anew, and my feet, as if obeying an impulse of their own, would follow **Milagros** and the old woman.

We walked always in silence, along trails bordered by leaves and ferns the size of a man. We crawled beneath the underbrush or cut our way through the walls of creepers and branches that left our faces dirty and scratched. There were times when I lost sight of my companions, but easily followed the twigs **Milagros** was in the habit of breaking as he walked. We crossed rivers and streams spanned by suspension bridges made out of vines fastened to trees on either bank. They were so fragile-looking that each time we crossed one I feared it would not support our weight.

Milagros laughed, assuring me that his people, although weak navigators, knew the art of building bridges.

On some trails we discovered footprints in the mud, which according to **Milagros** indicated we were in the vicinity of an Indian settlement. We never got close to one for he wanted us to reach our destination without delay. "If I were on my own I would have arrived long ago," **Milagros** said every time I inquired as to when we would reach Angelica's village. Then, looking at us, he would shake his head, and add in a resigned tone, "Women slow you down."

But **Milagros** did not mind our relaxed pace. Often he made camp in the early afternoon at some wide river beach where we bathed in the sun-warmed pools, and dried ourselves on enormous smooth rocks jutting out of the water. Drowsily we watched the motionless clouds so

slow to change their formations that it would be dusk before they disintegrated into different configurations.

It was during these lazy afternoons that I pondered over my motives in joining this bewildering venture. Was it to fulfill a fantasy of mine? Was I running away from some responsibility I could no longer handle? I even considered the possibility that Angelica might have cast a spell on me.

As the days passed my eyes became accustomed to the ever present greenness. Soon I began to distinguish red and blue macaws, rare toucans with black and yellow beaks. Once I even saw a tapir crashing through the undergrowth in search of water. It ended up as our next meal.

Monkeys with reddish fur followed us from above only to disappear as we continued through stretches of river between cascades, and by quiet channels reflecting the sky. Buried deep in the underbrush, on moss-covered logs, red and yellow mushrooms grew, so delicate that upon my touch they disintegrated as if made of colored dust.

I tried to orient myself by the large rivers we encountered, thinking they would correspond to those I remembered in geography books. But each time I asked for their names, they never coincided with mine, for **Milagros** only referred to them by their Indian designations.

At night under the light of the faint fire, when a white fog seemed to emanate from the ground and I felt the dampness of the night dew on my face, **Milagros** would begin talking in his low nasal voice about the myths of his people.

Angelica, with her eyes wide open, as if she were trying to keep awake rather than to pay attention, would sit up straight for about ten minutes before she was fast asleep. **Milagros** talked long into the night, bringing alive the time when beings who were part spirit, part animal, part human, inhabited the forest- creatures who caused floods and disease, replenished the forest with game and fruits, and taught mankind about hunting and planting.

Milagros's favorite myth was about **Iwrame**, an alligator, who before becoming an animal of the river walked and talked like a man. **Iwrame** was the keeper of fire, which he hid in his mouth, refusing to share it with others. The creatures of the forest decided to entertain the alligator with a sumptuous feast, for they knew that only by making **Iwrame** laugh could they steal the fire. Joke upon joke was told until finally, unable to contain himself any longer, **Iwrame** burst into laughter. A small bird flew into the opened jaw, snatched the fire, and flew high into a sacred tree.

Without changing the basic structure of the various myths he chose to tell, **Milagros** modified and embellished them according to his mood. He added details that he had not thought of before, interjecting personal views that seemed to come at the spur of the moment.

"Dream, dream," **Milagros** said each night upon finishing his tales. "A person who dreams lives long."

Was it real, was it a dream? Was I awake or asleep when I heard Angelica stirring? She mumbled something unintelligible and sat up. Still befuddled, she pulled away the hair sticking to her face, looked around, then approached my hammock. She gazed at me with a strange intensity: Her eyes were enormous in her thin, wrinkled face.

She opened her mouth: Strange sounds came from her throat and her whole body began to shake. I reached out my hand, but there was

nothing- only a vague shadow receding into the bushes. "Old woman, where are you going?" I heard myself ask. There was no reply- only the sound of dripping mist from the leaves. For an instant I saw her once more, the way I had seen her that same afternoon bathing in the river: Then she vanished in the thick night fog.

Without being able to stop her, I saw how she disappeared into an invisible crevice of the earth. No matter how much I searched I could not even find her dress. It's only a dream, I repeated to myself, yet I continued looking for her among the shadows, amidst the leaves shrouded in mist. But there was no vestige [* vestige- an indication that something has been present] of her.

I awoke with a profound anxiety. I noticed the heavy palpitations of my heart. The sun was already high above the treetops. I had never slept so late since starting our journey- not because I had not wanted to, but because **Milagros** insisted we rise at dawn. Angelica was not there; neither were her hammock or basket. Leaning against a tree trunk were **Milagros**'s bow and arrows. Strange, I thought. He had never left without them before. He must have gone with the old woman to gather the fruits or nuts he discovered yesterday afternoon, I kept repeating to myself, trying to appease my mounting distress.

I walked to the water's edge, not knowing what to do. They had never gone together before, leaving me behind.

A tree, infinitely lonely, stood at the other bank of the river, its branches bowed over the water, their weight supporting a network of creepers on which delicate red flowers bloomed. They clung like trapped butterflies in a gigantic spider's web.

A flock of parrots noisily settled on some vines that appeared to be growing out of the water without any visible support, for I could not distinguish the trees to which they belonged. I began to imitate the parrot's shrieks, but they remained completely unaware of my existence. Only when I walked into the water did they take flight, spanning a green arch across the sky.

I waited until the sun disappeared beyond the trees, and the blood red sky tainted the river with its fire. Listlessly I walked back to my hammock, poked the fire, and tried to revive the ashes. I became numb with terror as a green snake with amber-colored eyes stared into my face. With its head poised in midair, it seemed as startled as I. Afraid to breathe, I listened to the rustling of leaves as it slowly disappeared among the gnarled roots.

With absolute certainty I knew that never again would I see Angelica. I did not want to weep, but could not control my tears as I buried my face in the dead leaves on the ground. "Old woman, where have you gone?" I whispered, as I had done in my dream. I called her name across the immense green sea of growth. There was no answer from the ancient trees. Mutely, they witnessed my sorrow.

I barely made out **Milagros**'s figure in the thickening shadows. Rigid, he stood before me, his face and body blackened by ashes. For an instant he held my gaze, then his eyes closed, his legs bent beneath him, and, exhausted, he sank to the earth.

"Did you bury her?" I asked, draping his arm over my shoulders in order to drag him toward my hammock. With great difficulty I lifted him inside- first his torso, then his legs.

He opened his eyes, stretching his hand toward the sky as if the distant clouds were within his reach. "Her soul ascended to heaven, to the house of thunder," he said with great effort. "The fire released her soul from her bones," he added, then fell into a deep sleep.

As I watched over his restless dreams, I saw the shadowy bulk of phantom trees grow before my tired eyes. In the darkness of the night, these chimerical trees seemed more real and taller than the palms. I was no longer sad. Angelica had disappeared in my dream; she was part of the real and the fictitious trees. Forever she would roam among the spirits of vanished animals and mythical beings.

It was almost dawn when **Milagros** reached for his machete and his bow and arrows lying on the ground. Absentmindedly he hung his quiver on his back and without saying a word he walked into the thicket. I followed, afraid to lose him among the shadows.

In silence we walked for about two hours, then **Milagros** abruptly stopped by the edge of a cleared area in the forest. "The smoke of the dead is harmful to women and children," he said, pointing to a log pyre. [* pyre- wood heaped for burning a dead body as a funeral rite] It had partly collapsed, and in the midst of the ashes I could see darkened bones.

I sat on the ground and watched **Milagros** dry over a small fire a log mortar that he had made from a tree trunk. Something between horror and fascination kept my eyes glued on **Milagros** as he began sifting through the ashes for Angelica's bones. He crushed them with a slender pole until they were reduced to a gray-black powder.

"Through the smoke of the fire, her soul reached the house of thunder," **Milagros** said. It was already night when he filled our gourds with the powdered bones. He sealed them with a sticky resin.

"If she could only have kept death waiting a little longer," I said wistfully.

"It makes no difference," **Milagros** said, looking up from the mortar. His face was without expression yet his black eyes were bright with unshed tears. His lower lip trembled, then set in a half smile. "All she wanted was for her life essence to be once again part of her people."

"It's not the same," I said, without really understanding what **Milagros** was saying.

"Her life essence is in her bones," he said, as if excusing my ignorance. "Her ashes will be among her people in the forest."

"She **isn't** alive," I insisted. "What good are her ashes when she had wanted to see her people?" An uncontrollable sadness overcame me at the thought that never again would I see the old woman's smile or hear her voice and laughter. "She never got to tell me why she was so certain I would come with her."

Milagros began to cry, and picking up pieces of coal from the pyre, he rubbed them against his tear-stained face. "One of our shamans told Angelica that although she would leave her settlement, she would die among her own people, and her soul would remain a part of her tribe." **Milagros** looked at me sharply as I was about to interrupt him. "The shaman assured her that a girl with the color of your hair and eyes would make sure that she did."

"But I thought her people had no contact with whites," I said.

Tears still flowed from **Milagros**'s eyes as he explained that there had

been a time when his people had lived closer to the big river. "Nowadays there are only some old people left who still remember those days," he said softly. "For a long time we have been moving farther and farther into the forest."

I saw no reason to continue the journey, I thought despondently. What would I do without the old woman among her people. She had been my reason for being here. "What shall I do now? Are you going to take me back to the mission?" I asked, then seeing **Milagros's** puzzled expression, added, "It's not the same to take her ashes."

"It is the same," he murmured. "For her it was the most important part," he added, tying one of the ash-filled gourds around my waist.

My body stiffened for an instant, then relaxed as I looked into **Milagros's** eyes. His blackened face was awesome and sad at the same time. He pressed his tear-stained cheeks against mine, then blackened them with coals. Timidly I touched the gourd around my waist: It was light, like the old woman's laughter.

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Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Chapter 5
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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 5

For two days, at an ever accelerating pace, we walked up and down hills without rest. Apprehensively, I watched **Milagros's** silent figure slip in and out of the shadows. The urgency of his movements only intensified my feelings of uncertainty: There were moments when I felt like screaming at him to take me back to the mission.

The afternoon closed over the forest as the clouds turned from white to gray to black. Heavy and oppressive, they hovered over the treetops. A deafening roar of thunder broke the stillness: Water came down in sheets, tearing at branches and leaves with relentless fury.

Motioning me to take cover under the gigantic leaves he had cut, **Milagros** squatted on the ground. Instead of joining him, I took off my knapsack, untied the gourd filled with Angelica's powdered bones from around my waist, and pulled off my **T**-shirt. Warm and soothing, the water beat against my aching body. Lathering first my head, then my body with shampoo, I washed away the ashes, the smell of death from my skin. I turned to look at **Milagros**: his blackened face was drawn with fatigue, his eyes held such sadness that I regretted having cleaned myself in such haste. Nervously I began to wash my **T**-shirt and without looking at him asked, "Are we almost to the settlement?" I was certain we had walked well over a hundred miles since leaving the mission.

"We will be there tomorrow," **Milagros** said, unwrapping a small bundle of roasted meat held together with lianas and leaves. A peculiar smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and deepened the wrinkles around his slanted eyes. "That is, if we walk at my pace."

The rain thinned. The clouds dispersed. I breathed deeply, filling my lungs with the clear, fresh air. Drops continued to trickle from the leaves long after the rain abated. As they caught the reflection of the sun they glittered with the dazzling intensity of bits of broken glass.

"I hear someone coming," **Milagros** whispered. "Stay still."

I heard nothing- not even the call of a bird or the rustling of leaves. I was about to say so when a branch cracked and a naked man appeared on the path in front of us. He was not much taller than myself- perhaps five feet four. I wondered if it was his muscular chest or his nakedness that made him seem so much bigger than me. He carried a long bow and several arrows. His face and body were covered with red serpentine lines that extended all the way down the sides of his legs, ending in dots around his ankles.

A short distance behind him, two naked young women stared at me. A frozen expression of surprise held their dark eyes wide open. Tufts of fibers seemed to grow from their ears. **Matchlike** sticks stuck out from the corners of their mouths and lower lips. Fastened about their waists, upper arms, wrists, and below their knees were bands of red cotton string. Their dark hair was cut short, and like the man, they had a clean, wide-shaven tonsure on the crown.

No one said a word and out of sheer nervousness I shouted, "**Shori noje, shori noje!**" Angelica had advised me that if I ever happened to meet Indians in the forest, I should greet them by shouting: Good friend, good friend!

"**A ia, aia, shori,**" the man answered, moving closer. Red feathers adorned his ears: They were sticking out of two pieces of short cane, the size of my little finger, which were inserted through each lobe. He began to speak to **Milagros**, gesticulating a great deal, motioning with his hand or a nod of his head toward the path leading into the thicket. Repeatedly he raised one of his arms straight above his head, his fingers extended as if reaching for a ray of sunlight.

I beckoned the women to come closer. Giggling, they hid behind bushes. When I saw the bananas in the baskets fastened to their backs I opened my mouth wide and gestured with my hands that I wanted to eat one of them. Cautiously the older of the two women approached, and without looking at me she unfastened her basket, then broke the softest, yellowest banana from the bunch. In one swift motion she removed the slender sticks from around her mouth, sank her teeth in the peel, bit along it, broke it open, then held the naked fruit in front of my face. It had an oddly triangular shape and was certainly the thickest banana I had ever seen.

"Delicious," I said in Spanish, rubbing my stomach. It tasted very much like an ordinary banana but left a heavy coating in my mouth.

She gave me two more. As she was peeling the fourth I tried to make her understand that I could not eat another. Grinning, she dropped the remaining fruit on the ground, then placed her hands on my stomach. They were calloused hands, yet the delicate, slender fingers were gentle as she hesitantly touched my breasts, shoulders, and face, as if she wanted to verify that I was real. She began to talk in a high-pitched nasal tone that reminded me of Angelica's voice. She pulled the elastic on my panties and called her companion to take a look. It was only then that I felt embarrassed: I tried to pull away. Laughing and squealing with delight, they embraced me, stroking the back and front of my body. Then they took my hand and guided it over their own faces and bodies. They were slightly shorter than I, yet they were massive: With their full breasts, protruding stomachs, and wide hips, they seemed to dwarf me.

"They are from the **Iticoteri** village," **Milagros** said in Spanish,

turning toward me. "**Etewa** and his two wives, **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**, as well as other people from the settlement, have made camp for a few days at an old abandoned garden nearby." He reached for his bow and arrows, which he had left leaning against a tree trunk, and added, "We will travel with them."

Meanwhile the women had discovered my wet **T**-shirt. Enthralled, they rubbed it against their painted faces and bodies before I had a chance to slip it over my head. Stretched and streaked with red **onoto** paste, it hung on me like a dirty oversized rice sack.

I put the ash-filled gourd in my knapsack, and as I lifted it on my back the women began to giggle uncontrollably. **Etewa** came to stand next to me: He stared at me with his brown eyes, then a wide grin lit his face as he ran his fingers through my hair. His finely chiseled nose and the gentle curve of his lips gave his round face an almost girlish appearance.

"I will go with **Etewa** to track down a tapir he spotted a while ago," **Milagros** said. "You walk with the women."

For an instant I could only stare at him in disbelief. "But..." I finally managed to utter, not knowing what else to say. I must have looked comical for **Milagros** began to laugh: His slanted eyes all but disappeared between his forehead and his high cheekbones. He put one hand on my shoulder. He tried to look serious but a flickering smile remained on his lips.

"These are Angelica's and my people," he said, turning toward **Etewa** and his two wives. "**Ritimi** is her grand-niece. Angelica never saw her."

I smiled at the two women: They nodded their heads as if they had understood **Milagros**'s words.

Milagros's and **Etewa**'s laughter echoed through the lianas, then died away as they reached the bamboo thicket bordering the path along the river. **Ritimi** took my hand and led me into the thicket.

I walked between **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**. We moved silently in single file toward the abandoned gardens of the **Iticoteri**. I wondered whether it was because of the heavy load on their backs or whether it gave their feet a better grip on the ground that they walked with their knees and toes pointing inward. Our shadows grew and diminished with the faint rays of sunlight filtering through the treetops. My ankles were weak from exhaustion. I moved clumsily, stumbling over branches and roots. **Ritimi** put her arm around my waist, but it made walking on the narrow path even more awkward. She pulled the knapsack from my back, and stuffed it in **Tutemi**'s basket.

I was seized by an odd apprehension. I wanted to retrieve my knapsack, pull out the ash-filled gourd, and tie it around my waist. I had the vague notion of having severed some kind of a bond. Had I been asked to put my feelings into words I would not have been able to do so. Yet I sensed that from that moment on some of the magic and enchantment Angelica had transfused into me had vanished.

The sun was already below the horizon of trees as we reached a clearing in the forest. Amidst all the other shades of green I clearly distinguished the lighter, almost translucent green of the plantain fronds. Strung out on the edge of what once must have been a large garden were low triangular-shaped huts arranged in a semicircle with their backs to the forest. The dwellings were open on all sides except for the roofs, which were covered with several layers of broad banana leaves.

As if someone had given a signal, we were instantly surrounded by open-mouthed, wide-eyed women and men. I held on to **Ritimi**'s arm: Her having walked with me through the forest made her different from these gaping figures. Encircling me by the waist, she drew me close to her. The rapid, excited tone of her voice kept the crowd at bay for a moment longer. Suddenly their faces were only inches away from mine. Saliva dribbled down their chins, and their features were disfigured by the tobacco **wads** stuck between their gums and lower lips. I forgot all about the objectivity with which an anthropologist is to regard another culture. At the moment these Indians were nothing more than a group of ugly, dirty people. I closed my eyes only to open them the next instant as an unsteady bony hand touched my cheeks. It was an old man. Grinning, he began to shout: "**Aia, aia, aiiashori!**"

Echoing his shouts, everyone at once tried to embrace me, almost crushing me with joy. They managed to pull my **T**-shirt over my head. I felt their hands, lips, and tongues on my face and body. They smelled of smoke and earth: Their saliva, which clung to my skin, smelled of rotten tobacco leaves. Appalled, I burst into tears.

With apprehensive expressions on their faces, they pulled away. Although I could not understand their words, their tone clearly revealed their bewilderment.

Later that night I learned from **Milagros** that **Ritimi** had explained to the group that she had found me in the forest. At first she had believed I was a spirit, and she had been afraid to come near me. Only after she had seen me devour the bananas was she convinced I was human, for only humans eat that greedily.

Between my hammock and **Milagros**'s burned a fire: Smoking and sputtering, it threw a faint light over the open hut, leaving the trees outside in one solid mass of darkness. It was a reddish light that, combined with the smoke, made my eyes water. People sat around the fire so close to each other their shoulders touched. Their shadowed faces looked all the same to me: The red and black designs on their bodies seemed to have a life of their own as they moved and twisted with each gesture.

Ritimi sat on the ground, her legs fully extended, her left arm resting against my hammock. Her skin was a soft deep yellow in the wavering light: The painted lines on her face ran toward her temples, accentuating her Asiatic features. Clearly I could see the small holes, free of the sticks, at the corners of her mouth, lower lip, and the septum of her wide nostrils. Aware of my stare, she looked at me directly, her round face creasing into a smile. She had square short teeth: They were strong and very white.

I began to doze off to the gentle murmur of their voices, yet slept fitfully, wondering what **Milagros** was telling them as I kept waking to the sound of laughter.

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Chapter 6

"When do you think you'll be back?" I asked **Milagros** six months later, handing him the letter I had written to Father **Coriolano** at the mission. In it I briefly notified him that I intended to stay for at least two more months with the **Iticoteri**. I asked him to inform my friends in **Caracas**; and most important of all, I begged him to send with **Milagros** as many writing pads and pencils as he could spare. "When will you be back?" I asked again.

"In two weeks or so," **Milagros** said casually, fitting the letter into his bamboo quiver. He must have detected the anxiousness in my face for he added, "There is no way to tell, but I'll be back."

I watched as he started down the path leading to the river. He adjusted the quiver on his back, then turned to me briefly, his movements momentarily arrested as though there were something he wished to say. Instead he lifted his hand to wave good-bye.

Slowly I headed back to the **shabono**, passing several men felling trees next to the gardens. Carefully I stepped around the logs cluttered all over the cleared patch, making sure not to cut my feet on the pieces of bark, chips, and slivers of wood buried amidst the dead leaves on the ground.

"He'll be back as soon as the **plantains** are ripe," **Etewa** shouted, waving his hand the way **Milagros** had just done. "He won't miss the feast."

Smiling, I waved back, wanting to ask when the feast would take place. I did not need to: He had already given me the answer: When the **plantains** were ripe.

The brush and logs that were scattered each night in front of the main entrance of the **shabono** to keep out intruders had already been moved aside. It was still early, yet the huts facing the round, open clearing were mostly empty. Women and men were working in the nearby gardens, or had gone into the forest to gather wild fruits, honey, and firewood.

Armed with miniature bows and arrows, a group of little boys gathered around me. "See the lizard I killed," **Sisiwe** said, holding the dead animal by the tail.

"That's all he can do shoot lizards," a boy in the group said mockingly, scratching his ankle with the toes of his other foot. "And most of the time he misses."

"I don't," **Sisiwe** shouted, his face turning red with rage.

I caressed the **stubbles** on the crown of his head. In the sunlight his hair was not black but a reddish brown. Searching for the right words from my limited vocabulary, I hoped to assure him that one day he would be the best hunter in the settlement.

Sisiwe, **Ritimi**'s and **Etewa**'s son, was six, or at the most seven, years old for he did not yet wear a pubic waist string. **Ritimi**, believing that the sooner a boy tied his penis against his abdomen the faster he would grow, had repeatedly forced the child to do so. But **Sisiwe** had refused, arguing that it hurt. **Etewa** had not insisted. His son was growing healthy and strong. Soon, the father had argued, **Sisiwe** would realize that it was improper for a man to be seen without a waist string. Like most children, **Sisiwe** wore a piece of fragrant root tied around his neck, a charm against disease, and as soon as the designs on his body faded, he was painted anew with **onoto**.

Smiling, his anger forgotten, **Sisiwe** held on to my hand, and in one

swift motion climbed up on me as if I were a tree. He wrapped his legs around my waist. He swung backward and, stretching his arms toward the sky, shouted, "Look how blue it is- the color of your eyes."

From the middle of the clearing the sky seemed immense. There were no trees, lianas, or leaves to mar its splendor. The dense vegetation loomed outside the **shabono**, beyond the palisades [* palisades- fortifications consisting of a strong fence made of stakes driven into the ground] of logs protecting the settlement. The trees appeared to bide their time, as if they knew they were only provisionally held in check.

Tugging at my arm, the children pulled me together with **Sisiwe** to the ground. At first I had not been able to associate them with any particular parent for they wandered in and out of the huts, eating and sleeping wherever it was convenient. I only knew where the babies belonged, for they were perennially hanging around their mother's bodies. Whether it was day or night, the infants never seemed disturbed, regardless of what activity their mothers were engaged in.

I wondered how I would do without **Milagros**. Each day he had spent several hours teaching me the language, customs, and beliefs of his people, which I eagerly recorded in my **notepads**.

Learning who was who among the **Iticoteri** proved to be most confusing. They never called each other by name, except when someone was to be insulted. **Ritimi** and **Etewa** were known as Mother and Father of **Sisiwe** and **Texoma**. (It was permissible to use children's names, but as soon as they reached puberty everyone refrained from it.) Matters were further complicated in that males and females from a given lineage called each other brother and sister; males and females from another lineage were referred to as brother-in-law and sister-in-law. A male who married a woman from an eligible lineage called all the women of that lineage wives, but did not have sexual contact with them.

Milagros often pointed out that it was not only I who had to adapt. The **Iticoteri** were just as baffled by my odd behavior: To them I was neither woman, man, or child, and as such they did not quite know what to think of me or where they could fit me in.

Old **Hayama** emerged from her hut. In a high-pitched voice she told the children to leave me alone. "Her stomach is still empty," she said. Putting her arm around my waist, she led me to the hearth in her hut.

Making sure not to step on or collide with any of the aluminum and enamel cooking pots (acquired through trade with other settlements), the tortoise shells, gourds, and baskets scattered on the ground, I sat across from **Hayama**. I extended my legs fully, in the way of the **Iticoteri** women, and scratching the head of her pet parrot, I waited for the food.

"Eat," she said, handing me a baked plantain on a broken calabash. Attentively the old woman watched as I chewed with my mouth open, smacking my lips repeatedly. She smiled, content that I was fully appreciating the soft sweet plantain.

Hayama had been introduced to me by **Milagros** as Angelica's sister. Every time I looked at her I tried to find some resemblance to the frail old woman I had lost in the forest. About five feet four, **Hayama** was tall for an **Iticoteri** woman. Not only was she physically different from Angelica, but she did not have her sister's lightness of spirit. There was a harshness to **Hayama**'s voice and manner that often made me feel uncomfortable. And her heavy, drooping eyelids gave her face a peculiarly sinister

expression.

"You stay here with me until **Milagros** returns," the old woman said, serving me another baked plantain.

I stuffed the hot fruit in my mouth so I would not have to answer. **Milagros** had introduced me to his brother-in-law **Arasuwe** who was the headman of the **Iticoteri**, as well as to the other members of the settlement. However, it was **Ritimi** who, by hanging my hammock in the hut she shared with **Etewa** and their two children, had made it known that I belonged to her. "The white girl sleeps here," she had said to **Milagros**, explaining that little **Texoma** and **Sisiwe** would have their hammocks hung around **Tutemi**'s hearth in the adjoining hut.

No one had interfered with **Ritimi**'s scheme. Silently, a smile of gentle mockery on his face, **Etewa** had watched as **Ritimi** rushed between their hut and **Tutemi**'s, rearranging the hammocks in the customary triangle around the fire. On a small loft built between the back poles supporting the dwelling, she placed my knapsack, amidst bark boxes, an assortment of baskets, an **ax**, and gourds with **onoto**, seeds, and roots.

Ritimi's self-assuredness stemmed not only from the fact that she was the headman **Arasuwe**'s oldest daughter- by his first wife, a daughter of old **Hayama**, now dead- and that she was **Etewa**'s first and favorite wife; but also because **Ritimi** knew that in spite of her quick temper everyone in the **shabono** respected and liked her.

"No more," I pleaded with **Hayama** as she took another plantain from the fire. "My belly is full." Pulling up my **T**-shirt, I pushed out my stomach so she could see how filled it looked.

"You need to grow fat around your bones," the old woman said, mashing up the banana with her fingers. "Your breasts are as small as a child's." Giggling, she pulled my **T**-shirt up further. "No man will ever want you- he'll be afraid to hurt himself on the bones."

Opening my eyes wide in mock horror, I pretended to gobble down the mush. "I'll surely get fat and beautiful eating your food," I said with my mouth full.

Still wet from her river bath, **Ritimi** came into the hut combing her hair with a densely **thistled** pod. Sitting next to me, she put her arms around my neck, and planted resounding kisses on my face. I had to restrain myself from laughing. The **Iticoteri**'s kisses tickled me. They kissed differently: Each time they put their mouth against my cheek and neck, they vibrated their lips while sonorously ejecting air.

"You are not moving the white girl's hammock in here," **Ritimi** said, looking at her grandmother. The certainty of her tone was not matched by the inquiring softness of her dark eyes.

Not wanting to be the cause of an argument, I made it clear that it did not make much difference where my hammock hung. Since there were no walls between the huts, we practically lived together. **Hayama**'s hut stood on **Tutemi**'s left, and on our right was **Arasuwe** the headman's, which he shared with his oldest wife and three of his smallest children. His other two wives and their respective offspring occupied adjacent huts.

Ritimi fixed her gaze on me, a pleading expression in her eyes. "**Milagros** asked me to take care of you," she said, running the **thistled** pod through my hair, softly, so as not to scratch my scalp.

After what seemed an interminable silence, **Hayama** finally said, "You

can leave your hammock where it is, but you will eat here with me."

It was a good arrangement, I thought. **Etewa** already had four mouths to feed. **Hayama**, on the other hand, was taken good care of by her youngest son. Judging by the amount of animal skulls and **plantains** hanging from the thatched palm roof, her son was a good hunter and cultivator. Other than the baked **plantains** eaten in the morning, there was only one meal, in the late afternoon, when families gathered together to eat. People snacked throughout the day on whatever was available- fruit, nuts, or such delicacies as roasted ants and grubs.

Ritimi also seemed pleased with the eating arrangement. Smiling, she walked over to our hut and pulled down the basket she had given me which was hanging above my hammock, then took out my **notepad** and pencil. "Now let us work," she said in a commanding tone.

In the days that followed **Ritimi** taught me about her people as **Milagros** had done for the past six months. He had set up a few hours each day for what I referred to as formal instruction.

At first I had great difficulty in learning the language. Not only did I find it to be heavily nasal, but it was extremely difficult to understand people when they talked with **wads** of tobacco in their mouths. I tried to devise some sort of a comparative grammar, but gave it up when I realized that not only did I not have the proper linguistic training, but the more I tried to be rational about learning their language, the less I could speak.

My best teachers were the children. Although they pointed things out to me, and greatly enjoyed giving me words to repeat, they made no conscious effort to explain anything. With them I was able to rattle on, totally uninhibited about making mistakes. After **Milagros**'s departure, there was still much I did not comprehend, yet I was astonished by how well I managed to communicate with others, reading correctly the inflection of their voices, the expression on their faces, and the eloquent movements of their hands and bodies.

During those hours of formal instruction, **Ritimi** took me to visit the women in the different huts, and I was allowed to ask questions to my heart's content. Baffled by my curiosity, the women talked freely, as if they were playing a game. They patiently explained again and again whatever I did not understand.

I was grateful **Milagros** had set that precedent. Not only was curiosity regarded as bad manners, but it went against their will to be questioned. Yet **Milagros** had lavishly indulged me in what he called my eccentric whim, stating that the more I knew about the language and customs of the **Iticoteri**, the quicker I would feel at home with them.

It soon became apparent that I did not need to ask too many direct questions. Often the most casual remark on my part was reciprocated by a flow of information I would not have dreamed of eliciting.

Each day just before nightfall, aided by **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**, I would go over the data gathered during the day, and try to order it under some kind of classificatory scheme such as social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and other universal categories of human social behavior.

However, to my great disappointment, there was one subject **Milagros** had not touched upon: shamanism. I had observed from my hammock two curing sessions, of which I had written detailed accounts.

"**Arasuwe** is a great **shapori**," **Milagros** had said to me as I watched my first curing ritual.

"Does he invoke the help of the spirits when he chants?" I asked as I watched **Milagros**'s brother-in-law massage, suck, and rub the prostrate body of a child.

Milagros had given me an outraged look. "There are things one **doesn't** talk about." He had gotten up abruptly, and before walking out of the hut had added, "Don't ask about these things. If you do, you will run into serious trouble."

I had not been surprised by his response, but I had been unprepared for his outright anger. I wondered if his refusal to talk about the subject was because I was a woman, or because shamanism was a taboo topic. I did not dare to find out at the time. Being a woman, white, and alone was precarious enough.

I was aware that in most societies knowledge regarding shamanistic and curing practices are never revealed except to the initiates. During **Milagros**'s absence I did not mention the word shamanism once but spent hours deliberating over what would be the best way to learn about it without arousing any anger and suspicion.

From my notes on the two sessions it became evident that the **Iticoteri** believed the **shapori**'s body underwent a change when under the influence of the hallucinogenic snuff **epena**. That is, the shaman acted under the assumption that his human body transformed itself into a super-natural body. Thus he made contact with the spirits in the forest. My obvious approach would be to arrive at an understanding of shamanism via the body- not as an object determined by **psychochemical** laws, holistic forces in nature, the environment, or the psyche itself; but through an understanding of the body as lived experience, the body as an expressive unity known through performance.

Most studies on shamanism, including mine, have focused on the psychotherapeutic and social aspects of healing. I thought that my approach would not only provide a novel explanation but would furnish me with a way of learning about curing without becoming suspect. Questions concerning the body need not necessarily be associated with shamanism. I had no doubt that little by little I would retrieve the necessary data without the **Iticoteri** ever being aware of what I was really after.

Any pangs of conscience I felt regarding the dishonesty of my task were quickly stilled by repeating to myself that my work was important for the understanding of non-Western healing practices. The strange, often bizarre customs of shamanism would become understandable in the light of a different interpretational context, thus furthering anthropological knowledge in general.

"You haven't worked for two days," **Ritimi** said to me one afternoon. "You haven't asked about last night's songs and dances. Don't you know they are important? If we don't sing and dance the hunters will return without meat for the feast." Scowling, she threw the **notepad** into my lap. "You haven't even painted in your book."

"I'm resting for a few days," I said, clutching the **notepad** against my breast as if it were the dearest thing I possessed. I had no intention of letting her know that every precious page was to be filled exclusively with data on shamanism.

Ritimi took my hands in hers, examined them intently, then, assuming a very serious expression, commented, "They look very tired- they need rest."

We burst out laughing. **Ritimi** had always been baffled that I considered decorating my book to be work. To her work meant digging weeds in the garden, collecting firewood, and repairing the roof of the **shabono**.

"I liked the dances and songs very much," I said. "I recognized your voice- it was beautiful."

Ritimi beamed at me. "I sing very well." There was a charming candor and assurance in her statement; she was not boasting but only stating a fact. "I'm sure the hunters will return with plenty of game to feed the guests at the feast."

Nodding in agreement, I looked for a twig, then began to sketch a human figure on the soft dirt. "This is the body of a white person," I said as I sketched the main organs and bones. "I wonder how the body of an **Iticoteri** looks?"

"You must be very tired to ask such a stupid question," **Ritimi** said, staring at me as if I were dim-witted. She stood up and began to dance, chanting in a loud melodious voice: "This is my head, this is my arm, this is my breast, this is my stomach, this is my..."

In no time at all, attracted by **Ritimi**'s antics, a group of women and men gathered around us. Squealing and laughing, they made obscene remarks about each other's bodies. Some of the adolescent boys were laughing so hard, they rolled on the ground, holding their penises.

"Can anyone draw a body the way I drew mine?" I asked.

Several responded to this challenge. Grabbing a piece of wood, a twig, or a broken bow, they began to draw on the dirt. Their drawings differed markedly from each other's, not only because of the obvious sexual differences, which they made sure to emphasize, but because all the men's bodies were depicted with tiny figures inside the chest.

I could hardly hide my delight. I thought these must be the spirits I had heard **Arasuwe** summon with his chant before he began the curing session. "What are these?" I asked casually.

"The **hekuras** of the forest who live in a man's chest," one of the men said.

"Are all men **shapori**?"

"All men have **hekuras** in their chests," the man said. "But only a real **shapori** can make use of them. Only a great **shapori** can command his **hekuras** to aid the sick and counteract the spells of enemy **shapori**." Studying my sketch, he asked, "Why does your picture have **hekuras**, even in the legs? Women don't have **hekuras**."

I explained that these were not spirits, but organs and bones, and they promptly added them to their own drawings. Content with what I had learned, I willingly accompanied **Ritimi** to gather firewood in the forest- the women's most arduous and unwelcome task. They could never get enough wood, for the fires were never allowed to die.

That evening, as she had done every night since I arrived at the settlement, **Ritimi** examined my feet for thorns and splinters. Satisfied that there were none, she rubbed them clean with her hands.

"I wonder if the bodies of the **shapori** go through some kind of transformation when they are under the influence of **epena**," I said. It

was important to have it confirmed in their own words since the original premise of my theoretical scheme was that the shaman operated under certain assumptions concerning the body. I needed to know if these assumptions were shared by the group, and if they were of a conscious or unconscious nature.

"Did you see **Iramamowe** yesterday?" **Ritimi** asked. "Did you see him walk? His feet **didn't** touch the ground. He is a powerful **shapori**. He became the great jaguar."

"He **didn't** cure anyone," I said glumly. It disappointed me that **Arasuwe**'s brother was considered a great shaman. I had seen him beat his wife on two occasions.

No longer interested in pursuing the conversation, **Ritimi** turned away from me, and began to get ready for our evening ritual. Lifting the basket that held my belongings from the small loft at the back of the hut, she placed it on the ground. One by one she took out each item and held it above her head, waiting for me to identify it. As soon as I did she repeated the name in Spanish, then in English, starting a nocturnal chorus as the headman's wives, and several other women who each night gathered in our hut, echoed the foreign words.

I relaxed in my hammock as **Tutemi**'s fingers parted my hair searching for imaginary lice: I was certain I did not have any- not yet. **Tutemi** appeared to be five or six years younger than **Ritimi**, whom I believed to be twenty. She was taller and heavier, her stomach round with her first pregnancy. She was shy and retiring. Often I had discovered a sad, faraway look in her dark eyes, and at times she talked to herself as if she were thinking aloud.

"Lice! Lice!" **Tutemi** shouted, interrupting the women's Spanish-English chant.

"Let me see," I said, convinced that she was joking. "Are lice white?" I asked, examining the tiny white bugs on her finger. I had always believed they were dark.

"White girl, white lice," **Tutemi** said mischievously. With gleeful delight she crunched them one by one between her teeth and swallowed them. "All lice are white."

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American Rainforest - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 7

It was the day of the feast. Since noon I had been under the ministrations of **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**, who took great trouble to beautify me. With a sharpened piece of bamboo, **Tutemi** cut my hair in the customary style, and with a knife-sharp grass blade she shaved the crown of my head. The hair on my legs she removed with an abrasive paste made from ashes, vegetable resin, and dirt.

Ritimi painted wavy lines across my face, and intricate geometric patterns over my entire body with a piece of chewed-up twig. My legs, red and swollen from the depilation, were left unpainted. On my looped earrings, which I claimed could not be removed, she tied a pink flower together with tufts of white feathers. Around my upper arms, wrists, and

ankles she fastened red cotton strands.

"**Oh** no. You **re** not going to do that," I said, jumping out of **Ritimi**'s reach.

"It won't hurt," she assured me, then asked in an exasperated manner, "Do you want to look like an old woman? It won't hurt," **Ritimi** insisted, coming after me.

"Leave her alone," **Etewa** said, reaching for a bark box on the loft. He looked at me, then burst into laughter. His big white teeth and his squinting eyes seemed to mock my embarrassment. "She **doesn't** have much pubic hair."

Gratefully I tied the red cotton belt **Ritimi** had given me around my hips and laughed with him. Making sure I fastened the wide flat belt in such a manner that the fringed ends covered the offending hair, I said to **Ritimi**, "Now you can't see a thing."

Ritimi was not impressed, but gave an indifferent shrug, and continued examining her pubis for any hair.

Dark circles and arabesques [* arabesques- ornaments that interlaces simulated foliage in an intricate design] decorated **Etewa**'s brown face and body. Over his waistband he tied a thick round belt made of red cotton yarn: Around his upper arms he fastened narrow bands of monkey fur to which **Ritimi** attached the black and white feathers **Etewa** had selected from the bark box.

Dipping her fingers in the sticky resin paste one of **Arasuwe**'s wives had prepared in the morning, **Ritimi** wiped them over **Etewa**'s hair. Immediately **Tutemi** took a handful of white down feathers from another box and plastered them on his head until he looked as if he were wearing a white fur cap.

"When will the feast start?" I asked, watching a group of men haul away enormous piles of plantain skins from the already cleaned, weed-free clearing.

"When the plantain soup and all the meat is ready," **Etewa** said, strutting about, making sure we could see him from every angle. His lips were twisted in a smile, and his humorous eyes still squinted. He looked at me, then removed the **wad** of tobacco from his mouth. Placing it on a piece of broken calabash on the ground, he spat over his hammock in a sharp, strong arc. With the assurance of someone who feels pleased and delighted with his own looks, he turned toward us once more, then walked out of the hut.

Little **Texoma** picked up the slimy quid. Stuffing it into her mouth she began to suck on it with the same gratification I would have felt biting into a piece of chocolate. Her small face, disfigured with half of the **wad** protruding from her mouth, looked grotesque. Grinning, she climbed into my hammock, and promptly fell asleep.

In the next hut I could see the headman **Arasuwe** lying in his hammock. From there he supervised the cooking of **plantains** and the roasting of the meat brought by the hunters who had left a few days before. Like workers on an assembly line, several men had in record time disposed of the numerous bundles of **plantains**. One sank his sharp teeth into the peel, cutting it open: Another pried the hard skin away, then threw the fruit into the bark trough **Etewa** had built early that morning: A third watched over the three small fires he had lit underneath the trough.

"How come only men are cooking?" I asked **Tutemi**. I knew women never cooked large game, but I was baffled that none of them had even gotten close to the **plantains**.

"Women are too careless," **Arasuwe** answered for **Tutemi** as he stepped into the hut. His eyes seemed to challenge me to contradict his statement. Smiling, he added, "They get distracted too easily, and let the fire burn through the bark."

Before I had a chance to say anything, he was back in his hammock. "Did he only come in to say that?" I asked.

"No," **Ritimi** said. "He came to look you over."

I was reluctant to ask if I had passed **Arasuwe**'s inspection lest I remind her of my unplucked pubic hair. "Look," I said, "visitors are arriving."

"That's **Puriwariwe**, Angelica's oldest brother," **Ritimi** said, pointing to an old man among the group of men. "He is a feared **shapori**. He was killed once but **didn't** die."

"Killed once but **didn't** die." I repeated this slowly, wondering if I was supposed to take it literally, or if it was a figure of speech.

"Killed in a raid," **Etewa** said, walking into the hut. "Dead, dead, dead, but **didn't** die." He spoke distinctly, moving his lips in an exaggerated manner as if he could thus make me understand the true meaning of his words.

"Are there still raids taking place?"

No one answered my question. **Etewa** reached for a long hollow cane and a small gourd hidden behind one of the rafters, then left us to greet the visitors who stood in the middle of the clearing facing **Arasuwe**'s hut.

More men walked into the compound and I wondered aloud if any women had been invited to the feast.

"They are outside," **Ritimi** said. "With the rest of the guests, decorating themselves while the men take **epena**."

The headman **Arasuwe**, his brother **Iramamowe**, **Etewa**, and six other **Iticoteri** men- all decorated with feathers, fur, and red **onoto** paste- squatted face to face with the visitors who were already on their haunches. They talked for a while, avoiding one another's eyes.

Arasuwe unfastened the small gourd hanging around his neck, poured some of the brownish-green powder into one end of his hollow cane, then faced Angelica's brother. Placing the end of the cane against the shaman's nose, **Arasuwe** blew the hallucinogenic powder with great force into one of the old man's nostrils. The shaman did not flinch, groan, or stagger off, as I had seen other men do. But his eyes did become bleary and soon green slime dripped from his nose and mouth, which he flicked away with a twig. Slowly he began to chant. I did not catch his words; they were spoken too softly, and the groans of the others drowned them out.

Glassy-eyed, with mucus and saliva dripping down his chin and chest, **Arasuwe** jumped into the air. The red macaw feathers hanging from his ears and arms fluttered around him. He jumped repeatedly, touching the ground with a lightness that seemed incredible in someone so stockily built. His face seemed to be carved in stone. Straight bangs hung over a jutting brow. His wide, flaring nose and his snarling mouth reminded me of one of the four guardian kings I had once seen in a temple in Japan.

A few of the men had staggered away from the rest of the group,

holding their heads as they vomited. The old man's chant became louder; one by one the men gathered once more around him. Quietly they squatted, their folded arms over their knees, their eyes lost on some invisible spot only they could see, until the **shapori** finished his song.

Each of the **Iticoteri** men returned to his hut accompanied by a guest. **Arasuwe** had invited **Puriwariwe**. **Etewa** walked into his hut with one of the young men who had vomited. Without glancing at us, the guest stretched in **Etewa**'s hammock as if it were his own: He did not look older than sixteen.

"Why **didn't** all the **Iticoteri** men take **epena** or decorate themselves?" I whispered to **Ritimi**, who was busy cleaning and repainting **Etewa**'s face with **onoto**.

"Tomorrow they will all be decorated. More guests will come in the next few days," she said. "Today is for Angelica's relatives."

"But **Milagros isn't** here."

"He came this morning."

"This morning!" I repeated in disbelief. The young man lying in **Etewa**'s hammock opened his eyes wide, looked at me, then shut them again. **Texoma** awoke and began to wail. I tried to calm her by pushing the tobacco quid, which had fallen to the ground, back into her mouth. Refusing it, she began to cry even louder. I handed her to **Tutemi**, who rocked the child back and forth until she was still.

Why had **Milagros** not let me know he was back? I wondered, feeling angry and hurt. Tears of self-pity welled up in my eyes.

"Look. He's coming," **Tutemi** said, pointing toward the **shabono**'s entrance.

Followed by a group of men, women, and children, **Milagros** walked directly toward **Arasuwe**'s hut. Red and black lines circled his eyes and mouth. Spellbound, I gaped at the black monkey tail wrapped around his head, from which multicolored macaw feathers dangled, matching the ones that hung from his fur **armbands**. Instead of the festive cotton belt, he wore a bright red loincloth.

An inexplicable uneasiness overtook me as he approached my hammock. I felt my heart pound with fear as I gazed up into his tense, strained face.

"Bring your gourd," he said in Spanish, then turned around, and walked toward the trough filled with plantain soup.

Without paying the slightest attention to me, everyone followed **Milagros** into the clearing. Speechless, I reached for my basket, set it on the ground before me, and took out all my possessions. At the bottom, wrapped in my knapsack, was the smooth, ochre-colored calabash with Angelica's ashes. I had often wondered what I was supposed to do with it. **Ritimi** had never touched the knapsack when she went through my belongings.

The gourd felt heavy in my stiff, cold hands. It had been so light when I had carried it tied around my waist in the forest.

"Empty it into the trough," **Milagros** said. Again he spoke in Spanish.

"It's filled with soup," I said stupidly. I felt my voice quiver, and my hands were so unsteady I thought I would not be able to pull the resin plug from the calabash.

"Empty it," **Milagros** repeated, tilting my arm gently. I squatted awkwardly, and slowly poured the burnt, finely powdered bones into the

soup. I stared hypnotically at the dark heap they formed on the thick yellow surface. The smell made me nauseous. The ashes did not submerge. **Milagros** poured the contents of his own gourd on top of them. The women began to wail and cry. Was I supposed to join them? I wondered. I felt certain no matter how hard I tried not a single tear would come to my eyes.

Startled by sharp cracking sounds, I straightened up. With the handle of his machete, **Milagros** had split the two gourds into perfect halves. Next he mixed the powder into the soup, blending it so well that the yellow **pap** turned into a dirty gray.

I watched him bring the soup-filled gourd to his mouth, then empty it in one long gulp. Wiping his chin with the back of his hand, he filled it once more, and handed the ladle to me.

Horrified, I looked at the faces around me: Intently they watched every movement and gesture I made, with eyes that no longer seemed human. The women had stopped wailing. I could hear the accelerated beats of my heart. Swallowing repeatedly in an effort to overcome the dryness in my mouth, I held out a shaking hand. Then I shut my eyes tightly, and gulped down the heavy liquid. To my surprise the sweet, slightly salty soup glided smoothly down my throat. A faint smile relaxed **Milagros**'s tense face as he took the empty gourd from me. I turned around, and slowly walked away as ripples of nausea tightened my stomach.

High-pitched chatter and squeals of laughter issued from the hut. **Sisiwe**, surrounded by his friends, sat on the ground, showing them each one of my personal belongings, which I had left scattered around. My nausea dissolved into rage as I saw my **notepads** smoldering on the hearth.

Startled, the children laughed at me as I burned my fingers trying to retrieve what was left of the pads. Slowly the bemused expressions on their faces changed to amazement when they realized I was crying.

I ran out of the **shabono** down the path toward the river, clutching the burnt pages to my breast. "I'll ask **Milagros** to take me back to the mission," I mumbled, wiping the tears from my face. The idea struck me as so absurd that I burst out laughing. How could I face Father **Coriolano** with a shaven tonsure.

Squatting at the edge of the water, I stuck my finger in my throat and tried to vomit. It was no use. Exhausted, I lay face up on a flat boulder jutting over the water and examined what was left of my notes. A cool breeze blew my hair. I turned on my stomach. The warmth of the stone filled me with a soft laziness that melted all my anger and weariness away.

I looked for my face in the clear water, but the wind ruffled away all reflection from the surface. The river gave back nothing. Trapped in the dark pools along the bank, the brilliant green of the vegetation was a cloudy mass.

"Let your notes drift with the river," **Milagros** said, sitting beside me on the rock. His sudden presence did not startle me. I had been expecting him.

With a slight movement of my head I silently assented, and let my hand dangle over the rock. My fingers unclasped. I heard a faint splash as the scorched pad fell into the water. I felt as if a burden had been lifted

off my back as I watched my notes drift **downriver**. "You **didn't** go to the mission," I said. "Why **didn't** you tell me you had to bring Angelica's relatives?"

Milagros did not answer but stared out across the river.

"Did you tell the children to burn my notes?" I asked.

He turned his face toward me but remained silent. The contraction of his mouth revealed a vague disillusionment I failed to comprehend. When he spoke at last it was in a soft tone that seemed forced from him against his will. "The **Iticoteri** as well as other settlements have moved over the years deeper and deeper into the forest, away from the mission and the big rivers where the white man passes by." He turned to look at a lizard crawling uneasily over the stone. For an instant it stared at us with lidless eyes, then slithered off. "Other settlements have chosen to do the opposite," **Milagros** continued. "They seek the goods the **racionales** offer. They have failed to understand that only the forest can give them security. Too late, they will discover that to the white man the Indian is no better than a dog."

He knew, he said, having lived all his life between the two worlds, that the Indians did not have a chance in the world of the white man, no matter what a few individuals of either race did or believed to the contrary.

I talked about anthropologists and their work, the importance of recording customs and beliefs, which as he had mentioned on a previous occasion were doomed to be forgotten.

The hint of a mocking smile twisted his lips. "I know about anthropologists; I once worked for one of them as an informant," he said, and began to laugh: It was a high-pitched laughter, but there was no emotion in his face. His eyes were not laughing but shone with animosity.

I was taken aback because his anger seemed directed at me. "You knew I was an anthropologist," I said hesitantly. "You yourself helped me fill part of my notebook with information about the **Iticoteri**. It was you who took me from hut to hut, who encouraged others to talk to me, to teach me your language and your customs."

Impassively **Milagros** sat there, his painted face an expressionless mask. I felt like shaking him. It was as if he had not heard my words.

Milagros stared at the trees, already black against the fading sky: I looked up into his face. His head was silhouetted against the sky. I saw the flaming macaw feathers and purple manes of monkey fur as if the sky were streaked with them.

Milagros shook his head sadly. "You know you **didn't** come here to do your work. You could've done that much better at one of the settlements close to the mission." Tears formed at the edge of his eyelids: They clung to his stubby lashes, shining, trembling. "Knowledge of our ways and beliefs was given to you so you would move with the rhythm of our lives; so you would feel secure and protected. It was a gift, not to be used or to be given to others."

I could not shift my gaze away from his bright moist eyes: There was no resentment in them. I saw my face mirrored in his black pupils. Angelica's and **Milagros**'s gift. I finally understood. I had been guided through the forest, not to see their people with the eyes of an anthropologist- sifting, judging, analyzing all I saw and heard- but to see them as Angelica would have seen them, for one last time. She too had

known that her time and the time of her people was coming to an end.

I shifted my gaze to the water. I had not felt my watch falling in the river, but there it was lying amidst the pebbles, an unstable vision of tiny illuminated spots coming together and moving apart in the water. One of the metal links on the watchband must have broken, I thought, but made no effort to retrieve the watch, my last link with the world beyond the forest.

Milagros's voice broke into my reveries. "A long time ago at a settlement close to the big river, I worked for an anthropologist. He **didn't** live with us in the **shabono**, but built himself a hut outside the log palisade. It had walls and a door that locked from the inside and the outside." **Milagros** paused for a moment, wiping the tears that had dried around his wrinkled eyes, then asked me, "Do you want to know what I did to him?"

"Yes," I said hesitantly.

"I gave him **epena**." **Milagros** paused for a moment, and smiled as if he were enjoying my apprehension. "This anthropologist acted like everyone else who inhaled the sacred powder. He said he had the same visions as the shaman."

"There is nothing strange about that," I said, a little piqued by **Milagros's** smug tone.

"Yes, there is," he said, and laughed. "Because all I blew up his nostrils were ashes. All ashes do is make your nose bleed."

"Is that what you are going to give me?" I asked, and flushed at the obvious self-pity that permeated my voice.

"I gave you part of Angelica's soul," he said softly, helping me to my feet.

The **shabono's** boundaries seemed to dissolve against the darkness. I could see well in the faint light. The people gathered around the trough reminded me of forest creatures, their shining eyes smeared with the light from the fires.

I sat next to **Hayama**, and accepted the piece of meat she offered me. **Ritimi** rubbed her head against my arm. Little **Texoma** sat in my lap. I felt content, protected by the familiar odors and sounds. Intently I watched the faces around me, wondering how many of them were related to Angelica. There was not a single face resembling hers. Even **Milagros's** features, which had once seemed so much like Angelica's, looked different. Perhaps I had already forgotten what she looked like, I thought sadly. Then on a beam of light extending from the fire I saw her smiling face. I shook my head, trying to erase the vision, and found myself staring at the old shaman **Puriwariwe**, squatting a bit apart from the group.

He was a small, thin, dried-up man with a brownish-yellow skin; the muscles of his arms and legs were already shrunken. But his hair was still dark, curling slightly around his head. He was not adorned: All he wore was a bowstring around his waist. Sparse hairs hung from his chin, and the vestiges of a mustache shadowed the edges of his upper lip. Under heavy wrinkled lids, his eyes were like tiny lights, reflecting the gleam of the fire.

Yawning, he opened a cavernous mouth where yellowed teeth hung like stalagmites. Laughter and conversation ceased as he began to chant in a voice that gave the impression of belonging to another time and place. He possessed two voices: The one coming from his throat was

high-pitched and wrathful; and the other, coming from his belly, was deep and soothing.

Long after everyone had retired to their hammocks, and the fires had burned down, **Puriwariwe** remained crouched in front of a small fire in the middle of the clearing. He sang in a low-keyed voice.

I got up from my hammock, and squatted next to him, trying to bring my buttocks to touch the earth. According to the **Iticoteri** it was the only way one could squat for hours, and be totally relaxed. **Puriwariwe** looked at me, acknowledging my gaze, then stared into space as though I had disturbed his train of thought. He did not move and I had the odd sensation he had fallen asleep. Then he shifted his buttocks on the ground without relaxing his legs, and gradually began to chant once more in a voice that was but a faint murmur. I was not able to understand a single word.

It began to rain and I returned to my hammock. The drops pattered softly onto the thatched palm roof, creating a strange, **trancelike** rhythm. When I looked again toward the center of the clearing, the old man had disappeared; and as dawn lit up the forest, I felt myself slip into a timeless sleep.

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Chapter 8

The red sunset tinted the air with a fiery glow. The sky was aflame for a few minutes before it dissolved rapidly into darkness. It was the third day of the feast. From my hammock, together with **Etewa's** and **Arasuwe's** children, I watched the sixty or so men, **Iticoteri** as well as their guests, who without food or rest had been dancing since noon in the middle of the clearing. To the rhythm of their own shrill shouts, to the clacking of their bows and arrows, they turned one way, then another, stepping backward and forward, a throbbing, never-ending beat of sound and motion, an undulating array of feathers and bodies, a blur of crimson and black designs.

A full moon rose above the treetops, casting a radiant light over the clearing. For a moment there was a lull in the unceasing noise and movement. Then the dancers broke out in savage, strangled cries that filled the air with an ear-piercing sound as they flung aside their bows and arrows.

Running inside the huts, the dancers grabbed burning logs from the hearths, and with a frenzied violence banged them against the poles holding up the **shabono**. All sorts of crawling insects scurried for safety in the palm-thatch roof before they fell like a cascade to the ground.

Terrified that the huts might come crashing down, or that the flying embers might set the roofs on fire, I ran outside with the children. The earth trembled under the men's stomping feet as they trampled out all the hearths in the huts. Brandishing the lighted logs high above their heads, they ran out into the center of the clearing, and resumed their dance with mounting frenzy. They circled the plaza, their heads wagging back and forth like marionettes whose strings had broken. The soft white

feathers in their hair fluttered onto their sweat-glistening shoulders.

The moon moved behind a black cloud: Only the sparks of the fiery logs illuminated the clearing. The men's shrill cries rose to a higher pitch. Wielding their clubs overhead, they invited the women to join in the dance.

Shouting and laughing, the women darted back and forth, expertly dodging the swinging logs. The frenzy of the dancers mounted to a compelling intensity, converging toward a final climax as young girls, holding clusters of yellow palm fruit in their upraised arms, joined the crowd, their bodies swaying with sensual abandon.

I was not sure if it was **Ritimi** who grabbed my hand and pulled me into the dance, for in the next instant I stood alone among the ecstatic faces whirling around me. Caught between shadows and bodies, I tried to reach old **Hayama** standing in the safety of a hut, but I did not know in which direction to move. I did not recognize the man who, brandishing a log above his head, pushed me back amidst the dancers.

I cried out. Terror-stricken, I realized it was as if my cries were mute, exhausted in countless echoes reverberating inside me. I felt a sharp pain on the side of my head, right behind my ear, as I fell face down on the ground. I opened my eyes, trying to see through the shadows thickening about me, and wondered if those frenzied feet whirling and leaping in the air realized I had fallen amidst them. Then there was darkness, punctuated by pinpoints of light darting in and out of my head like **glowworms** in the night.

I was vaguely aware of someone dragging me away from the trampling dancers to a hammock. I forced my eyes open, but the figure hovering above me remained blurred. I felt a pair of gentle, slightly shaky hands touch my face, and the back of my head. For an instant I thought it was Angelica. But upon hearing that unmistakable voice coming from the depths of his stomach, I knew it was the old shaman **Puriwariwe**, chanting. I tried to focus my eyes, but his face remained distorted, as if I were seeing it through layers of water. I wanted to ask him where he had been, for I had not seen him since the first day of the feast, but the words were nothing but visions in my head.

I don't know whether I had been unconscious or whether I had slept, but when I awoke **Puriwariwe** was no longer there. Instead I saw **Etewa's** face bending over mine, so close I could have touched the red circles on his cheeks, between his brows, and at the corners of each eye. I stretched out my arm, but there was no one there. I shut my eyes; the circles danced inside my head like a red veil in a dark void. I shut them tighter until the image broke into a thousand fragments. The fire had been **relit**: It filled the hut with a cozy warmth that made me feel as if I were wrapped in an opaque cocoon of smoke. Dancing shadows silhouetted against the darkness were reflected on the golden patina of gourds hanging from the rafters.

Laughing happily, old **Hayama** came into the hut, and sat on the ground beside me. "I thought you would sleep till morning." Raising both hands to my head, her fingers probed until she found the swollen lump behind my ear. "It's big," she said. Her weathered features expressed a distant sorrow: Her eyes held a soft gentle light.

I sat up in the fiber hammock. Only then did I realize I was not in **Etewa's** hut.

"**Iramamowe's**," **Hayama** said before I had a chance to ask where I was. "His hut was the closest for **Puriwariwe** to bring you in after you were pushed against one of the men's clubs."

The moon had traveled high in the sky. Its pale shimmer spilled into the clearing. The dancing had ceased, yet an inaudible vibration still hung in the air.

Shouting, clacking their bows and arrows, a group of men positioned themselves in a semicircle in front of the hut. **Iramamowe** and one of the visitors stepped into the center of the gesticulating men. I could not tell which settlement the guest was from: I had been unable to distinguish the various groups who had come and gone since the beginning of the feast.

Iramamowe spread his legs in a firm stance, and raised his left arm over his head, exposing his chest fully. "**Ha, ha, ahaha, aita, aita**," he shouted, tapping his foot on the ground; a fearless cry that was meant to dare his opponent to strike him.

The young visitor adjusted his distance by measuring his arm length to **Iramamowe's** body. He took several dry runs, then with his closed fist delivered one powerful blow on the left side of **Iramamowe's** chest.

My body recoiled in shock. I felt nauseous as though the pain had swept through my own chest. "Why are they fighting?" I asked **Hayama**.

"They **aren't** fighting," she said, laughing. "They want to hear how their **hekuras**, the life essence that dwells inside their chests, resound. They want to hear how the **hokums** vibrate with each blow."

The crowd cheered enthusiastically. The young visitor stood back, his chest heaving with excitement, and punched **Iramamowe** once more. Chin arrogantly raised, eyes perfectly steady, body stiff in defiance, **Iramamowe** acknowledged the cheers of the men. It was only after the third blow that he broke his stance. For an instant his lips parted in an appreciative grin, then set once more in a snarl of indifference and contempt. The persistent tapping of his foot, **Hayama** assured me, revealed nothing other than annoyance: His adversary had not yet struck him hard enough.

With a morbid, righteous kind of satisfaction I hoped **Iramamowe** felt the pain of each blow. He deserved it, I thought. Ever since I had seen him strike his wife, I had built up a resentment against him. Yet, as I watched, I could not help but admire the gallant way he stood in the middle of the crowd. There was something childishly defiant in the ramrod straightness of his back, the manner in which his bruised chest was thrust forward. His round, flat face with its narrow forehead and flared upper lip appeared so vulnerable as he stared at the young man in front of him. I wondered if the slight flicker of his brown eyes betrayed that he was shaken.

With a shattering force the fourth blow landed on **Iramamowe's** chest. It reverberated like the rocks that tumbled down the river during a storm.

"I believe I heard his **hekuras**," I said, certain **Iramamowe's** rib had been broken.

"He's **waiteri**," the **Iticoteri** and their guests shouted in unison. With rapt expressions on their faces they bounced up and down on their haunches, clacking their bows and arrows over their heads.

"Yes. He is a brave one," **Hayama** repeated, her eyes fixed on

Iramamowe, who, satisfied that his **hekuras** had resounded potently, stood erect amidst the cheering men, his bruised chest puffed up with pride.

Silencing the onlookers, the headman **Arasuwe** stepped toward his brother. "Now you take **Iramamowe's** blow," he said to the young man who had delivered the four punches.

The visitor positioned himself in the same defiant stance in front of **Iramamowe**. Blood spilled from the young man's mouth as he collapsed to the ground after receiving **Iramamowe's** third blow.

Iramamowe jumped in the air, then began to dance around the fallen man. Sweat glistened on his face, on the strained muscles of his neck and shoulders. But his voice sounded clear, vibrant with joy, as he shouted, "**Ai ai aiaiaiai, aiai!**"

Two of the visiting women carried the injured man into the empty hammock next to where **Hayama** and I sat. One of them cried: The other bent over the man and began to suck blood and saliva from his mouth until his breath came in slow, measured gasps.

Iramamowe challenged another of the guests to strike him. After receiving the first punch he knelt on the ground, from where he dared his opponent to hit him once more. He spat blood after the next blow. The guest got down on his haunches facing **Iramamowe**. Wrapping their arms around each other, they embraced.

"You hit well," **Iramamowe** said, his voice a barely audible whisper. "My **hekuras** are full of life, potent and happy. Our blood has flown. This is good. Our sons will be strong. Our gardens and the fruits in the forest will ripen to sweetness."

The guest voiced similar thoughts. Vowing eternal friendship, he promised **Iramamowe** a machete he had acquired from a group of Indians who had settled near the big river.

"I have to watch this one more closely," **Hayama** said, walking out of the hut. Her youngest son was one of the men who had stepped into the circle for the next round of ritual blows.

I did not want to remain with the injured visitor in **Iramamowe's** hut. The two women who had brought him in had left to ask the shaman from their own group to prepare some medicine that would ease the pain in the man's chest.

My head began to spin as I stood up. Slowly I walked through the empty huts until I reached **Etewa's**. I stretched in my cotton hammock. An eerie silence closed in on me as if I were falling into a light faint.

I was awakened by angry shouts. Someone said, "**Etewa**, you have slept with my woman without my permission." The voice was so close it was as if he had spoken into my ear. Startled, I sat up. A group of men and giggling women had gathered in front of the hut. **Etewa**, standing perfectly still in the middle of the crowd, his face an unreadable mask, did not deny the charge. Suddenly he shouted, "You and your family have eaten like hungry dogs for the last three days." It was a deplorable accusation; visitors were given whatever they asked; for during a feast the hosts' gardens and hunting territory were at their guests' disposal. To be insulted in such a manner implied that the man had taken advantage of his privileged status. "**Ritimi**, get me my **nabrushi**," **Etewa** shouted, scowling at the angry young man in front of him.

Sobbing, **Ritimi** ran into the hut, picked up the club, and without

looking at her husband handed the four-foot-long stick to him. "I can't watch," she said, throwing herself into my hammock. I put my arms around her, trying to comfort her. Had it not been that she was so distressed I would have laughed. Not in the least concerned with **Etewa's** infidelity, **Ritimi** was afraid the night might end with a serious fight. Watching the two angry men shout at each other, and the crowd's excited reaction, I could not help but be alarmed in turn.

"Hit me on the head," the enraged visitor demanded. "Hit me, if you are a man. Let's see if we can laugh together again. Let's see if my anger passes."

"We are both angry," **Etewa** shouted with insolent vigor, hefting the **nabrushi** in his hand. "We must appease our wrath." Then, without further ado, he delivered a solid whack on the man's shaven tonsure.

Blood gushed from the wound. Slowly it spread over the man's face until it was covered like some grotesque red mask. His legs shook, almost buckling under him. But he did not fall.

"Hit me and we'll be friends again," **Etewa** shouted belligerently, silencing the aroused crowd. He leaned on his club, lowered his head, and waited. When the man struck him, **Etewa** was momentarily dazed; blood flowed down his brow and lashes, forcing him to close his eyes. The explosive yells of the men broke the silence, a chorus of approving shouts demanding they hit each other again.

With a mixture of fascination and disgust I watched the two men facing each other. Their muscles were drawn tightly, the veins in their necks distended, their eyes bright, as if rejuvenated by the raging flow of blood. Their faces, set in contemptuous red masks, betrayed no pain as they stepped around one another like two injured cocks.

With the back of his hand **Etewa** wiped the blood obstructing his vision, then spat. Lifting his club, he let it fall on his opponent's head, who without uttering a sound collapsed on the ground.

Clicking their tongues, their eyes a bit out of focus, the spectators emitted fearsome cries. I was certain a fight would break out as the whole **shabono** filled with their **earpiercing** yells. I held on to **Ritimi's** arm, and was surprised that her tear-stained face was set in a complacent, almost cheerful expression. She explained that she could tell by the tone of the men's shouts that they were no longer concerned with the initial insults. All they were interested in was to witness the power of each man's **hekuras**. There were no winners or losers. If a warrior fell, all it meant was that his **hekuras** were not strong enough at the moment.

One of the onlookers emptied a water-filled calabash on the prostrate guest, pulled his ears, wiped the blood from his face. Then, helping him up, he handed the half-dazed man his club, and urged him to hit **Etewa** once more on the head. The man had barely enough strength to lift the heavy stick; instead of landing on **Etewa's** skull, it struck him in the middle of the chest.

Etewa fell to his knees; blood spilled from his mouth, over his lips, chin, and throat, down his chest and thighs, a red trail seeping into the earth. "How well you hit," **Etewa** said in a strangled voice. "Our blood has flown. We are no longer troubled. We have calmed our wrath."

Ritimi went to **Etewa**. Sighing loudly, I lay back in my hammock and closed my eyes. I had seen enough blood for the night. I probed the swollen area on my head, wondering if I had a slight concussion.

I almost fell from my hammock as someone held on to the liana rope tying it to one of the poles in the hut. Startled, I looked up into **Etewa's** bloodied face. Either he did not see me, or was beyond caring where he rested, for he just slumped on top of me. The odor of blood, warm and pungent, mingled with the acrid smell of his skin. Repelled and fascinated, I could not help but stare at the open gash on his skull, still bleeding, and his swollen purple chest.

I was wondering how I could extricate my legs from under his weight when **Ritimi** stepped into the hut carrying a water-filled gourd, which she heated over the fire.

Expertly she lifted **Etewa** halfway up, and motioned me to slip behind him in the hammock so that she could prop him against my raised knees. Gently, she washed his face and chest clean.

Etewa was perhaps twenty-five, yet with his hair clinging damply to his forehead, and his lips slightly parted, he looked as helpless as a child in sleep. It occurred to me that he might die of internal injuries.

"He will be well tomorrow," **Ritimi** said as if she had guessed my thoughts. Softly she began to laugh: Her laughter had a ring of childish secret delight. "It's good for blood to flow. His **hekuras** are strong. He is **waiteri**."

Etewa opened his eyes, pleased to hear **Ritimi's** praise. He mumbled something unintelligible as he gazed into my face.

"Yes. He is **waiteri**," I agreed with **Ritimi**.

Tutemi arrived shortly with a dark hot brew.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Medicine," **Tutemi** said, smiling. She stuck her finger in the concoction, then put it against my lips. "**Puriwariwe** made it from roots and magical plants." A gleam of contentment shone in **Tutemi's** eyes as she forced **Etewa** to drink the bitter-tasting brew. Blood had flown: She was convinced she would bear a strong, healthy son.

Ritimi examined my legs, which were cut and bruised from being dragged across the clearing by **Puriwariwe**, and she washed them with the remaining warm water. I lay down in **Etewa's** uncomfortable fiber hammock.

The moon, circled by a yellow haze, had moved until it was almost over the horizon of trees. A few men were still dancing and singing in the clearing: Then a cloud hid the moon, obscuring everything in sight. Only the sound of voices, no longer shrill but a gentle murmur, told that the men were still there. The moon revealed itself once more, a pale light illuminating the tops of the trees, and the brown-skinned figures materialized against the darkness, shadows of long bodies giving substance to the soft clacking of bows and arrows,

Some of the men sang until a rim of light began to appear over the trees to the east. Dark purple clouds the color of **Etewa's** bruised chest covered the sky. Dew shone on the leaves, on the fringe of the palm fronds hanging around the huts. The voices began to fade, drifting away on the chilly breeze of dawn.

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Planting and sowing was primarily a man's task, yet most women accompanied their husbands, fathers, and brothers whenever they went to work in the gardens in the mornings. Besides keeping them company, the women helped weed, or took the opportunity to collect firewood if new trees had been felled.

For several weeks I had gone with **Etewa**, **Ritimi**, and **Tutemi** to their plots. The long, arduous hours spent weeding seemed to be wasted, for there never was any improvement to be seen. The sun and rain favored the growth of all species impartially, without recognizing human preferences.

Every household had their own area of land separated by the trunks of felled trees. **Etewa's** garden was next to **Arasuwe's**, who cultivated the largest area among the **Iticoteri**, for it was from the headman's plot that guests were fed at a feast.

At first I had recognized nothing but **plantains**, several kinds of bananas, and various palm trees scattered throughout the gardens. The palms were also purposely cultivated for their fruit, each tree belonging to the individual who planted it. I had been surprised to discover among the tangle of weeds an assortment of edible roots, such as manioc and sweet potatoes, and a variety of gourd-bearing vines, cotton, tobacco, and magical plants. Also growing in the gardens as well as around the **shabono** were the pink-flowered and red-podded trees from which the **onoto** paste was made.

Clusters of the red spiny pods were cut down, shelled, and the bright crimson seeds, together with the pulpy flesh surrounding them, were placed in a large water-filled calabash. As it was stirred and crushed, the **onoto** was boiled for a whole afternoon. After it had cooled during the night, the semi-solid mass was wrapped in perforated layers of plantain leaves, then tied to one of the rafters in the hut to dry. A few days later the red paste was transferred to small gourds, ready for use.

Ritimi, **Tutemi**, and **Etewa** each had their own patches of tobacco and magical plants in **Etewa's** garden. Like everyone else's tobacco plots, they were fenced off with sticks and sharpened bones to discourage intruders. Tobacco was never taken without permission; quarrels ensued whenever it was. **Ritimi** had pointed out several of her magical plants to me. Some were used as **aphrodisiacs** and protective agents: Others were employed for malevolent purposes. **Etewa** never talked about his magical plants, and **Ritimi** and **Tutemi** pretended they did not know anything about them.

Once I watched **Etewa** dig up a bulbous root. The following day, before leaving to hunt, he rubbed his feet and legs with the mashed-up root. For our evening meal that day we had armadillo meat. "What a powerful plant," I had commented. Puzzled, he had regarded me for a long time, then, grinning, said, "**Adoma** roots protect one from snake bites."

On another occasion, as I was sitting in the garden with little **Sisiwe**, listening to his detailed explanation concerning the variety of edible ants, we saw his father dig up another of his roots. **Etewa** crushed the root, mixed its sap with **onoto**, then rubbed the substance over his entire body. "A peccary [* peccary- nocturnal gregarious pig-like wild animals

of North America and South America] will cross my father's path," **Sisiwe** whispered. "I know by the kind of root he used. For every animal there is a magical plant."

"Even for monkeys?" I asked.

"Monkeys are frightened by terrifying yells," **Sisiwe** said knowingly. "Paralyzed, the monkeys can no longer run away and the men can shoot them."

One morning, almost hidden behind the tangled mass of calabash vines and weeds, I caught sight of **Ritimi**. I could only see her head rising behind the woody stems, pointed leaves, and clusters of white, bell-shaped flowers of the manioc plants. She seemed to be talking to herself; I could not hear what she was saying, but her lips moved incessantly, as if she were reciting some incantation. I wondered if she was charming her tobacco plants to grow taster or whether she was actually intending to help herself to some from **Etewa**'s patch, which was next to hers.

Surreptitiously, **Ritimi** edged her way toward the middle of her own tobacco plot. Her air of urgency was unmistakable as she snapped branches and leaves. Looking around, she stuffed them into her basket, then covered them with banana fronds. Smiling, she rose, hesitated for an instant, then walked toward me.

I looked up in feigned surprise as I felt her shadow above me.

Ritimi placed her basket on the ground and sat next to me. I was bursting with curiosity, yet I knew it would be futile to ask what she had been doing.

"Don't touch the bundle in my basket," she said after a moment, unable to suppress her laughter. "I know you were watching me."

I felt myself blushing and smiled. "Did you snatch some of **Etewa**'s tobacco?"

"No," she said in mock horror. "He knows his leaves so well he would notice if one were missing."

"I thought I saw you in his plot," I said casually.

Lifting the banana fronds from the basket **Ritimi** said, "I was in my own patch. Look, I took some branches of **oko-shiki**, a magical plant," she whispered. "I will make a powerful concoction."

"Are you going to cure someone?"

"Cure! Don't you know that only the **shapori** cures?" Tilting her head slightly to one side, she deliberated before she continued. "I'm going to bewitch that woman who had intercourse with **Etewa** at the feast," she said, smiling broadly.

"Maybe you should also prepare a potion for **Etewa**," I said, looking into her face. Her change of expression took me by surprise. Her mouth was set in a straight line; her eyes were narrowly focused on me. "After all, he was as guilty as the woman," I mumbled apologetically, feeling uneasy under her hard scrutiny.

"Didn't you see how shamelessly that woman taunted him?" **Ritimi** said reproachfully. "Didn't you see how vulgarly all those visiting women behaved?" **Ritimi** sighed, almost comically, then added with unconcealed disappointment, "Sometimes you are quite stupid."

I **didn't** know what to say. I was convinced that **Etewa** was as guilty as the woman. For want of anything better, I smiled. The first time I discovered **Etewa** in a compromising situation had been quite accidental. As everyone else did, I left the hut at dawn every day to relieve myself. I

always strayed a bit farther into the forest, beyond the area set aside for human evacuation. One morning I was startled by a soft moan. Believing it was a wounded animal, I crawled, as quietly as I could, toward the noise. Totally surprised, I could only stare as I saw **Etewa** on top of **Iramamowe**'s youngest wife. He looked into my face, smiling sheepishly, but did not stop moving on top of the woman.

Later that day **Etewa** offered me some of the honey he had found in the forest. Honey was a rare delicacy and was hardly ever shared with the same willingness as other foods were. In fact, most of the time honey was consumed at the spot where it was found. I thanked **Etewa** for the treat, assuming I was being bribed.

Sugars were something I constantly craved. I was no longer squeamish about consuming the honey together with wax combs, bees, maggots, pupae, and pollen the way the **Iticoteri** did. Whenever **Etewa** brought honey to the settlement, I would sit next to him and stare longingly at the runny paste studded with bees in varying stages of the metamorphic process until he offered me some. It never **occured** to me that he believed I had finally learned that to eye something one desired, or to ask for it outright, was considered proper behavior. Once, hoping to remind him that I knew of his philandering, I had asked him if he was not afraid to get hit on the head again by some enraged husband.

Etewa had looked at me in absolute astonishment. "It's because you don't know better- otherwise you **wouldn't** say such things." His tone was distant, the look in his eyes haughty as he turned toward a group of young boys engaged in sharpening pieces of bamboo that were to be used as arrowheads.

There were other occasions, not always accidental, when I encountered **Etewa** in similar circumstances. It soon became obvious that dawn was not only a time for attending to the baser bodily functions, but provided the safest opportunity for extramarital activity. I became greatly interested in who was cuckolding whom. **Cueing** themselves the evening before, the involved parties would disappear at dawn in the thicket. A few hours later, very casually, they returned by different routes, often carrying nuts, fruits, honey, sometimes even firewood. Some husbands reacted more violently than others upon finding out about their women's doings- they beat them, as I had seen **Iramamowe** do. Others, besides beating their wives, demanded a club duel with the male culprit, which sometimes ended in a larger fight that others joined.

Ritimi's words cut into my reveries, "Why are you laughing?"

"Because you are right," I said. "Sometimes I'm quite stupid." It suddenly dawned on me that **Ritimi** knew of **Etewa**'s activities- probably everyone in the **shabono** was aware of what was going on. No doubt it had been a coincidence when **Etewa** had offered me the honey that first time. Only I had examined the event with suspicion, believing all the time I was his accomplice.

Ritimi put her arms around my neck and planted smacking kisses on my cheek, assuring me that I was not stupid- only very ignorant. She explained that as long as she knew with whom **Etewa** was involved she was not greatly concerned about his amorous pursuits. She was by no means pleased by it, but believed she had some kind of control if it was with someone from the **shabono**. What distressed her was the possibility **Etewa** might take a third wife from some other settlement.

"How are you going to bewitch that woman?" I asked. "Are you going to make the concoction yourself?"

Standing up, **Ritimi** smiled with obvious satisfaction. "If I tell you now, the magic won't work." She paused, a quizzical expression in her eyes. "I'll tell you about it when I have bewitched the woman. Maybe someday you too will need to know how to bewitch someone."

"Are you going to kill her?"

"No. I'm not that courageous," she said. "The woman will have pains in her back until she has a miscarriage."

Ritimi slung the basket over her shoulders, then headed toward one of the few trees left standing near her tobacco patch. "Come, I need to rest before bathing in the river."

I stood for a moment to ease my cramped muscles, then followed her. **Ritimi** sat on the ground, resting her back against the massive tree trunk. Its leaves were like open hands between us and the sun, providing a cool shade. The earth, padded with leaves, was soft. I lay my head on **Ritimi**'s thigh, and watched the sky- so blue, so pale, it seemed transparent. The breeze rustled through the cane brush that grew behind us, gently, as if reluctant to impose itself on the midmorning stillness.

"The bump is gone," **Ritimi** said, running her fingers through my hair. "And there are no scars left on your legs," she added mockingly.

I agreed drowsily. **Ritimi** had laughed at my fear of getting sick from what she considered an insignificant injury. Having been pulled to safety by **Puriwariwe** was insurance enough that I would be well, she had assured me. However, I had been afraid that the cuts on my legs would become infected and I had insisted she wash them with boiled water every day. Old **Hayama**, as an added precaution, had rubbed the powder of burnt ants' nest on the wounds, claiming that it was a natural disinfectant. I had no ill effects from the stinging powder: The cuts healed quickly.

Through half-closed lids I gazed at the airy spaciousness of the gardens in front of me. Startled by shouts coming from the far end of the gardens, I opened my eyes. **Iramamowe** seemed to have materialized from beneath the banana fronds on his way toward the sky. Spellbound, I followed his movements as he worked his way up the spiny trunk of a **rasha** palm. So as not to hurt himself with the thorns, he worked with two pairs of crossed poles tied together, which he placed on the trunk one at a time. Relaxed, one motion leading to the next without a noticeable break, he alternated between standing on a pair of crossed poles and lifting the other set to place it higher on the trunk, until he reached the yellow clusters of **rasha**, at least sixty feet above the ground. For a moment he disappeared under the palm fronds that made a silvery arc against the sky. **Iramamowe** cut the drupes, tied the heavy clumps on a long vine, then eased them to the ground. Slowly, he worked his way down, vanishing in the greenness of banana leaves.

"I like the boiled drupes; they taste like ..." I said, then realized I did not know the word for potato. I sat up. With her head to the side, her mouth slightly open, **Ritimi** was sound asleep. "Let's go bathe," I said, tickling her nose with a grass blade.

Ritimi stared at me; she had the disoriented look of someone just awakened from a dream. Leisurely she rose to her feet, yawning and stretching like a cat. "Yes, let's go," she said, fastening the basket on her

back. "The water will wash my dream away."

"Did you have a bad one?"

She looked at me gravely, then brushed the hair off her forehead. "You were alone on a mountain," she said vaguely, as if she were trying to recollect her dream. "You **weren't** frightened, yet you were crying." **Ritimi** gazed at me intently, then added, "Then you woke me."

As we turned into the path leading to the river, **Etewa** came running after us. "Get some **pishaansi** leaves," he said to **Ritimi**. He turned to me. "You come with me."

I followed him through the newly cleared area of forest where fresh plantain suckers had already been planted between the rubble of felled trees, the trimmed leaf sheaths exposed above the ground. They were spaced from ten to twelve feet apart, allowing for the future full-grown plants to overlap leaves, but not to shade one another. Only a few days ago, **Etewa**, **Iramamowe**, and other close kin of the headman **Arasuwe** had helped him separate the suckers from the large basal **corn** of the **plantains**. On a contraption made with vines and thick leaves, fitted with a tumpline, they transported the heavy suckers to the new site.

"Did you find any honey?" I asked expectantly.

"No honey," **Etewa** said, "but something just as delicious." He pointed to where **Arasuwe** and his two oldest sons stood. They were taking turns at kicking an old banana tree. Hundreds of whitish, fat larvae fell out from between the **multilayered** green trunk.

As soon as **Ritimi** returned with the **pishaansi** leaves from the forest, the boys picked up the wriggling worms and put them on the sturdy wide leaves. **Arasuwe** lit a small fire. One of his sons held an elliptically-shaped piece of wood with his feet firmly planted on the ground while **Arasuwe** twirled the drill between his palms with an astounding speed. The ignited wood dust set fire to the termites' nest over which dry twigs and sticks were added.

Ritimi cooked the larvae for only a moment until the **pishaansi** leaves were black and brittle. Opening one of the bundles, **Etewa** wet his forefinger with saliva, rolled it in the roasted grub, then offered it to me. "It tastes good," he insisted as I turned my face away. Shrugging, he sucked his own finger clean.

Mumbling between mouthfuls, **Ritimi** urged me to give them a try. "How can you say you don't like them if you haven't even tasted them?"

With thumb and forefinger I placed one of the grayish, still soft grubs into my mouth. They are no different from escargot, I told myself, or cooked oysters. But when I tried to swallow the grub, it remained stuck to my tongue. I took it out again, waited till I had enough saliva, then swallowed the worm as if it were a pill. "In the morning, all I can eat is plantain," I said as **Etewa** pushed a bundle in front of me.

"You have worked in the garden," he said. "You have to eat. When there is no meat it is good to eat these." He reminded me that I had liked the ants and centipedes he had offered me on various occasions.

Looking into his expectant face, I could not bring myself to say that I had not liked them one bit, even though the centipedes had tasted like deep-fried vegetable tidbits. Reluctantly I forced myself to swallow a few more of the roasted grubs.

Ritimi and I followed behind the men on our way to the river. Children splashing in the water sang about a fat tapir that had fallen into

a deep pool and drowned. Men and women were rubbing themselves with leaves; their bodies glistened in the sun, golden and smooth. Sparkling droplets on the tips of their straight hair reflected the light like diamond beads.

Old **Hayama** beckoned me to sit next to her on a large boulder at the edge of the water. I believe I had become **Ritimi**'s grandmother's special charge, and she had taken it as a personal challenge to fatten me up. Like the children in the **shabono**, who were well fed so they would grow healthy and strong, old **Hayama** made sure I had plenty to snack on at all hours of the day. She indulged my insatiable appetite for sugars. Whenever someone found the sweet, thick, light-colored honey produced by **nonstinging** bees- the only kind given to the children- old **Hayama** made sure I was given at least a taste. If honey of the stinging black bees was brought to the **shabono**, **Hayama** also secured me some. Only adults partook of this kind, for the **Iticoteri** believed it caused nausea and even death to children. The **Iticoteri** were certain no harm would result if I ate both kinds, for they were unable to decide whether I was an adult or a child.

"Eat these," old **Hayama** said, offering me a few **sopaa** fruit. Greenish yellow, they were the size of lemons. I cracked them open with a stone (I had already broken a tooth trying to open nuts and fruits as the **Iticoteri** did) and sucked the sweet white pulp: The small brown seeds I spat out. The sticky juice gummed up my fingers and mouth.

Little **Texoma** climbed on my back, perching the small capuchin monkey she carried with her day and night on my head. The pet wrapped its long tail around my neck, so tightly I almost choked. One furry hand held on to my hair while the other swung in front of my face, striving to snatch away my fruit. Afraid to swallow monkey hair and lice, I tried to shake myself free. But **Texoma** and her pet shrieked with delight, believing I was playing a game. Lowering my feet in the water, I tried to slip my **T**-shirt over my head. Caught unawares, child and monkey jumped away.

The children pulled me down to the sand, tumbling beside me. Giggling, they began to walk, one by one, on my back, and I gave myself up to the pleasure of their small, cool feet on my aching muscles. In vain I had tried to convince the women to massage my shoulders, neck, and back after I had weeded for hours in the gardens. Whenever I had tried to show them how good it felt, they gave me to understand that although they liked being touched, massaging was something only the **shapori** did when a person was ill or bewitched. Fortunately they had no objections to letting the children walk on my back. To the **Iticoteri** it was quite inconceivable that someone could actually derive pleasure from such a barbaric act.

Tutemi sat next to me in the sand and began to unwrap the **pishaansi** bundle **Ritimi** had given her. Her pregnant belly and swollen breasts seemed to be held in place by the taut stretched skin. She never complained of aches or nausea; neither did she have any cravings. In fact, there were so many food taboos a pregnant woman had to obey that I often wondered how they bore healthy babies. They were not allowed to eat large game. Their only source of protein were insects, nuts, larvae, fish, and certain kinds of small birds.

"When will you have the baby?" I asked, caressing the side of her

stomach.

Knitting her brows in concentration, **Tutemi** deliberated for a while. "This moon comes and goes; another comes and goes, then one more comes and before it disappears, I will bear a healthy son."

I wondered if she was right. By her calculations that meant in three months. To me she looked as though she were about to give birth any day now.

"There are fish upriver- the kind you like," **Tutemi** said, smiling at me.

"I will take a quick swim, then I'll go with you to catch them."

"Take me swimming with you," little **Texoma** pleaded.

"You have to leave your monkey behind," **Tutemi** said.

Texoma perched the capuchin on **Tutemi**'s head and came running after me. Shrieking with pleasure, she lay on my back in the water, her hands holding on to my shoulders. I stretched my legs and arms slowly and fully with each stroke until we reached a pool at the opposite bank.

"Do you want to dive to the bottom?" I asked her.

"I do, I do," she cried, nuzzling her small wet nose against my cheek.

"I'll keep my eyes open, I'll not breathe, I'll hold on tight without choking you."

The water was not very deep. The blurred grayish, vermilion, and white pebbles resting in the amber sand shimmered brightly in spite of the trees shading the pool. I felt **Texoma**'s hands tugging at my neck; quickly I swam to the surface.

"Come out," **Tutemi** shouted as soon as she saw our heads. "We're waiting for you." She pointed to the women next to her.

"I'll go back to the **shabono** now," **Ritimi** said. "If you see **Kamosiwe** give this to him." She handed me the last of the larvae bundles.

I followed the women and several men on the well-trodden trail. Shortly we encountered **Kamosiwe**, standing in the middle of the path. Reclining against his bow, he appeared to be fast asleep. I placed the bundle at his feet. The old man opened his one good eye; the bright sun made him squint, grotesquely disfiguring his scarred face. He picked up the larvae: Slowly he began to eat, shifting from one foot to the other.

Following **Kamosiwe** as we climbed a small hill thick with growth, I marveled at the uncanny agility with which he moved. He never looked where he walked, yet always avoided the roots and thorns on the trail.

Slight, shrunken with age, he was the oldest-looking man I had ever seen. His hair was neither black, gray, or white, but an indistinctly colored woolly mop that apparently had not been combed for years. Yet it was short, as if cut periodically. It probably had stopped growing, I decided, like the **stubbles** on his chin that were always the same length. The scars on his wrinkled face were caused by a blow from a club that had taken out one of his eyes. When he spoke his voice was but a murmur, the meaning of which I had to guess.

At night he would often stand in the middle of the clearing, speaking for hours on end. Children crouched at his feet, feeding the fire that had been lit for him. His spent voice carried a strength, a tenderness that seemed at odds with his looks. There was always a feeling of urgent necessity in his words, a sense of warning, of enchantment as they scattered into the night. "There are words of knowledge, of tradition, preserved in the memory of this old man," **Milagros** had explained. It

was only after the feast that he mentioned that **Kamosiwe** was Angelica's father.

"You mean he is your grandfather?" I had asked in disbelief.

Nodding, **Milagros** had added, "When I was born, **Kamosiwe** was the headman of the **Iticoteri**."

Kamosiwe lived by himself in one of the huts close to the entrance of the **shabono**. He neither hunted nor worked in the gardens any longer; yet he was never without food or firewood. He accompanied the women to the gardens or into the forest when they went to collect nuts, berries, and wood. While the women worked, **Kamosiwe** stood watch, leaning against his bow, a banana leaf stuck on the tip of his arrow to shade his face from the sun.

Sometimes he waved his hand in the air- perhaps at a bird, perhaps at a cloud, which he believed was the soul of an **Iticoteri**. Sometimes he laughed to himself. But mostly he stood still, either dreaming or listening to the sound of the wind rustling through the leaves.

Although he had never acknowledged my presence among his people, I often caught his one eye on me. Sometimes I had the distinct feeling he purposely sought my presence, for he always accompanied the group of women I was with. And at dusk, when I would seek the solitude of the river, he would be there, squatting not too far from me.

We stopped at a point where the river widened between the banks. The dark rocks scattered on the yellow sand appeared as if someone had purposely arranged them in a symmetrical order. The shadowed still water was like a dark mirror reflecting the aerial roots of the giant **matapalos**. Coming down from a height of ninety feet, they choked and constricted the tree. It was on one of its branches, as a tiny seed dropped by a bird, that the deadly roots had first germinated. I could not tell what kind of a tree it had been- perhaps a ceiba, for the branches bending in tragic grandeur were full of thorns.

Equipped with branches from the **arapuri** tree growing nearby, some of the women waded into the shallow river. Their piercing, shrill cries shattered the stillness as they beat the water. The frightened fish took refuge under the rotten leaves on the opposite bank, where the other women caught them with their bare hands. Biting off their heads, they flung the still wriggling fish into the flat baskets on the sand.

"Come with me," one of the headman's wives said. Taking me by the hand, she led me further upriver. "Let's try our luck with the men's arrows."

The men and young boys who had accompanied us were circled by a group of shrieking women demanding they lend them their weapons. Fishing was considered a woman's activity: Men only went to laugh and jeer. It was the only time they allowed the women to use their bows and arrows. Some men handed their weapons to the women, then quickly ran to the safety of the bank, afraid of getting hit accidentally. They were delighted that none of them made a kill.

"Try," **Arasuwe** said, handing me his bow.

I had taken archery lessons at school and felt certain of my skill. However, as soon as I held his bow I knew this was impossible. I could barely draw the bow; my arm shook uncontrollably as I released the short arrow. I tried repeatedly, but not once did I hit a fish.

"What a bold way to shoot," old **Kamosiwe** said, handing me a

smaller bow belonging to one of **Iramamowe**'s sons. The boy did not complain but glowered at me sullenly. At his age no man would willingly hand his weapon to a woman.

"Try again," **Kamosiwe** urged. His one eye shone with a strange intensity.

Without the slightest hesitation I drew the bow once more, aiming the arrow at the shimmering silvery body that for an instant seemed motionless under the surface. I felt the tension of the drawn bow suddenly relax; the arrow released effortlessly. I distinctly heard the sharp sound of the arrow hitting the water and then saw a trail of blood. Cheering, the women retrieved the arrow-pierced fish. It was no bigger than a medium-sized trout. I returned the weapon to the boy, who stared at me with astonished admiration.

I looked for old **Kamosiwe**, but he was gone.

"I will make you a small bow," **Arasuwe** said, "and slender arrows- the kind used for shooting fish."

The men and women had gathered around me. "Did you really shoot the fish?" one of the men asked. "Try it again. I **didn't** see it."

"She did, she did," **Arasuwe**'s wife assured him, showing him the trophy.

"**Ahahaha**," the men exclaimed.

"Where did you learn to shoot with a bow and arrow?" **Arasuwe** asked.

As best as I could, I attempted to explain what a school was. Watching **Arasuwe**'s puzzled eyes, I wished I had said that my father had taught me. Explaining something that required more than a few sentences at a time could be a frustrating experience, not only for me, but for my listeners as well. It was not always a matter of knowing the right words: Rather the difficulty stemmed from the fact that certain words did not exist in their language. The more I talked, the more troubled **Arasuwe**'s expression became. Frowning with disappointment, he insisted I explain why I knew how to use the bow and arrow. I wished **Milagros** had not gone to visit another settlement.

"I know of whites who are good marksmen with a gun," **Arasuwe** said. "But I have never seen a white use the bow and arrow skillfully."

I felt a need to belittle the fact that I had actually hit a fish, alleging that it was sheer luck, which it was. However, **Arasuwe** kept insisting that I knew how to use the Indians' weapons. Even **Kamosiwe** had noticed the way I held the bow, he said loudly.

I believe that somehow I got the idea of school across, for they insisted I tell them what else I had been taught. The men laughed outrageously upon hearing that the way I had decorated my notebook was something I had learned at school. "You haven't been taught properly," **Arasuwe** said with conviction. "Your designs were very poor."

"Do you know how to make machetes?" one of the men asked.

"You need hundreds of people for that," I said. "Machetes are made in a factory." The harder I tried to make them understand, the more tongue-tied I became. "Only men make machetes," I finally said, pleased to have found an explanation that satisfied them.

"What else did you learn?" **Arasuwe** asked.

I wished I had some gadget with me, such as a tape recorder, a flashlight, or some such thing, to impress them with. Then I remembered

the gymnastics I had practiced for several years. "I can jump through the air," I said off-hand. Clearing off a square area of the sandy beach, I placed four of the fish-filled baskets in each of its corners. "No one can step into this space." Standing in the middle of my arena, I gazed at the curious faces around me. They broke into hilarious guffaws as they watched me do a series of stretch exercises. Although the sand did not have the springiness of a floor exercise mat, I was at least comforted by the thought that I would not hurt myself if I missed my footing. I did a couple of handstands, **cartwheels**, front and back **walkovers**, then a forward and backward somersault. I did not land with the grace of an accomplished gymnast, but I was pleased by the admiring faces around me.

"What strange things you were taught," **Arasuwe** said. "Do it again."

"One can only do it once." I sat on the sand to catch my breath. Even if I had wanted to I could not repeat my performance.

The men and women came closer, their intent eyes fixed on me.

"What else can you do?" one of them asked.

For an instant I was at a loss; I thought I had done plenty. After a moment's consideration, I said, "I can sit on my head."

Laughter shook their bodies until tears rolled down their cheeks. "Sit on the head," they repeated, each time bursting into new peals of laughter.

I flattened my forearms on the ground, placed my forehead on my intertwined palms, and slowly lifted my body upward. Sure of my balance, I crossed my upraised legs. The laughter stopped. **Arasuwe** lay flat on the ground, his face close to mine. He smiled, crinkling the corners of his eyes. "White girl, I don't know what to think of you, but I know if I walk with you through the forest, the monkeys will stop to see you. Enchanted, they will sit still to watch you, and I will shoot them." He touched my face with his large calloused hand. "Sit on your buttocks again. Your face is red, as if it were painted with **onoto**. I'm afraid your eyes will fall out of your head."

Back in the **shabono**, **Tutemi** placed one of the bundles of fish, cooked in **pishaansi** leaves, in front of me on the ground. Fish was my favorite food. To everyone's surprise, I preferred it to armadillo, peccary, or monkey meat. The **pishaansi** leaves and the salty solution derived from the ashes of the **kurori** tree added a spiciness that greatly enhanced its natural flavor.

"Did your father want you to learn to use the bow and arrow?"

Arasuwe asked, squatting next to me. Before I had a chance to answer, he continued, "Had he wanted a boy when you were born?"

"I don't think so. He was very pleased when I was born. He already had two sons."

Arasuwe opened the bundle in front of him. Silently he shifted the fish toward the middle of the leaves, as if he were pondering a mystery for which he had no adequate words. He motioned me to take some of his food. With two fingers and a thumb, I lifted a large portion of fish into my mouth. As was proper, I licked the juice dribbling down my arm and when I ran into a spine I spat it on the ground, without spitting out any of the flaky meat.

"Why did you learn to shoot arrows?" **Arasuwe** asked in a compelling tone.

Without thinking I answered, "Maybe something in me knew I was to come here someday."

"You should have known that girls don't use the bow and arrow." He smiled at me briefly, then began to eat.

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South
American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 10

The soft patter of rain and the voices of men singing outside the hut woke me from my afternoon nap. Shadows began to lengthen and the wind played with the palm fronds hanging over the roofs. Sounds and presences filled the huts all at once. Fires were stoked. Soon everything smelled of smoke, of dampness, of food and wet dogs. There were men chanting outside, oblivious to the drops pecking at their backs and at their masklike faces. Their eyes, watery from the **epena**, were fixed on the distant clouds, open wide to the spirits of the forest.

I walked out into the rain to the river. The heavy drops drumming on the ceiba leaves awakened the tiny frogs hiding under the tall grass blades that grew along the bank. I sat down at the edge of the water. Unaware of time passing, I watched the concentric circles of rain spreading over the river, pink flowers drifting by like forsaken dreams of another place. The sky darkened; the outline of the clouds began to blur as they merged into each other. The trees turned into a single mass. Leaves lost their distinctive shapes, becoming indistinguishable from the evening sky.

I heard a whimpering sound behind me; I turned around but saw only the faintest gleam of rain on the leaves. Seized by an inexplicable apprehension, I ascended the trail leading to the **shabono**. At night I was never sure of anything; the river, the forest were like presences I could only feel but never understand. I slipped on the muddy path, stubbing my toe on a gnarled root.

Once more I heard a soft whimpering sound. It reminded me of the mournful cries of **Iramamowe**'s hunting dog, which he had shot in a fit of rage with a poisoned arrow during a hunt when the animal had barked inopportunely. The injured dog had returned to the settlement and hid outside the wooden palisade, where it had whined for hours until **Arasuwe** put an end to its suffering with another arrow.

I called softly. The cries stopped and then I distinctly heard an agonized moan. Maybe it's true that there are forest spirits, I thought, straightening up. The **Iticoteri** claimed that there were beings who cross a tenuous boundary that separates animal from man. These creatures call the Indians at night, luring them to their deaths. I stifled a cry. It seemed as if a shape loomed from the dark- some concealed figure that moved among the trees only a pace from where I stood. I sat down again in an effort to conceal myself. I heard a faint breathing: It was more like a sighing, accompanied by a rattling, choking sound. Through my head rushed the stories of revenge, of bloody raids the men were so fond of talking about at night. In particular I remembered the story about Angelica's brother, the old shaman **Puriwariwe**, who supposedly had

been killed in a raid, yet had not died.

"He was shot in the stomach, where death hides," **Arasuwe** had said one evening. "He **didn't** lie down in his hammock, but remained standing in the middle of the clearing, leaning on his bow and arrow. He swayed but **didn't** fall.

"The raiders remained rooted on the spot, unable to shoot another arrow as the old man chanted to the spirits.

With the arrow still stuck in the spot where death lies, he disappeared into the forest. He was gone for many days and nights. He lived in the darkness of the forest without food or drink. He chanted to the **heknras** of animals and trees, creatures that are harmless in the clear light of the day, but in the shadows of the night they cause terror to the one who cannot command them. From his hiding place, the old **shapori** lured his enemies: He killed them one by one, with magical arrows."

Again I heard the whimpering sound, then a choking noise. I crawled, carefully feeling for thorns in the undergrowth. I gasped in terror as I touched a hand; its fingers were curled around a broken bow. I did not recognize the sprawled-out body until I touched **Kamosiwe**'s scarred face. "Old man," I called, afraid that he was dead.

He turned on his side, pulled his legs up with the ease of a child that seeks warmth and comfort. He tried to focus with his single, deeply set eye as he looked at me helplessly. It was as though he were returning from a great distance, from another world. Steadying himself against the broken bow, he tried to get on his feet. He clutched my arm, then let out an eerie sound as he sank to the ground. I could not hold him up. I shook him, but he lay still.

I felt for his heartbeat to see if he was dead. **Kamosiwe** opened his one eye: His gaze seemed to hold a silent plea. The dilated pupil reflected no light: Like a deep, dark tunnel, it seemed to draw the strength out of my body. Afraid I would make a mistake, I talked to him in Spanish, softly, as if he were a child. I hoped he would close that awesome eye and fall asleep.

Lifting him by the armpits, I dragged him toward the **shabono**. Although he was only skin and bones, his body seemed to weigh a ton. After a few minutes I had to sit and rest, wondering if he was still alive. His lips trembled: He spat out his tobacco quid. The dark saliva dribbled over my leg. His eye filled with tears. I put the **wad** back into his mouth, but he refused it. I took his hands, rubbed them against my body so as to imbue them with some warmth. He started to say something, but I heard only an unintelligible mutter.

One of the young boys who slept close to the entrance, next to the old man's hut, helped me lift **Kamosiwe** into his hammock. "Put logs on the fire," I said to one of the gaping boys. "And call **Arasuwe**, **Etewa**, or someone who can help the old man."

Kamosiwe opened his mouth to ease his breathing. The wavering light of the small fire accentuated his ghostlike paleness. His face twisted into an odd smile, a grimace that reassured me I had done the right thing.

The hut filled with people. Their eyes shone with tears: Their sorrowful wails spread throughout the **shabono**.

"Death is not like the darkness of night," **Kamosiwe** said in a barely audible whisper. His words fell into silence as the people, gathered around his hammock, momentarily stopped their laments.

"Do not leave us alone," the men moaned as they burst into loud weeping. They began to talk about the old man's courage, about the enemies he had killed, about his children, about the days he was headman of the **Iticoteri** and the prosperity and glory he had brought to the settlement.

"I will not die yet." The old man's words silenced them once again. "Your weeping makes me too sad." He opened his eye and scanned the faces around him. "The **hekuras** are still in my chest. Chant to them, for they are the ones who keep me alive."

Arasuwe, **Iramamowe**, and four other men blew **epena** into each other's nostrils. With blurred eyes they began to sing to the spirits dwelling below and above the earth.

"What ails you?" **Arasuwe** asked after a while, bending over the old man. His strong hands massaged the weak, withered chest; his lips blew warmth into the immobile form.

"I'm only sad," **Kamosiwe** whispered. "The **hekuras** will soon abandon my chest. It's my sadness that makes me weak."

I returned with **Ritimi** to our hut. "He will not die," she said, wiping the tears from her face. "I don't know why he wants to live so long. He is so old, he is no longer a man."

"What is he?"

"His face," she said, "has become so small, so thin..." **Ritimi** looked at me as if at a loss for words to express her thoughts. She made a vague gesture with her hand, as if grasping for something she did not know how to voice. Shrugging, she smiled. "The men will chant throughout the night, and the **hekuras** will keep the old man alive."

A monotonous rain, warm and persistent, mingled with the men's songs. Whenever I sat up in my hammock I could see them across the clearing in **Kamosiwe**'s hut, crouched in front of the fire. They chanted with a compelling force, convinced that their invocations could preserve life, as the rest of the **Iticoteri** slept.

The voices faded with the rosy melancholy of dawn. I got up and walked across the clearing. The air was chilly, the ground damp from the rain. The fire had died down, yet the hut was warm from the misty smoke. The men huddled together still crouched around **Kamosiwe**. Their faces were drawn; their eyes were hollowed by deep circles.

I returned to my hammock as **Ritimi** was getting up to rekindle the fire. "**Kamosiwe** seems well," I said, lying down to sleep.

As I stood up from behind a bush I saw **Arasuwe**'s youngest wife and her mother slowly pushing their way through the thicket in the direction of the river. Quietly I followed the two women. They had no baskets with them- only a piece of sharpened bamboo. The pregnant woman held her hands to her belly as if supporting its heavy weight. They stopped under an **arapuri** tree, where the undergrowth had been cleared and broad **platanillo** leaves had been scattered on the ground. The pregnant woman knelt on the leaves, pressing her abdomen with both hands. A soft moan escaped her lips, and she gave birth.

I held my hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle. I could not conceive that giving birth could be so effortless, so fast. The two women talked in whispers, but neither one of them looked at, or picked up, the shiny wet infant on the leaves.

With the bamboo knife, the old woman cut the umbilical cord, then

looked around until she found a straight branch. I watched her place the stick across the baby's neck, then step with both feet at either end. There was a faint snapping sound. I was not sure if it was the baby's neck or if it was the branch that had cracked.

The afterbirth they wrapped in one bundle of **platanillo** leaves, the small lifeless body into another. They tied the bundles with vines, and placed them under the tree.

I tried to hide behind the bushes as the women got up to leave, but my legs would not obey me. I felt drained of all emotion, as if the scene in front of me were some bizarre nightmare. The women looked at me. A faint flicker of surprise registered on their faces, but I saw no pain or regret in their eyes.

As soon as they were gone I untied the vines. The lifeless body of a baby girl lay on the leaves as if in sleep. Long black hair, like silk strands, stuck to her slippery head. The **lashless** lids were swollen, covering the closed eyes. The trickle of blood running from nose and mouth had dried, like some macabre **onoto** design on the faint purplish skin. I pried open the small fists. I checked the toes to see if they were complete: I found no visible deformity.

The late afternoon had spent itself. The dried leaves made no rustling sound under my bare feet: They were damp with the night. The wind parted the leafy branches of the **ceibas**. Thousands of eyes seemed to be staring at me; indifferent eyes, veiled in green shadows. I walked down the river, and sat on a fallen log that had not yet died. I touched the clusters of new shoots that desperately wanted to see the light. The cricket's call seemed to mock my tears.

I could smell the smoke from the huts and I resented those fires that burned day and night, swallowing time and events. Black clouds hid the moon, cloaking the river in a veil of mourning. I listened to the animals—those that wake from their day's sleep and roam the forest at night. I was not afraid. A silence, like a soft dust from the stars, fell around me. I wanted to fall asleep, and wake up knowing it had all been a dream.

Through a patch of clear sky I saw a shooting star. I could not help smiling. I had always been fast to make a wish, but I could not think of any.

I felt **Ritimi**'s arm around my neck. Like some forest spirit she had sat down noiselessly beside me. The pale sticks at the corners of her mouth shone in the dark as if they were made of gold. I was grateful she was near me, that she did not say a word.

The wind brushed away the clouds that obscured the moon: Its light covered us in a faint blue. Only then did I notice old **Kamosiwe** squatting beside the log, his eye fixed on me. He began to talk, slowly, enunciating each word. But I was not listening. Leaning heavily on his bow, he motioned us to follow him to the **shabono**. He stopped by his hut: **Ritimi** and I walked on to ours.

"Only a week ago, women and men cried," I said, sitting in my hammock. "They cried believing **Kamosiwe** was going to die. Today I saw **Arasuwe's wife** kill her newborn child."

Ritimi handed me some water. "How could the woman feed a new baby at her breast when she has a child that still suckles?" she said briskly. "A child who has lived this long."

Intellectually I grasped **Ritimi**'s words. I was aware that infanticide

was a common practice among Amazonian Indians. Children were spaced approximately two to three years apart. The mother lactated during this time, and refrained from bearing another child in order to sustain an ample supply of milk. If a deformed or female child were born during this time, it was killed, so as to give the nursing child a better chance of survival.

Emotionally, however, I was unable to accept it. **Ritimi** held my face, forcing me to look at her. Her eyes shone, her lips trembled with feeling. "The one who has not yet glimpsed at the sky has to return from where it came." She stretched her arm toward the immense black shadows that began at our feet and ended in the sky. "To the house of thunder."

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 11

Instead of the women's soft chattering, I was awakened one morning by **Iramamowe**'s shouts announcing that he would prepare curare that day.

I sat up in my hammock. **Iramamowe** stood in the middle of the clearing. Legs apart, arms folded over his chest, he scrutinized the young men who had gathered around him. At the top of his voice he warned them that if they planned to help him prepare the poison, they were not to sleep with a woman that day. **Iramamowe** went on ranting as if the men had already misbehaved, reminding them that he would know if they disobeyed him for he would test the poison on a monkey. Should the animal survive he would never again ask the men to assist him. He told them that if they wished to accompany him into the forest to collect the various vines needed to make the **mamucori**, they had to refrain from eating and drinking until the poison had been smeared on their arrowheads.

Calm returned to the **shabono** as soon as the men left. **Tutemi**, after stoking the fires, rolled the tobacco quids for herself, **Ritimi**, and **Etewa**, then returned to her hammock. I thought there was time to snatch a bit more sleep before the **plantains** buried under the embers were done. I turned over in my hammock: The smoke warmed the chilly air. As they did every morning after relieving themselves, little **Texoma** and **Sisiwe**, as well as **Arasuwe**'s two youngest children, climbed into my hammock and snuggled up to me.

Ritimi had been oblivious to the morning events. She was still sound asleep on the ground. Sleep did not interfere with **Ritimi**'s vanity. Her head, resting on her arm, was propped in such a manner that it allowed her to wear her full beauty regalia: Slender polished rods were stuck through the septum of her nose and the corners of her mouth. Her exposed cheek revealed two brown lines, a sign recognizable by everyone in the **shabono** that she was menstruating. For the last two nights **Ritimi** had not slept in her hammock, had not eaten meat, had not cooked any of the meals, and had not touched **Etewa** or any of his belongings.

Men feared menstruating women. **Ritimi** had told me that women were known not to have **hekuras** in their chest but were linked to the life

essence of the otter, the ancestor of the first woman on earth. During their menses, women were thought to be imbued with the supernatural powers of the otter. She did not seem to know what these powers were, but she said that if a man saw an otter in the river he never killed it for fear that a woman in the settlement would die that same instant.

The **Iticoteri** women had at first been puzzled as to why I had not menstruated since my arrival. My explanation- loss of weight, change of diet, new surroundings- was not thought to be the reason. Instead they believed that as a non-Indian, I was not fully human. I had no link to the life essence of any animal, plant, or spirit.

It was only **Ritimi** who wanted to believe and prove to the other women that I was human. "You have to tell me immediately when you are **roo**, as if I were your mother," **Ritimi** would say to me every time she herself menstruated. "And I will make the proper preparations so you will not be turned into a stone by the tiny creatures that live underground."

Ritimi's insistence was probably another reason my body did not follow its normal cycles. Since I have a tendency to suffer from claustrophobia, I had periodic attacks of anxiety triggered by the possibility of having to endure the same restrictions that an **Iticoteri** girl going through her first menses does.

Only a week before, **Xotomi**, one of the headman's daughters, had emerged from a three-week confinement. Her mother, upon learning that **Xotomi** had begun her first period, built an enclosure made out of sticks, palm fronds, and vines in a corner of their hut. A narrow space had been left open. It was barely large enough for her mother to slip in and out of twice a day to feed the meager fire inside (which was never allowed to die) and remove the soiled **platanillo** leaves covering the ground. The men, afraid of dying young or of becoming ill, did not so much as glance toward that area in the hut.

For the first three days of her menstrual period **Xotomi** was only given water and had to sleep on the ground. Thereafter she was given three small **plantains** a day and was permitted to rest in the small bark hammock that was hung inside. She was not allowed to speak or weep during her confinement. All I heard from behind the tied palm fronds was the faint sound of **Xotomi** scratching herself with a stick, for she was not supposed to touch her body.

By the end of the third week, **Xotomi**'s mother dismantled the enclosure, tied the palm leaves into a tight bundle, then asked some of her daughter's playmates to hide them in the forest. **Xotomi** did not move, as if the palm fronds were still around her. She remained crouched on the ground with downcast eyes. Her slightly hunched shoulders seemed so frail that I was sure if someone grasped them the bones would give way with a hollow crack. More than ever she looked like a frightened child, thin and dirty.

"Keep your eyes on the ground," her mother said, helping the twelve-, perhaps thirteen-year-old girl to her feet. With her arms around her waist, she led **Xotomi** to the hearth. "Don't rest your eyes on any of the men in the clearing," she admonished the girl, "lest you want their legs to tremble when they have to climb trees."

Water had been heated. Lovingly, **Ritimi** washed her half-sister from head to foot, then rubbed her body with **onoto** until it glowed uniformly

red. Fresh banana leaves were placed on the fire as **Ritimi** guided the girl around the hearth. Only after **Xotomi**'s skin smelled of nothing but burnt leaves was she allowed to look at us and speak.

She bit her lower lip as she slowly lifted her head. "Mother, I don't want to move out of my father's hut," she finally said, then burst into tears.

"**Oho**, you silly child," the mother exclaimed, taking **Xotomi**'s face into her hands. Brushing aside the tears, the woman reminded the girl how lucky she was to become the wife of **Hayama**'s youngest son **Matuwe**, that she was fortunate to be so close to her brothers, who would protect her should he mistreat her. The mother's dark eyes glittered, blurred with tears. "I had reasons to be heavy-hearted when I first came to this **shabono**. I had left my mother and brothers behind. I had no one to protect me."

Tutemi embraced the young girl. "Look at me. I also came from far away, but now I'm happy. I will soon have a child."

"But I don't want a child," **Xotomi** sobbed. "I only want to hold my pet monkey."

In a swift impulse I reached for the monkey perched on a cluster of bananas and handed it to **Xotomi**. The women burst into giggles. "If you treat your husband right, he'll be like your pet monkey," one of them said in between fits of laughter.

"Don't say such things to the girl," old **Hayama** said reprovingly. Smiling, she faced **Xotomi**. "My son is a good man," she said soothingly. "You'll have nothing to fear." **Hayama** went on praising her son, stressing **Matuwe**'s prowess as a hunter and provider.

The day of the wedding **Xotomi** sobbed quietly. **Hayama** came to her side. "Don't cry anymore. We will adorn you. You'll be so beautiful today, everyone will gasp in wonder." She took **Xotomi**'s hand, then motioned the women to follow them through a side exit into the forest.

Sitting on a tree stump, **Xotomi** wiped her tears with the back of her hand. A whimsical smile appeared on her lips as she gazed into old **Hayama**'s face, then she readily submitted to the women's ministrations. Her hair was cut short, her tonsure shaven. Tufts of soft white feathers were pushed through her perforated **earlobes**. They contrasted sharply with her black hair, adding an ethereal beauty to her thin face. The holes at the corners of her mouth and lower lip were decorated with red macaw feathers. Through the perforated septum in her nose **Ritimi** inserted an almost white, very slender polished stick.

"How lovely you look," we exclaimed as **Xotomi** stood in front of us.

"Mother, I'm ready to go," she said solemnly. Her dark slanted eyes shone, her skin looked flushed with the **onoto**. She smiled briefly, revealing strong, even white teeth, then led the way back to the **shabono**. Only for an instant- just before entering the clearing- was there a silent plea in her eyes as she turned to look at her mother.

Her head held high, her gaze focused on no one in particular, **Xotomi** slowly circled the clearing, seemingly unperturbed by the admiring words and glances of the men. She entered her father's hut and sat in front of the trough filled with plantain **pap**. First she offered some of the soup to **Arasuwe**, then to her uncles, her brothers, and finally to each man in the **shabono**. After she had served the women, she walked toward **Hayama**'s hut, sat down in one of the hammocks, and began to

eat the game prepared by her husband, to whom she had been promised before she had been born.

Tutemi's words cut into my reveries. "Are you going to eat your plantain here or at **Hayama**'s?"

"I'd better eat there," I said, grinning at **Ritimi**'s grandmother, who was already waiting for me in the hut next to **Tutemi**'s.

Xotomi smiled at me as I came over. She had changed a great deal. It had nothing to do with the weight she had gained back since emerging from her confinement. Rather it was her mature behavior, the way she looked at me, the way she urged me to eat the plantain. I wondered if it was because girls- as opposed to boys, who were able to prolong their childhood into their teens- were encouraged by the time they were six or eight to help their mothers with the domestic chores- gathering wood, weeding in the gardens, taking care of their younger siblings. By the time a boy was considered an adult, a girl of the same age was married and often the mother of a child or two.

After eating, **Tutemi**, **Xotomi**, and I worked for several hours in the gardens, then walked into the **shabono**, refreshed from our bath in the river. A group of men, their faces and bodies painted black, sat together in the clearing. Some were scraping the bark off thick pieces of branches.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"Don't you recognize them?" **Tutemi** laughed at me. "It's **Iramamowe** and the men who went with him yesterday into the forest."

"Why are they painted black?"

"**Iramamowe**!" **Tutemi** shouted. "The white girl wants to know- why are your faces all black?" she asked, then ran into her hut.

"It's good you are running," **Iramamowe** said, standing up. "The baby in your womb might weaken the **mamucori** by adding water." Frowning, he turned to **Xotomi** and me; before he had a chance to say anything else, **Xotomi** pulled me by the hand into **Etewa**'s hut.

In between fits of laughter **Xotomi** explained that anyone who had been in the water that day was not supposed to come close to the men preparing curare. Water was believed to weaken the poison. "If the **mamucori** doesn't work right, he will blame you."

"I would have liked to watch them prepare the **mamucori**," I said disappointedly.

"Who would want to watch anything like that?" **Ritimi** said, sitting up. "I can tell you what they are going to do." She yawned and stretched, then folded the **platanillo** leaves she had been sleeping on and covered the ground with fresh ones. "The men are painted black because **mamucori** is not only useful for hunting but also for making war," **Ritimi** said, motioning me to sit next to her. She peeled a banana, then with a full mouth explained how the men were boiling the **mamucori** vine until it turned into a dark liquid. Later the dried **ashukamaki** vine would be added to thicken the poison. Once the mixture had been boiled down, it would be ready to be brushed on the men's arrowheads.

Resignedly I helped **Tutemi** prepare the tobacco leaves for drying. Following her precise instructions, I split each leaf along the nervation, pulling upward so they bundled up, then tied them in bunches on the rafters. From where I sat I was unable to see what was going on outside **Iramamowe**'s hut. Children surrounded the working men, hoping to be asked to help. No wonder I had not seen a single child that morning

bathing in the river.

"Get some water from the stream," **Iramamowe** said to little **Sisiwe**. "But don't get your feet wet. Step on trunks, roots, or stones. If you get wet, I'll have to send someone else."

It was late afternoon when **Iramamowe** was almost finished mixing and boiling the curare. "Now the **mamucori** is becoming strong. I can feel my hands going to sleep." In a slow, monotonous voice he began to chant to the spirits of the poison as he stirred the curare.

Around midmorning the following day **Iramamowe** came running into the **shabono**. "The **mamucori** is useless. I shot a monkey but it didn't die. It walked away with the useless arrow stuck in its leg." **Iramamowe** ran from hut to hut, insulting the men who had helped him prepare the curare. "Didn't I warn you not to sleep with women. Now the **mamucori** is worthless. If an enemy should attack us, you won't even be able to defend your women. You think you are brave warriors. But you are as useless as your arrows. You should be carrying baskets instead of weapons."

For a moment I thought **Iramamowe** was going to cry as he sat on the ground in the middle of the clearing. "I'll make the poison by myself. You are all incompetent," he muttered over and over until his anger was spent, until he was thoroughly exhausted.

A few days later at dawn, shortly before the monkey **Iramamowe** had shot with his newly poisoned arrow was fully cooked, a stranger walked into the **shabono** carrying a large bundle. His hair was still wet from a river bath; his face and body were extravagantly painted with **onoto**. Placing his bundle, as well as his bow and arrows, on the ground, he stood silently in the middle of the clearing for a few minutes before he approached **Arasuwe**'s hut.

"I've come to invite you to my people's feast," the man said in a loud singsong voice. "The headman of the **Mocototeri** has sent me to tell you that we have many ripe **plantains**."

Arasuwe, without getting up from his hammock, told the man that he could not attend the feast. "I cannot leave my gardens now. I've planted new banana saplings; they need my care." **Arasuwe** made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "Look at all the fruit hanging from the rafters; I don't want them to spoil."

The visitor walked over to our hut and addressed **Etewa**. "Your father-in-law **doesn't** wish to come. I hope you will be able to visit my people who have sent me to invite you."

Etewa slapped his thighs with pleasure. "Yes. I'll come. I don't mind leaving my **plantains** behind. I'll give others permission to eat them."

The visitor's dark lively eyes shone with delight as he went from hut to hut inviting the **Iticoteri** to his settlement. The man was invited to rest in old **Kamosiwe**'s hut. He was offered plantain soup and monkey meat. Later in the evening he untied his bundle in the middle of the clearing. "A hammock," the men who had gathered around him murmured disappointedly. Even though the **Iticoteri** acknowledged the comfort and warmth of cotton hammocks, only a few women owned one. The men preferred the bark or vine ones, replacing them periodically. The visitor was eager to trade the cotton hammock for poisoned arrowheads and **epena** powder made from seeds. Talking and exchanging news, some **Iticoteri** men stayed up all night with the visitor.

Arasuwe was adamant that I should not be part of the group going to the **Mocototeri** feast. "**Milagros** has entrusted you to me," the headman reminded me. "How can I protect you if you are at another place?"

"What do I need to be protected for?" I asked. "Are the **Mocototeri** dangerous people?"

"The **Mocototeri** are not to be trusted," **Arasuwe** said after a long silence. "I can feel it in my legs that it is not right for you to go."

"When I first met Angelica she told me that it was not dangerous for a woman to walk through the forest."

Arasuwe did not bother to answer or comment on my statement but looked at me as if I had become invisible. Obviously he considered the matter settled and did not intend to demean himself by any further bantering with an ignorant girl.

"Maybe **Milagros** will be there," I said.

Arasuwe smiled. "**Milagros** will not be there. If he were I would have no reason to worry."

"Why are the **Mocototeri** not to be trusted?" I persisted.

"You ask too many questions," **Arasuwe** said. "We are not on friendly terms with them," he added grudgingly.

I looked at him in disbelief. "Why then do they invite you to a feast?"

"You are ignorant," **Arasuwe** said, walking out of the hut.

It was not only I who was disillusioned by **Arasuwe's** decision.

Ritimi was so disappointed she could not show me off to the **Mocototeri** that she enlisted **Etewa** and **Iramamowe**, as well as old **Kamosiwe**, to help convince her father to let me accompany them. Although old people's advice was valued and respected, it was **Iramamowe**, known for his bravery, who finally persuaded and assured his brother that no harm would befall me at the **Mocototeri** settlement.

"You should take the bow and arrows I made for you," **Arasuwe** said to me later that evening. He began to laugh uproariously. "that would certainly astonish the **Mocototeri**. It would almost be worth it for me to go and witness their surprise." Seeing that I was checking my arrows, **Arasuwe** added somberly, "You can not take them. It's not proper for a woman to walk through the forest carrying a man's weapon."

"I will take care of her," **Ritimi** promised her father. "I'll make sure she never leaves my side- not even when she has to go into the bush."

"I'm sure **Milagros** would have wanted me to go," I said, hoping to make **Arasuwe** feel more at ease.

Eyeing me gloomily, he shrugged his shoulders. "I trust you will return safely."

Anticipation and apprehension kept me awake that night. The familiar noises of the collapsing logs in the fire filled me with misgivings. **Etewa** stirred the embers with a stick before lying down. Through the smoke and mist the distant crowns of trees looked like ghosts. The spaces between the leaves were like hollow eyes accusing me of something I did not understand. I was almost tempted to follow **Arasuwe's** advice, but the light of day dispelled my **apprehension**.

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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The sun had barely taken the chill off the morning air when we set out with baskets stocked with **plantains**, **calabashes**, hammocks, the paraphernalia for decorating ourselves, and the items for trade: thick bundles of undyed cotton yarn, newly fashioned arrowheads, bamboo containers filled with **epena** and **onoto**. With their own hammocks slung around their necks, the older children walked close behind their mothers. The men, closing up the rear of each family unit, carried nothing but their bows and arrows.

There were twenty-three of us. For four days we walked silently through the forest at a relaxed pace set by the old people and children. Whenever they became aware of the slightest movement or sound in the thicket, the women stood still, pointing with their chins in the direction of the disturbance. Swiftly the men disappeared in the specified direction. More often than not, they returned with an agouti- a rabbit-like rodent- or a peccary, or a bird, which was cooked as soon as we made camp in the afternoon. The children were forever on the lookout for wild fruit. Their keen eyes would follow the flight of bees until they reached their hives in a hollow tree trunk. While the insects were still in flight, they were able to accurately identify whether they belonged to the stinging or **nonstinging** variety.

Hayama, **Kamosiwe**, and several of the old people wrapped strips of the fibrous bast of a tree around their thorax and abdomen. They claimed it restored their energy and made walking easier. I tried it too, but the tightly wrapped bast only gave me a rash.

As we climbed up and down hills, I wondered if it was a different route from the one I had been on with **Milagros**. There was not a tree, rock, or stretch of river I could recall. Neither did I remember having encountered mosquitoes and other insects hovering above the marshes. Attracted by our sweaty bodies, they buzzed around us with a maddening persistence. I, who had never been bothered by them, could not decide which part of my body to scratch first. My torn **T**-shirt offered no protection. Even **Iramamowe**, who initially had been oblivious to their unrelenting bites, occasionally acknowledged the inconvenience by slapping his neck, his arm, or by lifting his leg to scratch his ankle.

Around noon of the fifth day we made camp at the edge of the **Mocototeri's** gardens. The cleared-out undergrowth made the giant **ceibas** appear even more monumental than in the forest. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the leaves, illuminating and shadowing the dark ground.

We bathed in the nearby river, where red flowers, suspended from lianas overhanging the water, swayed with sensuous grace to the rhythm of the breeze. **Iramamowe** and three other young men were the first to don their festive attire and to paint themselves with **onoto** before heading toward the host's **shabono**. **Iramamowe** returned shortly, carrying a basket filled with roasted meat and baked **plantains**.

"**Ohooo**, the **Mocototeri** have so much more," he said, distributing the food among us.

Before the women began to beautify themselves they assisted their men with the pasting of white down on their hair, and tying feathers and monkey fur around their arms and heads. I was given the task of

decorating the children's faces and bodies with the prescribed **onoto** designs.

Our laughter and chatter were interrupted by the shouts of an approaching **Mocototeri**.

"He looks like a monkey," **Ritimi** whispered.

I nodded in agreement, barely able to conceal my giggles. The man's short bowed legs and long disproportionate arms seemed even more pronounced as he stood next to **Etewa** and **Iramamowe**, who looked imposing with their white down-covered heads, the long multicolored macaw feathers streaming from their **armbands**, and their bright-red waist belts.

"Our headman wants to start the feast. He wants you to come soon," the **Mocototeri** said in the same formal high-pitched voice as the man who had come to the **shabono** to invite us to the feast. "If you take too long to prepare yourselves, there will be no time to talk."

With their heads held high, their chins slightly pushed up, **Etewa**, **Iramamowe**, and three young men, also properly painted and decorated, followed the **Mocototeri**. Although they pretended indifference, the men were aware of the admiring glances of the rest of us as they strutted toward the **shabono**.

Overcome by last-minute nervousness, the women hurried through the last touches of their toilette, adding a flower or feather here, a **dab** of **onoto** there. How they looked was entirely up to the judgment of the others, for there were no mirrors.

Ritimi fastened the waist belt around me, making sure the wide fringe was centered properly. "You're still so thin," she said, touching my breasts, "even though you eat so much. Don't eat today the way you eat at our **shabono** or the **Mocototeri** will think we don't give you enough."

I promised to eat very sparingly, then burst into laughter as I remembered that this was the same advice my mother used to give me as a child whenever I was invited to spend the weekend with friends. She too had been embarrassed by my voracious appetite, thinking that people might believe I was not properly fed at home or, worse yet, that they might think I had a tapeworm.

Just before we set out toward the **Mocototeri shabono**, old **Hayama** admonished her great-grandchildren, **Texoma** and **Sisiwe**, to behave properly. Raising her voice so that the other children who had come with us could also hear her, she stressed how important it was to minimize any chance for the **Mocototeri** women to criticize them once they had departed. Old **Hayama** insisted the children try to urinate and defecate for one last time behind the bushes, for once inside the **shabono** no one would clean up after them or take them outside if they had to go.

Upon reaching the **Mocototeri** clearing, the men formed a line, holding their weapons vertically to their upraised haughty faces. We stood behind them with the children.

A group of shouting women ran out of the huts as soon as they saw me. I was neither afraid nor repelled as they touched, kissed, and licked my face and body. But **Ritimi** seemed to have forgotten how the **Iticoteri** had first greeted me when I arrived at their settlement, for she kept mumbling under her breath that she would have to retrace the **onoto** designs on my skin.

Holding my arm in a strong grip, one of the **Mocototeri** women

pushed **Ritimi** aside. "Come with me, white girl," she said.

"No," **Ritimi** shouted, pulling me closer to her. Her smile did not detract from the sharp angry tone of her voice. "I've brought the white girl for you to look at. No one must take her away from me. We are like each other's shadows. I go where she goes. She goes where I go." Trying to outstare her opponent, **Ritimi**'s eyes held the woman's fixed gaze, daring her to challenge her words.

The woman opened her tobacco-filled mouth in gaping laughter. "If you have brought the white girl to visit, you must let her come into my hut."

Someone from behind the group of women approached us. With arms crossed over his chest, he pushed his hips forward with a little swagger as he came to stand beside me. "I'm the headman of the **Mocototeri**," he said. As he smiled, his eyes were but two shining slits amidst the red designs of his deeply wrinkled face. "Is the white girl your sister that you protect her so?" he asked **Ritimi**.

"Yes," she said forcefully. "She is my sister."

Shaking his head in disbelief, the headman studied me. He seemed totally unimpressed. "I can see that she is white, but she **doesn't** look like a real white woman," he finally said. "Her feet are bare like ours: She does not wear strange clothes on her body except for this." He pulled at my torn, loose underpants. "Why does she wear this under an Indian waist belt?"

"**Pantiis**," **Ritimi** said importantly: She liked the English word better than the Spanish, which she had also learned. "That's what white people call it. She has two more of them. She wears **pantiis** because she is afraid that spiders at night and centipedes during the day might crawl inside her body."

Nodding as if he understood my fear, the headman touched my short hair, and rubbed his fleshy palm over my shaven tonsure. "It's the color of the young assai palm fronds." He moved his face close to mine until our noses touched. "What strange eyes- they are the color of rain." His scowl disappeared in a smile of delight. "Yes, she must be white; and if you call her sister, then no one will take her away from you," he said to **Ritimi**.

"How can you call her sister?" the woman who still held my arm asked. There was earnest perplexity written all over her painted face as she gazed at me.

"I call her sister because she is like us," **Ritimi** said, putting her arm around my waist.

"I want her to come and stay in my hut," the woman said. "I want her to touch my children."

We followed the woman into one of the huts. Bows and arrows were leaning against the sloping roof. Bananas, gourds, and bundles of meat wrapped in leaves were strung from the rafters. Machetes, axes, and an assortment of clubs lay in the corners. The ground was littered with twigs, branches, fruit skins, and shards of earthenware vessels.

Ritimi sat with me in the same cotton hammock. As soon as I had finished the juice made from soaked palm fruit the woman had given me, she placed a small baby in my lap. "Caress him."

Turning and twisting in my arms, the infant almost fell to the ground. And when he stared into my face he began to bawl.

"You better take him," I said, handing the woman the child. "Babies

are afraid of me. They first have to get to know me before I can touch them."

"Is that so?" the woman asked, eyeing **Ritimi** suspiciously as she rocked the baby in her arms.

"Our babies don't scream." **Ritimi** cast contemptuous glances at the infant. "My own and my father's children even sleep with her in the same hammock."

"I'll call the older children," the woman said, gesturing toward the little girls and boys peeking from behind the bundles of **plantains** stacked against the sloping roof.

"Don't," I said. I knew that they would be frightened too. "If you force them to come, they too will cry."

"Yes," said one of the women who had followed us into the hut. "The children will sit with the white girl as soon as they see that their mothers are not afraid to touch her palm-fiber hair and pale body."

Several women had gathered around us. Tentatively at first, their hands explored my face, then my neck, arms, breasts, stomach, thighs, knees, calves, toes: There was not a part of me they left unexamined. Whenever they discovered a mosquito bite or a scratch, they spat on it, then rubbed the spot with their thumbs. If the bite was recent, they sucked out the poison.

Although I had become accustomed to **Ritimi's**, **Tutemi's**, and the **Iticoteri's** children's lavish shows of affection, which never lasted more than a moment, I felt uncomfortable under the exploring touch of so many hands on my body. "What are they doing?" I asked, pointing to a group of men squatting outside the hut next to us.

"They are preparing the assai leaves for the dance," said the woman who had placed the baby in my lap. "Do you want to look at that?"

"Yes," I said emphatically, wanting to shift the attention away from myself.

"Does **Ritimi** have to accompany you everywhere you go?" the woman asked as **Ritimi** got up from the hammock with me.

"Yes," I said. "Had it not been for her I would not be visiting your **shabono**. **Ritimi** has taken care of me since I arrived in the forest."

Ritimi beamed at me. I wished I had expressed words to that effect sooner. Not once during the rest of our stay did any of the **Mocototeri** women question **Ritimi's** proprietary manner toward me.

The men outside the hut were separating the still closed, pale yellow leaves of the young assai palm with sharp little sticks. One of the men rose from his squatting position as we approached. Taking the tobacco **wad** from his mouth, he wiped the dribbling juice from his chin with the back of his hand and held the palm frond over my head. Smiling, he pointed to the fine gold veins in the leaf, barely visible against the light of the setting sun. He touched my hair, replaced the **wad** in his mouth, and without saying a word, continued separating the leaves.

Fires were lit in the middle of the clearing as soon as it was dark. The **Iticoteri** men touched off an explosion of wild cheering from their hosts as they lined up, weapons in hand, around the fires. Two at a time, the **Iticoteri** danced around the clearing, slowing down in front of each hut, so all could admire their attire and their dancing steps.

Etewa and **Iramamowe** made up the last pair. Shouts reached a higher pitch as they moved in perfectly matched steps. They did not

dance around the huts but stayed close to the fires, wheeling and spinning at an ever accelerating speed, their rhythm dictated by the leaping flames. **Etewa** and **Iramamowe** stopped abruptly in their tracks, held their bows and arrows vertically next to their faces, then aimed them at the **Mocototeri** men standing in front of their huts. Laughing uproariously, the two men resumed their dance while the onlookers broke out in exultant, approving shouts.

The **Iticoteri** men were invited by their hosts to rest in their hammocks. While food was served, a group of **Mocototeri** burst into the clearing. "Hail, ham, **hahiii**," they shouted, moving to the clacking of their bows and arrows, to the swishing sound of the fringed, undulating assai palm fronds.

I could hardly make out the dancing figures. At times they seemed fused together, then they leapt apart, fragments of dancing arms, legs, and feet visible from between the swaying palm fronds- black, birdlike silhouettes with giant wings as they moved away from the light of the fires, blazing copper figures, no longer man or bird, as their bodies glistening with sweat glowed in the flames.

"We want to dance with your women," the **Mocototeri** demanded. When there was no response from the **Iticoteri**, they jeered. "You are jealous of them. Why don't you let your poor women dance? Don't you remember we let you dance with our women at your feast?"

"Whoever wants to dance with the **Mocototeri**, may do so," **Iramamowe** shouted, then admonished the men, "But you will not force any of our women to dance if they don't wish to do so."

"**Haii, hahii, hahiii**," the men yelled **euphorically**, welcoming the **Iticoteri** women as well as their own.

"Don't you want to dance?" I asked **Ritimi**. "I will go with you."

"No. I don't want to lose you in the crowd," she said. "I don't want anyone to hit you on the head."

"But that was an accident. Besides, the **Mocototeri** are not dancing with fire logs," I said. "What could they possibly do with palm fronds?"

Ritimi shrugged her shoulders. "My father said the **Mocototeri** are not to be trusted."

"I thought one only invites one's friends to a feast."

"Enemies too," **Ritimi** said, giggling. "Feasts are a good time to find out what people are planning to do."

"The **Mocototeri** are very friendly," I said. "They have fed us very well."

"They feed us well because they don't want anyone to say they are stingy," **Ritimi** said. "But as my father has told you, you are still ignorant. You obviously don't know what's going on if you think they are friendly." **Ritimi** patted my head as if I were a child, then continued, "**Didn't** you notice that our men **didn't** take **epena** this afternoon? Haven't you realized how watchful they are?"

I had not noticed, and was tempted to add that I thought the **Iticoteri's** behavior was not very friendly but remained quiet. After all, as **Ritimi** had pointed out, I did not understand what was going on. I observed the six **Iticoteri** men dancing around the fires. They were not moving with their usual abandon and their eyes kept darting back and forth, keenly watching all that went on around them. The rest of the **Iticoteri** men were not lounging in their host's hammocks but were

standing outside the huts.

The dance had lost its enchantment for me. Shadows and voices took on a different mood. The night now seemed packed with an ominous darkness. I began to eat what had been served to me earlier. "This meat tastes bitter," I said, wondering if it was poisoned.

"It's bitter because of the mamucori," Ritimi said casually. "The spot where the poisoned arrow hit the monkey hasn't been washed properly."

I spat out the meat. Not only was I afraid of being poisoned, but I felt nauseous as I remembered the sight of the monkey boiling in the tall aluminum pot, a layer of fat and monkey hairs floating on the surface.

Ritimi put the piece of meat back on my calabash plate. "Eat it," she urged me. "It's good- even the bitter part. Your body will get used to the poison. Don't you know that fathers always give their sons the part where the arrow hit? If they are shot in a raid by a poisoned arrow they won't die because their bodies will be used to the mamucori."

"I'm afraid that before I get hit by a poisoned arrow, I will die from eating poisoned meat."

"No. One doesn't die from eating mamucori," Ritimi assured me. "It has to go through the skin." She took the already chewed piece from my calabash, bit off a chunk, then pushed the remaining half into my gaping mouth. Smiling mockingly, she exchanged her dish with mine. "I don't want you to choke," she said, eating the rest of the cooked monkey breast with exaggerated gusto. Still chewing, she pointed toward the clearing, and asked if I could see the woman with the round face dancing by the fire.

I nodded, but I did not recognize which one she meant. There were about ten women dancing close to the fire. They all had round faces, dark slanted eyes, voluptuous bodies the color of honey in the light of the flames.

"She is the one who had intercourse with Etewa at our feast," Ritimi said. "I've bewitched her already."

"When did you do that?"

"This afternoon," Ritimi said softly, and began to giggle. "I blew the oko-shiki I had collected from my garden on her hammock," she added with satisfaction.

"What if someone else sits in her hammock?"

"It makes no difference. The magic is only meant to harm her," Ritimi assured me.

I had no chance to find out more about the bewitching for at that moment the dancing ceased and the tired, smiling dancers returned to the various huts to rest and eat.

The women who joined us around the hearth were surprised Ritimi and I had not danced. Dancing was as important as painting the body with onoto- it kept one young and happy.

Shortly the headman stepped into the clearing and announced in a thunderous voice, "I want to hear the Iticoteri women sing. Their voices are pleasing to my ears. I want our women to learn their songs."

Giggling, the women nudged each other. "You go, Ritimi," one of Iramamowe's wives said. "Your voice is beautiful."

That was all the encouragement Ritimi needed. "Let's all go together," she said, standing up.

Silence spread over the shabono as we walked out into the clearing

with our arms around each other's waists. Facing the headman's hut, Ritimi began to sing in a clear, melodious voice. The songs were very short: The last two lines were repeated as a chorus by the rest of us. The other women sang too, but it was Ritimi's songs, one in particular, that the Mocototeri headman insisted she repeat until his women had learned it.

When the wind blows the palm leaves,

I listen to their melancholy sound with the silent frogs.

High in the sky, the stars are all laughing,

But cry tears of sadness as the clouds cover them.

The headman walked toward us and, addressing me, said, "Now you must sing for us."

"But I don't know any songs," I said, unable to repress my giggles.

"You must know some," the headman insisted. "I've heard stories of how much the whites like to sing. They even have boxes that sing."

In the third grade in Caracas I had been told by the music teacher that besides having a dreadful voice I was also tone deaf. However, Professor Hans, as he expected to be addressed, was not insensitive to my desire to sing. He allowed me to remain in the class provided I stayed in the last row and sang very softly. Professor Hans did not bother much with the required religious and folk songs we were supposed to be learning, but taught us Argentinian tangos from the thirties. I had not forgotten those songs.

Looking at the expectant faces around me, I stepped closer to the fire. I cleared my throat and began to sing, oblivious to the jarring notes escaping my throat. For a moment I felt I was faithfully reproducing the passionate manner in which Professor Hans had sung his tangos. I clutched my hands to my breast, I closed my eyes as if transported with the sadness and tragedy of each line.

My audience was spellbound. The Mocototeri and Iticoteri had come out of their huts to watch my every gesture.

The headman stared at me for a long time, then finally said, "Our women cannot learn to sing in this strange manner."

The men sang next. Each singer stood alone in the middle of the clearing, both hands resting high on his upright bow. Sometimes a friend accompanied the performer: Then the singer rested his arm over his companion's shoulder. One song in particular, sung by a Mocototeri youth, was the favorite of the night.

When a monkey jumps from tree to tree

I shoot it with my arrow.

Only green leaves drop down.

Swirling around, they gather at my feet.

The Iticoteri men did not lie down in their hammocks but talked and sang with their hosts throughout the night. I slept with the women and children in the empty huts around the main entrance of the shabono.

In the morning I stuffed myself with the papayas and pineapples one of the Mocototeri girls had brought for me from her father's garden. Ritimi and I had discovered them earlier on our way into the bush. She had advised me not to ask for the fruit- not because it was not proper, but because the fruit was unripe. But I did not mind their sour taste or even the slight stomachache that followed. I had not eaten familiar fruits for months. Bananas and palm fruit were like vegetables to me.

"You had a wretched voice when you sang," a young man said, squatting next to me. "**Ohoo**, I **didn't** understand your song, but it sounded hideous."

Speechless, I glared at him. I did not know whether to laugh or insult him in turn.

Putting her arms around my neck, **Ritimi** burst into laughter. She looked at me askance, then whispered in my ear, "When you sang I thought the monkey meat had given you a bellyache."

Squatting on the same spot in the clearing where they had started out last night, a group of **Iticoteri** and **Mocototeri** men were still talking in the formal, ritualized manner proper to the **wayamou**. Bartering was a slow, involved affair during which equal importance was given to the items for trading and the exchange of information and gossip.

Close to noon, some **Mocototeri** women began criticizing their husbands for the items they had exchanged, stating that they needed the machetes, aluminum pots, and cotton hammocks themselves. "Poisoned arrowheads," one of the women shouted angrily. "You could make them yourself if you **weren't** so lazy." Without paying the slightest attention to the women's remarks, the men continued their **hagglings**.

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 13

It was past noon when we left the **Mocototeri** settlement, our baskets filled with the accustomed **plantains**, palm fruits, and meat given to departing guests.

Shortly before nightfall, three **Mocototeri** men caught up with us. One of them raised his bow as he spoke. "Our headman wants the white girl to stay with us." He stared at me down the shaft of his drawn arrow.

"Only a coward points his arrow at a woman," **Iramamowe** said, stepping in front of me. "Why don't you shoot, you useless **Mocototeri**?"

"We haven't come to fight," the man remarked, returning his bow and arrow to an upright position. "We could have ambushed you some time ago. All we want is to frighten the white girl so she'll come with us."

"She cannot stay with you," **Iramamowe** said. "**Milagros** brought her to our **shabono**. If he had wanted her to stay with you, he would have taken her to your settlement."

"We want her to come with us," the man persisted. "We will bring her back before the rains start."

"If you make me angry, I shall kill you on the spot." **Iramamowe** pounded his chest. "Remember, you cowardly **Mocototeri**, that I'm a fierce warrior. The **hekuras** in my chest are always at my command, even without **epena**." **Iramamowe** moved nearer to the three men.

"Don't you know that the white girl belongs to the **Iticoteri**?"

"Why don't you ask her where she wants to stay?" the man said. "She liked our people. Maybe she wants to live with us."

Iramamowe began to laugh- a rumbling laughter that did not reveal whether he was amused or outraged. He stopped abruptly. "The white girl does not like the way the **Mocototeri** look. She said you all resemble

monkeys." **Iramamowe** turned toward me. There was such a pleading expression in his eyes that it was all I could do not to giggle.

I felt a tinge of remorse as I looked into the bewildered faces of the three **Mocototeri**. For an instant I felt tempted to deny **Iramamowe's** words. But I could not ignore his anger, nor had I forgotten **Arasuwe's** apprehension at my going to the feast. I crossed my arms over my chest, lifted my chin, and without looking at them directly said, "I don't want to go to your settlement. I don't want to eat and sleep with monkeys."

The **Iticoteri** burst into loud guffaws. The three men turned around abruptly, then disappeared on the path leading into the thicket.

We made camp not too far from the river in a cleared area of the forest, where the remains of temporary shelters still stood. We did not cover them with new leaves, for old **Kamosiwe** assured us that it would not rain that night.

Iramamowe did not eat, but sat, glum and intense, in front of the fire. There was a tension about him as if he were expecting the three men to reappear at any moment.

"Is there any danger the **Mocototeri** might come back?" I asked.

Iramamowe was some time before giving me an answer. "They are cowards. They know that my arrows will kill them on the spot." He stared fixedly on the ground: His lips set in a straight line. "I'm considering what would be the best way to return to our **shabono**."

"We should divide up our party," old **Kamosiwe** suggested, gazing at me with his one eye. "There is no moon tonight; the **Mocototeri** will not return. Perhaps tomorrow they will ask again for the white-girl. We can tell them that they frightened her away, that she asked to be taken back to the mission."

"Are you sending her back?" **Ritimi's** voice hung in the darkness, charged with anxiety.

"No," the old man said cheerfully. The grayish bristles on his chin, his one eye that never missed anything, his slight wrinkled body gave him the appearance of a wicked elf. "**Etewa** should return to the **shabono** with **Ritimi** and the white girl by way of the mountains. It's a longer route but they won't be slowed down by children and old people. They will reach our settlement no later than a day or two after we do. It is a good route, not traveled much." Old **Kamosiwe** got up and sniffed the air. "It will rain tomorrow. Build a shelter for the night," he said to **Etewa**, then squatted, a smile on his lips, his one sunken eye staring at me. "Are you afraid to return to the **shabono** by way of the mountains?"

Smiling, I shook my head. Somehow I could not envision myself to be in real danger.

"Were you afraid when the **Mocototeri** aimed his arrow at you?" old **Kamosiwe** asked.

"No. I knew the **Iticoteri** would protect me." I had to refrain myself from adding that the incident had seemed comical to me rather than dangerous. I did not fully realize at the time that in spite of the obvious bluffing, characteristic of any critical circumstance, the **Mocototeri** and **Iticoteri** were perfectly serious in their threats and demands.

Old **Kamosiwe** was delighted with my reply. I had the feeling his pleasure derived not so much from the fact that I had not been frightened, but rather by my trust in his people. He talked to **Etewa** long into the night. **Ritimi** fell asleep holding my hand in hers, a blissful smile

on her lips. Watching her dream, I knew why she looked so happy. For a few days she would have **Etewa** practically to herself.

In the **shabono** men hardly ever showed any outward affection toward their wives. It was considered a weakness. Only toward the children were the men openly tender and loving; they indulged, kissed, and caressed them lavishly. I had seen **Etewa** and even the fierce **Iramamowe** carry the heavy loads of wood for their women only to drop them as soon as they approached the **shabono**. When there had been no other man near, I had seen **Etewa** save a special piece of meat or fruit for **Ritimi** or **Tutemi**. Protected by the darkness, I had seen him press his ear against **Tutemi**'s womb to listen to the strong kicks of his unborn child. In the presence of others he never mentioned that he was to be a father.

Ritimi and I were awakened by **Etewa** hours before dawn. Quietly we left the camp, following the sandy bank of the river. Except for our hammocks, a few **plantains**, and the three pineapples the **Mocototeri** girl had given me, our baskets were empty. Old **Kamosiwe** had assured **Etewa** that he would find plenty of game. There was no moon, yet the water shone black, reflecting the faint glow of the sky. At intervals the sound of a nocturnal bird darted through the stillness, a faint cry heralding the oncoming dawn. One by one, the stars faded: The contours of trees became distinct as the rosy light of dawn descended all the way to the shadows at our feet. I was astonished at the width of the river, and at the silence of its flowing waters so still they did not seem to move. Three macaws formed a triangle in the sky, painting the stationary clouds with their red, blue, and yellow feathers as the orange glowing sun rose over the treetops.

Etewa opened his mouth in a yawn that seemed to force its way up from the farthest depths of his lungs. He squinted: The light of the sun was too bright for eyes that had not slept enough.

We unfastened our baskets. **Ritimi** and I sat on a log from where we watched **Etewa** draw his bow. Slowly, he raised his arms and arched his back, pointing his arrow high in the air. Motionless, he stood for an interminable time, a stone figure, each taut muscle carefully etched, his gaze attentive to the birds crossing the sky. I did not dare ask why he was waiting so long to let his arrow go.

I did not hear the arrow travel through the air- only a flashing cry that **dissoved** into a flapping of wings. For an instant the macaw, a mass of feathers held together by the red-tinted arrow, was suspended in the sky before it plunged downward, not too far from where **Etewa** stood.

Etewa made a fire over which we roasted the plucked bird and some **plantains**. He ate only a small portion, insisting that we finish the rest so we would have enough strength for the arduous climb over the hills.

We did not miss the sunlight on the river path as we turned into the thicket. The penumbra of vines and trees was soothing to our tired eyes. Decaying leaves looked like patches of flowers against the background of greenness. **Etewa** cut branches from the dark, wild cocoa trees. "With this wood one makes the best fire drills," he said, stripping the branches of their bark with his sharp knife, which was made from the lower incisor of an agouti. Then he cut the green, yellow, and purple pods individually attached to the stunted cacao trunks by short leafless stems. He split the fruits open and we sucked the sweet gelatinous flesh surrounding the

seeds, which we wrapped in leaves. "Cooked," **Ritimi** explained, "the **pohoro** seeds are delicious." I wondered if they would taste like chocolate.

"There must be monkeys and weasels nearby," **Etewa** explained, showing me the discarded, chewed-up fruit skins on the ground. "They like the **pohoro** fruit as much as we do."

A bit further on **Etewa** stopped in front of a twisted vine, which he marked with his knife. "**Mamucori**," he said. "I will return to this spot when I need to make fresh poison."

"**Ashnkamaki**?" I exclaimed as we stopped beneath a tree, its trunk encrusted with glossy, **waxlike** leaves. But it was not the liana used to thicken curare. **Etewa** pointed out that those leaves were long and jagged. He had stopped because of the various animal bones on the ground.

"Harpy eagle," he said, gesturing to the nest at the top of the tree.

"Don't kill the bird," **Ritimi** pleaded. "Perhaps it's the spirit of a dead **Iticoteri**."

Ignoring his wife, **Etewa** climbed up the tree. Upon reaching the nest he lifted out a shrieking white fluffy chick. We heard the loud cries of its mother as **Etewa** threw the chick on the ground. He propped himself against the trunk and a branch, then aimed his arrow at the circling bird.

"I'm glad I shot the bird," **Etewa** said, motioning us to follow him to the spot where the dead eagle crashed through the trees. "It eats only meat." He turned toward **Ritimi**, then added softly, "I listened to its cry before I aimed my arrow- it **wasn't** the voice of a spirit." He plucked the soft white feathers from the bird's breast, the long gray ones from its wings, then wrapped them in leaves.

The afternoon heat filtering through the leaves made me so drowsy that all I wanted to do was sleep. **Ritimi** had dark smudges under her eyes, as if she had dabbed coal on the tender skin. **Etewa**'s pace slackened. Without saying a word, he headed toward the river. We stood motionless in the wide, shallow waters, held in suspension by the heat and the glare. We stared at the reflected clouds and trees, then lay down on a bank of ochre-colored sand in the middle of the river. Blues faded into green and red from the tannin of the submerged roots. Not a leaf stirred, not a cloud moved. Even the dragonflies hovering over the water seemed motionless in their transparent vibrations. Turning on my stomach, I let my hands lie flat on the river's surface as if I could hold the languid harmony reigning between the reflection in the river and the glow in the sky. I slid on my stomach until my lips touched the water, then drank the mirrored clouds.

Two herons that had taken flight at our arrival returned. Poised on their long legs, with necks sunk between their feathers, they watched us through blinking, half-closed lids. I saw silvery bodies jump up in the air, seeking the intoxicating heat shimmering over the water. "Fish," I exclaimed, my lethargy momentarily gone.

Chuckling, **Etewa** pointed with his arrow to a flock of shrieking parrots crossing the sky. "Birds," he shouted, then reached for the bamboo quiver on his back. He took out an arrowhead, tasted it with the tip of his tongue to see if the poison was still good. Satisfied by its bitter taste, he fastened the sharp point to one of his arrow shafts. Next he tested his bow by letting go of the string. "It's not well stretched," he said,

untying it at one end. He twisted the string several times, then threaded it again. "We will stay here for the night," he said, wading through the water. He climbed up on the opposite bank, disappearing behind the trees.

Ritimi and I remained on the sandy bank. She unwrapped the feathers and spread them on a stone for the sun to kill the lice. Excitedly she pointed to a tree on the bank on which clusters of pale flowers hung like fruit. She cut whole branches, then offered me the flowers to eat. "They are sweet," she pointed out upon noticing my reluctance to eat them.

Trying to explain that the flowers reminded me of strongly perfumed soap, I fell asleep. I awoke with the sounds of dusk sweeping up the light of the day, the rustling of the breeze cooling the trees, the calls of birds settling for the night.

Etewa had returned with two **curassows** and a bundle of palm fronds. I helped **Ritimi** collect firewood along the riverbank. While she plucked the birds, I assisted **Etewa** with building the shelter.

"Are you sure it's going to rain?" I asked him, looking at the clear, cloudless sky.

"If old **Kamosiwe** said it's going to rain, then it will," **Etewa** said. "He can smell rain the way others can smell food."

It was a cozy little hut. The front pole was higher than the two in the back but not high enough for us to stand up. The poles were connected with long sticks, giving the shelter a triangular shape. Both the roof and the back were covered with palm fronds. We covered the ground with **platanillo** leaves, for the poles were not strong enough to support three hammocks.

Actually, **Etewa** did not build the shelter so much for **Ritimi's** and my comfort as for his. If he got wet in the rain, he might cause the child in **Tutemi's** womb to be born dead or deformed.

Ritimi cooked the birds, several **plantains**, and the cacao seeds over the fire **Etewa** built inside the hut. I mashed one of our pineapples. The mixture of flavors, textures, reminded me of a Thanksgiving dinner.

"It must be like **momo** nuts," **Ritimi** said after I had explained about cranberry sauce. "**Momo** is also red; it needs to be boiled for a long time until it's soft. It also has to soak in water until all the poison is leached out."

"I don't think I'd like **momo** nuts."

"You will," **Ritimi** assured me. "See how much you like the **pohoro** seeds. **Momo** nuts are even better."

Smiling, I nodded. Although the roasted cacao seeds did not taste like chocolate, they were as delicious as fresh cashews.

Etewa and **Ritimi** were asleep the moment they lay back on the **platanillo** leaves. I stretched out next to **Ritimi**. In her sleep she reached over, hugging me close to her. The warmth of her body filled me with a soothing laziness; her rhythmic breathing lulled me into a pleasant drowsiness. A succession of dreamlike images drifted through my mind, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, as if someone were projecting them in front of me: **Mocototeri** men **brachiating** from tree to tree glided past me, their cries indistinguishable from the howler monkeys. Crocodiles with luminous eyes, barely above the surface of the water, blinked sleepily, then suddenly opened their giant jaws ready to swallow me.

Anteaters with threadlike viscous tongues blew bubbles in which I saw myself captive together with hundreds of ants.

I was awakened by a sudden gust of wind; it brought with it the smell of rain. I sat up and listened to the heavy drops pattering on the palm fronds. The familiar sounds of crickets and frogs provided a continuous pulsating background hum to the plaintive cries of nocturnal monkeys, the flutelike calls of forest partridges. I was sure I heard steps and then the snapping of twigs.

"There is someone out there," I said, reaching over to **Etewa**.

He moved to the front pole of the shelter. "It's a jaguar looking for frogs in the marshes." **Etewa** turned my head slightly to the left. "You can smell him."

I sniffed the air repeatedly. "I can't smell a thing."

"It's the jaguar's breath that smells. It's strong because he eats everything raw." **Etewa** turned my head once more, this time to the right. "Listen, he is returning to the forest."

I lay down again. **Ritimi** awoke, rubbed her eyes, and smiled. "I dreamt that I walked up in the mountains and saw the waterfalls."

"We will go that way tomorrow," **Etewa** said, unfastening the **opena** pouch from around his neck. He poured some of the powder in his palm, then with one deep breath drew it into his nostrils.

"Are you going to chant to the **hekuras** now?" I asked.

"I will beg the spirits of the forest to protect us," **Etewa** said, then began to chant in a low voice. His song, carried on the night breeze, seemed to traverse the darkness. I was certain it reached the spirits dwelling in the four corners of the earth. The fire died down to a red glimmer. I no longer heard **Etewa's** voice, but his lips were still moving as I fell into a dreamless sleep.

I was awakened shortly by **Ritimi's** soft moans and touched her shoulder, thinking she was having a nightmare.

"Do you want to try it?" she murmured.

Surprised, I opened my eyes and looked into **Etewa's** smiling face; he was making love to her. I watched them for a while. The motion of their bodies was so closely adjusted they barely moved.

Etewa, not in the least embarrassed, moved out of **Ritimi** and knelt in front of me. Lifting my legs, he stretched them slightly. He pressed his cheeks against my calves; his touch was like the playful caress of a child. There was no embrace; there were no words. Yet I was filled with tenderness.

Etewa switched to **Ritimi** again, resting his head between her shoulder and mine.

"Now we truly are sisters," **Ritimi** said softly. "On the outside we don't look the same, but our insides are the same now."

I snuggled against her. The river breeze brushing through the shelter was like a caress.

The rosy light of dawn descended gently over the treetops. **Ritimi** and **Etewa** headed toward the river. I stepped outside the shelter and breathed in the new day. At dawn the darkness of the forest is no longer black but a bluish green, like an underground cave that is illuminated by a light filtering through some secret crack. A sprinkling of dew, like soft rain, wet my face as I pushed leaves and vines out of my way. Little red spiders with hairy legs hastily **respun** their silvery webs.

Etewa found a honeycomb inside a hollow trunk. After squeezing the last drop in our mouths, he soaked the comb in a water-filled calabash and later we drank the sweet water.

We climbed overgrown paths bordering small cascades and stretches of river that swept by at dizzying speeds, causing a breeze that blew our hair and swayed the bamboo on the shore.

"This is the scene of my dream," **Ritimi** said, extending her arms as if to embrace the wide expanse of water hurtling down before us into a deep wide pool.

I edged my way onto the dark basalt rocks protruding around the falls. For a long time I stood beneath it, my hands raised to break the thunderous force of the water descending from heights already warmed by the sun.

"Come out, white girl," **Etewa** shouted. "The spirits of the rushing water will make you ill."

Later in the afternoon we made camp by a grove of wild banana trees. Amidst them I discovered an avocado tree. It had only one fruit; it was not pear shaped, but round, as big as a cantaloupe, and shone as if it were made out of wax. **Etewa** lifted me so I could reach the first branch, then slowly I climbed toward the fruit hanging at the tip of the highest limb. My greed to reach the green ball was so great I ignored the brittle branches cracking under my weight. As I pulled the fruit toward me the branch I was standing on gave way.

Etewa laughed till tears rolled down his cheeks. **Ritimi**, also laughing, scraped the mashed avocado from my stomach and thigh.

"I could have hurt myself," I said, piqued by their indifference and mirth. "Maybe I broke a leg."

"No, you **didn't**," **Etewa** assured me. "The ground is soft with dead leaves." He scooped some mashed fruit in his hand and urged me to taste it. "I told you not to stay under the falls," he added seriously. "The spirits of the rushing water made you ignore the danger of dry branches."

By the time **Etewa** had built the shelter all trace of day had vanished. The forest was clouded in a whitish mist. It did not rain, but the dew on the leaves fell in heavy drops at the slightest touch.

We slept on the **platanillo** leaves, warmed by each other's bodies and by the low fire that **Etewa** kept alive throughout the night by periodically pushing the burning logs closer to the flame with his foot.

We left our camp before dawn. Thick mist still shrouded the trees and the cry of frogs reached us as if from a great distance. The higher we climbed, the scantier the vegetation became until at last there was nothing but grasses and rocks.

We reached the top of a plateau eroded by winds and rains, a relic from another age. Below, the forest was still asleep under a blanket of fog. A mysterious, pathless world whose vastness one could never guess from the outside. We sat on the ground and silently waited for the sun to rise.

An overwhelming sense of awe brought me to my feet as the sky in the east glowed red and purple along the horizon. The clouds, obedient to the wind, opened to let the rising disk through. Pink mist rolled over the treetops, touching up shadows with deep blue, spreading green and yellow all over the sky until it changed into a transparent blue.

I turned to look behind me, to the west, where clouds were changing

shape, giving way to the expanding light. To the south, the sky was tinted with fiery streaks and luminous clouds piled up, pushed by the wind.

"Over there is our **shabono**," **Etewa** said, pointing into the distance. He grasped my arm and turned me around, into a northerly direction. "And over there is the great river, where the white man passes by."

The sun had lifted the blanket of **tog**. The river shone like a golden snake cutting through the greenness until it lost itself in an immensity of space that seemed to be part of another world.

I wanted to speak, to cry out loud, but I had no words with which to express my emotions. Looking at **Ritimi** and **Etewa**, I knew they understood how deeply I felt. I held out my arms as if to embrace this marvelous border of forest and sky. I felt I was at the edge of time and space. I could hear the vibrations of the light, the whispering of trees, the cries of distant birds carried by the wind.

I suddenly knew that it was out of choice and not out of lack of interest that the **Iticoteri** had never been curious about my past. For them I had no personal history. Only thus could they have accepted me as something other than an oddity. Events and relationships of my past had begun to blur in my memory. It was not that I had forgotten them; I had simply stopped thinking about them, for they had no meaning there in the forest. Like the **Iticoteri**, I had learned to live in the present. Time was outside of me. It was something to be used only at the moment. Once used, it sank back into itself and became an imperceptible part of my inner being.

"You have been so quiet for so long," **Ritimi** said, sitting on the ground. Pulling her knees up, she clasped them, then rested her chin on them and gazed at me.

"I've been thinking of how happy I am to be here," I said.

Smiling, **Ritimi** rocked herself gently to and fro. "One day I will collect wood and you will no longer be at my side. But I will not be sad, because this afternoon, before we reach the **shabono**, we will paint ourselves with **onoto** and we will be happy watching a flow of macaws chase the setting sun."

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Women, I had been told, were not to concern themselves with any aspect of the **epena** ritual. They were not supposed to prepare it, nor were they allowed to take the hallucinogenic snuff. It was not even proper for a woman to touch the cane tube through which the powder was blown, unless a man specifically asked her to fetch it for him.

To my utter astonishment one morning, I saw **Ritimi** bent over the hearth, attentively studying the dark reddish **epena** seeds drying over the embers. Without acknowledging my presence, she proceeded to rub the dried seeds between her palms over a large leaf containing a heap of bark ashes. With the same confidence and expertise I had seen in **Etewa**, she periodically spat on the ashes and seeds as she kneaded them into a pliable uniform mass.

As she transferred the doughy mixture onto a hot earthenware shard, **Ritimi** looked up at me, her smile clearly revealing how delighted she was by my bafflement. "**Ohooo**, the **epena** will be strong," she said, shifting her gaze back to the hallucinogenic dough bursting with loud popping sounds on the piece of terra-cotta. With a smooth stone she ground the fast-drying mass until it all blended into a very fine powder, which included a layer of dust from the earthenware shard.

"I **didn't** know women knew how to prepare **epena**," I said.

"Women can do anything," **Ritimi** said, funneling the brownish powder into a slender bamboo container.

Waiting in vain for her to satisfy my curiosity, I finally asked, "Why are you preparing the snuff?"

"**Etewa** knows I prepare **epena** well," she said proudly. "He likes to have some ready whenever he returns from a hunt."

For several days we had eaten nothing but fish. Not being in the mood for hunting, **Etewa**, together with a group of men, had dammed a small stream, in which they placed crushed, cut-up pieces of **ayori-toto** vine. The water had turned a whitish color, as if it were milk. All the women had to do was to fill their baskets with the asphyxiated fish that rose to the surface. But the **Iticoteri** were not too fond of fish and soon the women and children began to complain about the lack of meat. Two days had passed since **Etewa** and his friends had set out for the forest.

"How do you know **Etewa** is returning today?" I asked, and before **Ritimi** answered, hastily added, "I know, you can feel it in your legs."

Smiling, **Ritimi** picked up the long narrow tube and blew through it repeatedly. "I **m** cleaning it," she said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"Have you ever taken **epena**?"

Ritimi leaned closer to whisper in my ear, "Yes, but I did not like it. It gave me a headache." She looked around furtively. "Would you like to try some?"

"I don't want a headache."

"Maybe it's different for you," she said; Standing up, she casually put the bamboo container and the three-foot-long cane into her basket. "Let's go to the river. I want to see if I mixed the **epena** well."

We walked along the bank, quite a distance from where the **Iticoteri** usually came to bathe or to draw water. I squatted on the ground in front of **Ritimi**, who meticulously began introducing a small amount of **epena** into one end of the cane. Delicately, she flicked the tube with her forefinger, scattering the powder along its length. I felt drops of sweat running down my sides. The only time I had ever been drugged was when I had had three wisdom teeth removed. At the time I had wondered if it would not have been wiser to bear the pain instead of the gruesome hallucinations the drug had induced in me.

"Lift your head slightly," **Ritimi** said, holding the slender tube toward me. "See the little **rasha** nut at the end? Press it against your nostril."

I nodded. I could see that the palm seed had been tightly attached to the end of the cane with resin. I made sure the small hole that had been drilled into the hollowed-out fruit was inside my nose. I ran my hand along the fragile length of the smooth cane. I heard the sharp sound of compressed air shooting through the tube. I let go of it as a piercing pain seared into my brain. "That feels terrible!" I groaned, pounding the top of

my head with my palms.

"Now the other one," laughed **Ritimi** as she placed the cane against my left nostril.

I felt as if I were bleeding, but **Ritimi** assured me it was only mucus and saliva dribbling uncontrollably from my nose and mouth. I tried to wipe myself clean but was unable to lift my heavy hand.

"Why don't you enjoy it instead of being so fussy about a little slime running into your belly button?" **Ritimi** said, grinning at my clumsy efforts. "I'll wash you later in the river."

"There is nothing to enjoy," I said, beginning to sweat profusely from every pore. I felt nauseous and there was an odd heaviness in my limbs. I saw points of red and yellow light everywhere. I wondered what **Ritimi** found so funny. Her laughter reverberated in my ears as if it came from inside my head. "Let me blow some in your nose," I suggested.

"**Oh**, no. I have to watch over you," she said. "We cannot both end up with a headache."

"This **epena** has to give more than a headache," I said. "Blow some more into my nose. I want to see a **hekura**."

"**Hekuras** don't come to women," **Ritimi** said between fits of laughter. She placed the cane against my nose. "But perhaps if you chant they'll come to you."

I felt each grain travel up my nasal passage, exploding in the top of my skull. Slowly, a delicious lassitude [* lassitude- a state of comatose; a feeling of lack of interest or energy] spread through my body. I turned my gaze to the river, almost expecting a mythical creature to emerge from its depths. Ripples of water began to grow into waves splashing back and forth with such force that I scurried backward on my hands and knees. I was certain the water was trying to trap me. Shifting my eyes to **Ritimi**'s face, I was bewildered by her alarmed expression.

"What is it?" I asked. My voice trailed off as I followed the direction of her gaze. **Etewa** and **Iramamowe** stood in front of us. With great difficulty I stood up. I touched them to make sure I was not hallucinating.

Unfastening the large bundles slung over their backs, they handed them to the other hunters standing behind on the trail. "Take the meat to the **shabono**," **Iramamowe** said hoarsely.

The thought that **Etewa** and **Iramamowe** would eat so little of the meat filled me with such sadness I began to cry. A hunter gives away most of the game he kills. He would rather go hungry than risk the chance of being accused of stinginess. "I'll save you my portion," I said to **Etewa**. "I prefer fish to meat."

"Why are you taking **epena**? **Etewa**'s voice was stern, but his eyes were sparkling with amusement.

"We had to check if **Ritimi** mixed the powder properly," I mumbled. "It's not strong enough. Haven't seen a **hekura** yet."

"It's strong," **Etewa** retorted. Putting his hands on my shoulders, he made me squat on the ground in front of him. "**Epena** made from seeds is stronger than the kind made from bark." He filled the cane with the snuff. "**Ritimi**'s breath does not have much strength." A devilish grin creased his face as he placed the tube against my nostril and blew.

I fell backward, cradling my head, which reverberated with **Iramamowe**'s and **Etewa**'s uproarious laughter. Slowly I stood up. My feet felt as though they were not touching the ground.

"Dance, white girl," **Iramamowe** urged me. "See if you can lure the **hekuras** with your chant."

Mesmerized by his words, I held out my arms and began to dance with small jerky steps, the way I had seen the men dance when in an **epena** trance.

Through my head ran the melody and words of one of **Iramamowe's** **hekura** songs.

After days of calling the **hekura** of the hummingbird,

she finally came to me.

Dazzled, I watched her dance.

I fainted on the ground,

and did not feel as she

pierced my throat

and tore out my **tonsue**.

I did not see how my blood

flowed into the river,

tinting the water red.

She filled the gap with precious feathers.

That is why I know the **hekura** songs.

That is why I sing so well.

Etewa guided me to the edge of the river, then splashed water on my face and chest. "Don't repeat his song," he warned me. "**Iramamowe** will get angry. He will harm you with his magic plants."

I wanted to do as he told me, yet I was compelled to repeat **Iramamowe's** **hekurasong**.

"Don't repeat his song," **Etewa** pleaded. "**Iramamowe** will make you deaf. He will make your eyes bleed." **Etewa** turned toward **Iramamowe**. "Do not bewitch the white girl."

"I won't," **Iramamowe** assured him. "I'm not angry at her. I know she is still ignorant of our ways." Framing my face with his hands, he forced me to look into his eyes. "I can see the **hekuras** dancing in her pupils."

In the light of the sun **Iramamowe's** eyes were not dark, but light, the color of honey. "I can also see the **hekuras** in your eyes," I said to him, studying the yellow specks on his iris. His face radiated a gentleness that I had never seen before. As I tried to tell him that I finally understood why his name was Jaguar's Eye, I collapsed against him. I was vaguely aware of being carried in someone's arms. As soon as I was in my hammock, I fell into a deep sleep from which I did not awaken until the following day.

Arasuwe, **Iramamowe**, and old **Kamosiwe** had gathered in **Etewa's** hut. Anxiously, I looked from one to the other. They were painted with **onoto**; their perforated **earlobes** were decorated with short, feather-ornamented pieces of cane. When **Ritiroi** sat next to me in my hammock, I was certain she had come to protect me from their wrath. Before giving any of the men a chance to speak, I began weaving excuses for having taken **epenn**. The faster I talked, the safer I felt. A steady flow of words, I thought, was the surest way of dispelling their anger.

Arasuwe finally cut into my incoherent chatter. "You talk too fast. I can't understand what you are saying."

I was disconcerted at the friendliness of his tone. I was certain it was not a result of my talking. I glanced at the others. Except for a vague

curiosity, their faces revealed nothing. I leaned against **Ritimi** and whispered, "If they **aren't** upset, why are they all in the hut?"

"I don't know," she said softly.

"White girl, have you ever seen a **hekura** before yesterday?" **Arasuwe** asked.

"I've never seen a **hekura** in my life," I rapidly assured him. "Not even yesterday."

"**Iramamowe** saw **hekuras** in your eyes," **Arasuwe** insisted. "He took **epena** last night. His personal **hekura** told him she had taught you her song."

"I know **Iramamowe's** song because I've heard it so often," I almost shouted. "How could his **hekura** have taught me? Spirits don't come to women."

"You don't look like an **Iticoteri** woman," old **Kamosiwe** said, gazing at me as if he were seeing me for the first time. "The **hekuras** could easily be confused." He wiped the tobacco juice dribbling down the side of his mouth. "There have been times when **hekuras** have come to women."

"Believe me," I said to **Iramamowe**, "the reason I know your song is because I've heard you sing it so many times."

"But I sing very softly," **Iramamowe** argued. "If you really know my song, why don't you sing it now?"

Hoping this would bring the **epena** incident to an end, I began to hum the melody. To my utter distress, I could not remember the words.

"You see," **Iramamowe** exclaimed triumphantly. "My **hekura** taught you my song. That's why I **didn't** get angry at you yesterday, why I **didn't** blow into your eyes and ears, why I **didn't** hit you with a burning log."

"It must be so," I said, forcing a smile. Inwardly I shuddered. **Iramamowe** was well known for his quick temper, revengeful nature, and cruel punishments.

Old **Kamosiwe** spat his tobacco **wad** on the ground, then reached for a banana hanging directly above him. Peeling it, he stuffed the fruit whole in his mouth. "A long time ago there was a woman **shapori**," he mumbled, still chewing. "Her name was **Imaawami**. Her skin was as white as yours. She was tall and very strong. When she took **epena**, she sang to the **hekuras**. She knew how to massage away pain and how to suck out sickness. There was no one like her to hunt for the lost souls of children, and to counteract the curses of enemy shamans."

"Tell us, white girl," **Arasuwe** said, "have you known a **shapori** before you came here? Have you ever been taught by one?"

"I've known shamans," I said. "But they have never taught me anything." In great detail I described the kind of work I had been engaged in prior to my arrival at the mission. I talked about dona **Mercedes** and how she had permitted me to watch and record the interaction between herself and her patients. "Once dona **Mercedes** let me take part in a spiritual seance," I said. "She believed that I might be a medium. **Curers** from various areas had gathered at her house. We all sat in a circle chanting for the spirits to come. We chanted for a very long time."

"Did you take **epena**?" **Iramamowe** asked.

"No. We smoked big, fat cigars," I said, and almost giggled at the memory. There had been ten people in dona **Mercedes's** room. Rigidly we had all sat on stools covered with goat skin. With obsessive concentration we had puffed at our cigars, filling the room with smoke so

thick we could hardly see each other. I was too busy getting sick to be transported into a trance. "One of the **curers** asked me to leave, saying that the spirits would not come as long as I stayed in the room."

"Did the **hekuras** come after you left?" **Iramamowe** asked.

"Yes," I said. "Dona **Mercedes** told me the following day how the spirits entered into the head of each curer."

"Strange," **Iramamowe** murmured. "But you must have learned many things if you lived at her house."

"I learned her prayers and incantations to the spirits, and also the types of plants and roots she used for her patients," I said. "But I was never taught how to communicate with spirits or how to cure people." I looked at each of the men. **Etewa** was the only one who smiled.

"According to her, the only way to learn about curing was to do it."

"Did you start curing?" old **Kamosiwe** asked.

"No. Dona **Mercedes** suggested I should go to the jungle."

The four men looked at one another, then slowly turned to me, and almost in a chorus asked, "Did you come here to learn about shamans?"

"No!" I shouted, then in a subdued tone added, "I came to bring Angelica's ashes." Choosing my words very carefully, I explained how it was my profession to study people, including shamans- not because I wanted to become one, but because I was interested in learning about the similarities and differences between various shamanistic traditions.

"Have you been with other **shapori** besides dona **Mercedes**?" old **Kamosiwe** asked.

I told the men about **Juan Caridad**, an old man I had met years before. I got up and reached for my knapsack, which I kept inside a basket tied to one of the rafters. From the zipped side pocket, which because of the odd lock had escaped the women's curiosity, I pulled out a small leather pouch. I emptied its contents into **Arasuwe**'s hands. Suspiciously, he gazed at a stone, a pearl, and the uncut diamond I had been given by **Mr. Barth**.

"This stone," I said, taking it from **Arasuwe**'s hand, "was given to me by **Juan Caridad**. He made it jump out of the water before my eyes." I caressed the smooth, deep golden-colored stone. It fitted perfectly in my palm. It was oval-shaped, flat on one side, a round bulge on the other.

"Did you stay with him the way you did with dona **Mercedes**?" **Arasuwe** asked.

"No. I **didn't** stay with him for very long," I said. "I was afraid of him."

"Afraid? I thought you were never afraid," old **Kamosiwe** exclaimed.

"**Juan Caridad** was an awesome man," I said. "He made me have strange dreams in which he would always appear. In the mornings he would give me a detailed account of what I had dreamt."

The men nodded knowingly at each other. "What a powerful **shapori**," **Kamosiwe** said. "What did he make you dream about?"

I told them that the dream that had frightened me the most had been, up to a point, an exact sequential replica of an event that had taken place when I was five years old. Once, while I was returning from the beach with my family, my father decided, instead of driving directly home, to take a detour through the forest to look for orchids. We stopped by a shallow river. My brothers went with my father into the bush. My mother, afraid of snakes and mosquitoes, remained in the car. My sister dared me to wade with her along the shallow riverbank. She was ten

years older than I, tall and thin, with short curly hair so bleached by the sun it appeared white. Her eyes were a deep velvety brown, not blue or green like most blondes'. As she squatted in the middle of the stream, she told me to watch the water between her feet, which to my utter bewilderment turned red with blood. "Are you hurt?" I asked. She did not say a word as she stood up. Smiling, she beckoned me to follow her. I remained in the water, petrified, as I watched her climb up the opposite bank.

In my dream I experienced the same fear, but I told myself that now that I was an adult there was nothing to be afraid of. I was about to follow my sister up the steep bank when I heard **Juan Caridad**'s voice urging me to remain in the water. "She is calling you from the land of the dead," he said. "Don't you remember that she is dead?"

No matter how much I begged him, **Juan Caridad** absolutely refused to discuss how he succeeded in appearing in my dreams or how he knew that my sister had died in a plane crash. I had never talked to him about my family. He knew nothing about me except that I had come from **Los Angeles** to learn about curing practices.

Juan Caridad did not get angry when I suggested that he probably was familiar with someone who knew me well. He assured me that no matter what I said or what I accused him of, he would not discuss a subject he had sworn to remain silent about. He also urged me to return home.

"Why did he give you the stone?" old **Kamosiwe** asked.

"Can you see these dark spots and the transparent veins crisscrossing the surface?" I said, holding the stone close to his one eye. "**Juan Caridad** told me that they represent the trees and the rivers of the forest. He said the stone revealed that I would spend a long time in the jungle, that I should keep it as a talisman to protect me from harm."

The four men in the hut were silent for a long time. **Arasuwe** handed me the uncut diamond and the pearl. "Tell us about these."

I talked about the diamond **Mr. Barth** had given me at the mission.

"And this?" old **Kamosiwe** asked, picking up the small pearl from my hand. "I've never seen such a round stone."

"I've had it for a long time," I said.

"Longer than the stone **Juan Caridad** gave you?" **Ritimi** asked.

"Much longer," I said. "The pearl was also given to me by an old man when I arrived at Margarita Island, where I had gone with some classmates for a holiday. As we disembarked from the boat, an old fisherman came directly toward me. Placing the pearl in my hand, he said, 'It was yours from the day you were born. You lost it, but I found it for you at the bottom of the sea.'"

"What happened then?" **Arasuwe** asked impatiently.

"Nothing much," I said. "Before I recovered from my surprise, the old man was gone."

Kamosiwe held the pearl in his hand, letting it roll back and forth. It looked strangely beautiful in his dark, calloused palm, as if it belonged there. "I would like you to have it," I said to him.

Smiling, **Kamosiwe** looked at me. "I like it very much." He held the pearl against the sunlight. "How beautiful it is. There are clouds inside the stone. Did the old man who gave it to you look like me?" he asked as all four men were walking out of the hut.

"He was old like you," I said as he turned toward his hut. But the old man had not heard me. Holding the pearl high above his head, he pranced around the clearing.

No one said a word about my having taken epena. On some evenings, however, when the men gathered outside their huts to inhale the hallucinogenic powder, some youths would jokingly cry out, "White girl, we want to see you dance. We want to hear you sing Iramamowe's hekura song." But I did not try the powder again.

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Chapter 15

I never found out where Puriwariwe, Angelica's brother, lived. I wondered if someone actually called him when he was needed or if he intuited it. Whether he would stay in the shabono for days or weeks, no one knew. There was something reassuring about his presence, about the way he chanted to the hekuras at night, urging the spirits to protect his people, especially the children, who were the most vulnerable of all, from the spells of an evil shapori.

One morning the old shapori walked directly into Etewa's hut. Sitting in one of the empty hammocks, he demanded I show him the treasures I kept hidden in my knapsack.

I was tempted to retort that I kept nothing hidden, but remained silent as I unfastened my basket from the ratter. I knew he was going to ask me for one of the stones and fervently wished it would not be the one Juan Caridad had given me. Somehow I was certain it was the stone that had brought me to the jungle. I feared that if Puriwariwe were to take it from me, Milagros would arrive and take me back to the mission. Or worse, something dreadful might happen to me. I believed implicitly in the stone's protective powers.

Intently the old man studied both the diamond and the stone. He held the diamond against the light. "I want this one," he said, smiling. "It holds the colors of the sky." Stretching in the hammock, the old man placed the diamond and the other stone on his stomach. "Now, I want you to tell me about the shapori Juan Caridad. I want to hear of all the dreams in which this man appeared."

"I don't know if I can remember them all." Glancing at his thin, wrinkled face and emaciated body, I had the vague feeling I had known him longer than I could remember. There was a familiar, tender response in me as his smiling eyes held my gaze. Lying comfortably in my hammock, I began to speak with an easy fluency. Whenever I did not know the Iticoteri word, I filled in with a Spanish one. Puriwariwe did not seem to mind. I had the impression he was more interested in the sound and rhythm of my words than in their actual meaning.

When I finished with my narration, the old man spat out the wad of tobacco Ritimi had prepared for him prior to leaving for work in the gardens. In a soft voice he spoke of the woman shaman Kamosiwe had already told me about. Not only was Imaawami considered a great

shapori, but she was also believed to have been a superb hunter and warrior who had raided enemy settlements together with the men.

"Did she have a gun?" I asked, hoping to learn more about her identity. Since I first heard about her, I had been obsessed with the possibility that she might have been a captive white woman. Maybe as far back as the time when the Spaniards first came looking for El Dorado.

"She used a bow and arrows," the old shaman said. "Her mamucori poison was of the best kind."

No matter how I phrased my question, I was unable to learn whether Imaawami was a real person or a being that belonged to a mythological epoch. All the shapori was willing to say was that Imaawami existed a long time ago. I was certain the old man was not being evasive; it was common for the Iticoteri to be vague about past events.

On some evenings, after the women had cooked the last meal, Puriwariwe would sit by the fire in the middle of the clearing. Both young and old gathered around him. I always looked for a spot close to him, for I did not want to miss a word of what he said. In a low, monotonous, nasal tone, he talked about the origin of man, of fire, of floods, of the moon and the sun. Some of these myths I already knew. Yet each time they were recounted it was as if I were listening to a different story. Each narrator embellished, improved upon it according to his own vision.

"Which one is the real myth of creation?" I asked Puriwariwe one evening after he finished the story of Waipilishoni, a woman shaman who had created blood by mixing onoto and water. She had given life to the woodlike bodies of a brother and sister by making them drink this substance. The evening before the shapori had told us that the first Indian was born out of the leg of a manlike creature.

For an instant Puriwariwe regarded me with a perplexed expression. "They are all real," he finally said. "Don't you know that man was created many times throughout the ages?"

I shook my head in amazement. He touched my face and laughed. "Ohoo, how ignorant you still are. Listen carefully. I will tell you of all the times the world was destroyed by fires and floods."

A few days later, Puriwariwe announced that Xorowe, Iramamowe's oldest son, was to be initiated as a shapori. Xorowe was perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. He had a slight, agile body and a narrow, delicately featured face in which his deep brown eyes seemed overly large and glowing. Taking only a hammock, he moved into the small hut that had been built for him in the clearing. Since it was believed that hekuras fled from women, no females were allowed near the dwelling- not even Xorowe's mother, grandmother, or his sisters.

A youth who had never been with a woman was chosen to take care of the initiate. It was he who blew epena into Xorowe's nostrils, who saw that the fire was never out, and made sure each day that Xorowe had the proper amount of water and honey, the only food the initiate was allowed. The women always left enough wood outside the shabono, so the boy did not have to search too far. The men were responsible for finding honey. Each day the shapori urged them to go farther into the forest for new sources.

Xorowe spent most of the time inside the hut lying in his hammock. Sometimes he sat on a polished tree trunk Iramamowe had placed

outside the dwelling, for he was not supposed to sit on the ground. Within a week, **Xorowe**'s face had darkened from the **epena**. His once glowing eyes were dull and unfocused. His body, dirty and emaciated, moved with the clumsiness of a drunkard.

Life went on as usual in the **shabono**, except for the families living closest to **Xorowe**'s hut, who were not allowed to cook meat on their hearths. According to **Puriwariwe**, **hekuras** detested the smell of roasting meat, and if they so much as caught a whiff of the offensive odor, they would flee back to the mountains.

Like his apprentice, **Puriwariwe** took **epena** day and night. Tirelessly, he chanted for hours, coaxing the spirits into **Xorowe**'s hut, begging the **hekuras** to cut open the young man's chest. Some evenings **Arasuwe**, **Iramamowe**, and others accompanied the old man in his chants.

During the second week, in an uncertain, quivering voice, **Xorowe** joined in the singing. At first he only sang the **hekura** songs of the armadillo, tapir, jaguar, and other large animals, which were believed to be masculine spirits. They were the easiest to entice. Next he sang the **hekura** songs of plants and rocks. And last he sang the songs of the female spirits- the spider, snake, and hummingbird. They were not only the most difficult to lure but, because of their treacherous and jealous nature, were hard to control.

Late one night, when most of the **shabono** was asleep, I sat outside **Etewa**'s hut, and watched the men chant. **Xorowe** was so weak one of the men had to hold him up so **Puriwariwe** could dance around him. "**Xorowe**, sing louder," the old man urged him. "Sing as loud as the birds, as loud as the jaguars." **Puriwariwe** danced out of the **shabono** into the forest. "**Xorowe**, sing louder," he shouted. "The **hekuras** dwelling in all the corners of the world need to hear your song."

Three nights later, **Xorowe**'s joyful cries echoed through the **shabono**: "Father, Father, the **hekuras** are approaching. I can hear their humming and buzzing. They are dancing toward me. They are opening my chest, my head. They are coming through my fingers and my feet." **Xorowe** ran out of the hut. Squatting before the old man, he cried, "Father, Father, help me, for they are coming through my eyes and nose."

Puriwariwe helped **Xorowe** to his feet. They began to dance in the clearing, their thin emaciated shadows spilling across the moonlit ground. Hours later, a despairing scream, the cry of a panic-stricken child, pierced the dawn. "Father, Father, from today on let no woman come near my hut."

"That's what they all say," **Ritimi** mumbled, getting out of her hammock. She stocked the fire, then buried several **plantains** under the hot embers. "When **Etewa** decided to be initiated as a **shapori**, I had already gone to live with him," she said. "The night he begged **Puriwariwe** to let no woman near him I went to his hut and drove the **hekuras** away."

"Why did you do that?"

"**Etewa**'s mother urged me to do it," **Ritimi** said. "She was afraid he would die. She knew **Etewa** liked women too much; she knew he would never become a great **shapori**." **Ritimi** sat in my hammock. "I will tell you the whole story." She snuggled comfortably against me, then began to speak in a low whisper.

"The night the **hekuras** entered **Etewa**'s chest, he cried out just as **Xorowe** did tonight. It is the female **hekuras** who make such a fuss. They want no woman in the hut. **Etewa** sobbed bitterly that night, crying out that an evil woman had passed near his hut. I felt quite sad when I heard him say that the **hekuras** had left him."

"Did **Etewa** know it was you who had been in his hut?"

"No," **Ritimi** said. "No one saw me. If **Puriwariwe** knew, he **didn't** say. He was aware **Etewa** would never be a good **shapori**."

"Why did he get initiated in the first place?"

"There is always the possibility that a man may become a great **shapori**." **Ritimi** rested her head against my arm. "That night many men stayed up chanting for the **hekuras** to return. But the spirits had no desire to come back. They had left not only because **Etewa** had been soiled by a woman, but because the **hekuras** were afraid he would never be a good father to them."

"Why does a man get soiled when he goes with a woman?"

"**Shapori** do," **Ritimi** said. "I don't know why, because men as well as **shapori** enjoy it. I believe it's the female **hekuras** who are jealous and afraid of a man who enjoys women too often." **Ritimi** went on to explain how a sexually active man had little desire to take **epena** and chant to the spirits. Male spirits, she explained, were not possessive. They were content if a man took the hallucinogenic snuff before and after a hunt or a raid. "I'd rather have a good hunter and warrior than a good **shapori** for a husband," she confessed. "**Shapori** don't like women much."

"What about **Iramamowe**?" I asked. "He is considered a great **shapori**, yet he has two wives."

"**Oho**, you are so ignorant. I have to explain everything to you."

Ritimi giggled. "**Iramamowe** does not sleep with his two wives often. His youngest brother, who has no woman of his own, sleeps with one of them." **Ritimi** looked around to make sure no one was overhearing us. "Have you noticed that **Iramamowe** often goes into the forest by himself?"

I nodded. "But so do other men."

"And so do women," **Ritimi** aped me, mispronouncing the words the way I had. I had great difficulty imitating the proper **Iticoteri** nasal tone, which probably was a result of their usually having tobacco **wads** in their mouths. "That's not what I mean," she said. "**Iramamowe** goes into the forest to find what great **shapori** seek."

"What is that?"

"The strength to travel to the house of thunder. The strength to travel to the sun and come back alive."

"I've seen **Iramamowe** sleep in the forest with a woman," I confessed.

Ritimi laughed softly. "I will tell you a very important secret," she whispered. "**Iramamowe** sleeps with a woman the way a **shapori** does. He takes a woman's energy away, but gives nothing in return."

"Have you slept with him?"

Ritimi nodded. But no matter how much I coaxed and pleaded with her, she would not elaborate any further.

A week later, **Xorowe**'s mother, sisters, aunts, and cousins started to wail in their huts. "Old man," the mother cried, "my son has no more strength. Do you want to kill him of hunger? Do you want to kill him from

lack of sleep? It is time you left him alone."

The old **shapori** paid no attention to their cries. The following evening **Iramamowe** took **epena** and danced in front of his son's hut. He alternated between jumping high in the air and crawling on all fours, imitating the fierce growls of a jaguar. He stopped abruptly. With his eyes fixed on some point directly in front of him, he sat on the ground.

"Women, women, do not despair," he cried out in a loud, nasal voice. "For a few more days **Xorowe** has to remain without food. Even though he appears weak, and his movements are clumsy, and he moans in his sleep, he will not die." Standing up, **Iramamowe** walked toward **Puriwariwe** and asked him to blow more **epena** into his head. Then he returned to the same spot where he had been sitting.

"Listen carefully," **Ritimi** urged me. "**Iramamowe** is one of the few **shapori** who has traveled to the sun during his initiation. He has guided others on their first journey. He has two voices. The one you just heard was his own; the other one is that of his personal **hekura**."

Now **Iramamowe**'s words sprang from deep in his chest; like stones rumbling down a ravine, the words tumbled into the silence of people gathered in their huts. Huddled together in an atmosphere heavy with smoke and anticipation, they seemed to be barely breathing. Their eyes glittered with longing for what the personal **hekura** of **Iramamowe** had to say, for what was about to take place in the mysterious world of the initiate.

"My son has traveled into the depths of the earth, and has burned in the hot fires of their silent caves," said **Iramamowe**'s rumbling **hekura** voice. "Guided by the **hekura** eyes, he has been led through cobwebs of darkness, across rivers and mountains. They have taught him songs of birds, fishes, snakes, spiders, monkeys, and jaguars.

"Although his eyes and cheeks are sunken, he is strong. Those who have descended into the silent burning caves; those who have traveled beyond the forest mist, will return with their personal **hekura** in their chest. Those are the ones who will be guided to the sun, to the luminous huts of my brothers and sisters, the **hekur**as of the sky.

"Women, women, do not cry out his name. Let him go on his journey. Let him depart from his mother and sisters, so he can reach this world of light, which is more exhausting than the world of darkness."

Spellbound, I listened to **Iramamowe**'s voice. No one talked, no one moved, no one looked anywhere but at his figure, sitting rigidly in front of his son's hut. After every pause, his voice rose to a higher pitch of intensity.

"Women, women, do not despair. On his path he will meet those who have withstood the long nights of mist. He will meet those who have not turned back. He will meet those who have not trembled in fear by what they have witnessed during their journey. He will meet those who had their bodies burned and cut up, those who had their bones removed and dried in the sun. He will meet those who did not fall into the clouds on their way to the sun.

"Women, women, do not disturb his balance. My son is about to reach the end of his journey. Do not watch his dark face. Do not look into his hollow eyes that shine with no light, for he is destined to be a solitary man." **Iramamowe** stood up. Together with **Puriwariwe** he entered **Xorowe**'s hut, where they spent the rest of the night chanting softly to

the **hekur**as.

A few days later, the youth who had taken care of **Xorowe** during his long weeks of initiation washed him with warm water and dried him with fragrant leaves. Then he painted his body with a mixture of coals and **onoto**- wavy lines extending from his forehead down his cheeks and shoulders. The rest of his body was marked with evenly distributed round spots that reached to his ankles.

For a moment **Xorowe** stood in the middle of the clearing. His eyes shone sadly from their hollow sockets, filled with an immense melancholy, as if he had just realized he was no longer his former human self, but only a shadow. Yet there was an aura of strength about him that had not been there before, as if the conviction of his newfound knowledge and experience were more enduring than the memory of his past. Silently **Puriwariwe** led him into the forest.

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"White girl!" **Ritimi**'s six-year-old son shouted, running along the manioc rows. Out of breath, he stopped in front of me, then cried out excitedly, "White girl, your brother..."

"My what?" Dropping my digging stick, I ran toward the **shabono**. I stopped at the edge of the cleared strip of forest around the wooden palisade circling the **shabono**. Although it was not considered a garden, gourds, cotton, and an assortment of medicinal plants grew there. According to **Etewa**, the reason for this cleared strip was that enemies could not possibly trespass silently through this kind of vegetation as they could a forest cover.

No unusual sounds came from the huts. Crossing the clearing toward the group of people squatting outside **Arasuwe**'s hut, I was not surprised to see **Milagros**.

"Blond Indian," he said in Spanish, motioning me to squat beside him. "You even smell like one."

"I'm glad you are here," I said. "Little **Sisiwe** said you were my brother."

"I spoke to Father **Coriolano** at the mission." **Milagros** pointed to the writing pads, pencils, sardine cans, boxes of crackers, and sweet biscuits the **Iticoteri** were passing around. "Father **Coriolano** wants me to take you back to the mission," **Milagros** said, looking at me thoughtfully.

I could think of nothing to say. Picking up a twig, I drew lines on the dirt. "I can't leave yet."

"I know." **Milagros** smiled, but there was a trace of sadness about his lips. His voice was quite gentle, ironic. "I told Father **Coriolano** you were doing much work. I convinced him how important it is for you to finish this remarkable research you are conducting."

I could not repress my giggles. He sounded like a pompous anthropologist. "Did he believe you?"

Milagros pushed the writing pads and pencils toward me. "I assured Father **Coriolano** that you are well." From a small bundle **Milagros**

pulled out a box containing three bars of **Camay** soap. "He also gave me these for you."

"What am I to do with them?" I asked, sniffing the scented bars.

"Wash yourself!" **Milagros** said emphatically, as it he really believed I had forgotten what soap was for.

"Let me smell it," **Ritimi** said, lifting a bar from the box. She held it against her nose, closed her eyes and took one long breath. "Hum. What are you going to wash with it?"

"My hair!" I exclaimed. It occurred to me that perhaps the soap would kill the lice.

"I'll wash mine too," **Ritimi** said, rubbing the bar on her head.

"Soap only works with water," I explained. "We have to go to the river."

"To the river!" cried the women who had gathered around the men as they stood up.

Laughing, we ran down the path. Men returning from the gardens just gaped at us, whereas the women accompanying them turned around and ran after us, toward **Ritimi**, who was holding the precious soap in her upraised hand.

"You have to get your hair wet," I called out from the water. The women remained on the bank, looking doubtfully at me. Grinning, **Ritimi** handed me the soap. Soon my head was covered with a thick lather. I scrubbed hard, enjoying the dirty suds squishing through my fingers, down my neck, back, and chest. With a halved calabash I rinsed my hair, using the soapy water to wash my body. I began to sing an old Spanish commercial advertising **Camay** soap- one I used to hear on the radio as a child. "For a heavenly array, there is nothing like **jabon Camay**."

"Who wants to be next?" I asked, wading toward the bank where the women stood. I felt I was glowing with cleanliness.

Stepping back, the women smiled, but none volunteered. "I will, I will," little **Texoma** shouted, running into the water.

One by one, the women came closer. Awed, they watched attentively as the suds seemed to grow out of the child's head. I worked up a stiff lather and shaped **Texoma**'s hair until spikes stuck out all around her head. Hesitantly, **Ritimi** touched her daughter's hair. A timid smile crinkled the corners of her mouth. "**Ohoo**, what beauty!"

"Keep your eyes closed until I've rinsed out all the soap," I admonished **Texoma**. "Close them tight. It hurts if the suds run into your eyes."

"For a heavenly array," **Texoma** cried out as the soapy water ran down her back. "There is nothing like . . ." She looked at me and I filled in the rest. "Sing that song again. I want my hair to turn the color of yours."

"It won't turn my color," I said. "But it will smell good."

"I want to be next!" the women began shouting.

Except for the pregnant ones, who were afraid that the magic soap might harm their unborn children, I washed at least twenty-five heads. However, not wanting to be outdone, the pregnant women decided to wash their hair in the accustomed manner- with leaves and mud from the bottom of the river. To them too I had to sing the silly **Camay** soap commercial. By the time we were all scrubbed, my voice was hoarse.

The men gathered around **Arasuwe**'s hut were still listening to **Milagros**'s account of his visit to the outside world. They sniffed our hair

as we squatted beside them. An old woman crouching next to a youth, pushed his head between her legs. "Sniff this, I washed it with **Camay** soap." She began to hum the melody of the commercial.

The men and women burst into guffaws. Still laughing, **Etewa** shouted, "Grandmother, no one wants your vagina, even if you fill it with honey."

Cackling, the woman made an obscene gesture, then went inside her hut. "**Etewa**," she shouted from her hammock, "I've seen you lying between the legs of even older **hags** than myself."

After the laughter subsided, **Milagros** pointed to the four machetes placed on the ground in front of him. "Your friends left these at the mission before departing for the city," he said. "They are for you to give away."

I looked at him helplessly. "Why so few?"

"Because I **couldn't** carry more," **Milagros** said cheerfully. "Don't give them to the women."

"I will give them to the headman," I said, gazing at the expectant faces around me. Grinning, I pushed the four machetes in front of **Arasuwe**. "My friends sent these for you."

"White girl, you are clever," he said, checking the sharp point of one of the machetes. "This one I will keep for myself. One is for my brother **Iramamowe**, who has protected you from the **Mocototeri**. One is for **Hayama**'s son, from whose garden and game you eat the most." **Arasuwe** looked at **Etewa**. "One should be for you, but since you were given a machete not too long ago at one of our feasts I will give the machete to your wives, **Ritimi** and **Tutemi**. They take care of the white girl as if she were their own sister."

For a moment there was absolute silence; then one of the men stood up and addressed **Ritimi**. "Give me your machete so I can cut down trees. You don't need to do the work a man does."

"Don't give it to him," **Tutemi** said. "It's easier to work in the gardens with a machete than with a digging stick."

Ritimi looked at the machete, picked it up, then handed it to the man. "I will give it to you. The worst sin of all is not to give away what others ask of you. I don't want to end up in **shopariwabe**."

"Where is that?" I whispered to **Milagros**.

"**Shopariwabe** is a place like the missionaries' hell."

I opened one of the sardine cans. After popping one of the silvery oily fish into my mouth, I offered the can to **Ritimi**. "Try one," I coaxed her.

She looked at me uncertainly. Between thumb and forefinger, she daintily lifted a piece of sardine into her mouth. "Ugh, what an ugly taste," she cried, spitting it out.

Milagros took the can from my hand. "Save them. They are for the journey back to the mission."

"But I'm not going back yet," I said. "They will spoil if we save them for long."

"You should return before the rains," **Milagros** said gravely. "Once they start, it will be impossible to cross rivers or walk through the forest."

I could not help the smug grin. "I have to stay at least until **Tutemi**'s child is born," I said. I was sure the baby would arrive during the rains.

"What shall I tell Father **Coriolano**?"

"What you told him already," I said mockingly. "That I'm doing remarkable work."

"But he expects you to return before the rains," **Milagros** said. "It rains for months!"

Smiling, I took one of the boxes of crackers. "We better eat these- they will spoil with the humidity."

"Don't open the other sardine cans," **Milagros** said in Spanish. "The **Iticoteri** won't like them. I will eat them myself."

"Aren't you afraid to go to **shopariwabe**?"

Without answering, **Milagros** passed the already opened can around. Most of the men only smelled the contents, then handed it to the next person. The ones who were daring enough to taste the sardines, spit them out. The women did not bother either smelling or trying them. **Milagros** smiled at me when the can was returned to him. "They don't like sardines. I will not go to hell if I eat them all by myself."

The crackers were no success either, except with a few children, who licked off the salt. But the sweet biscuits, even though they tasted rancid, were eaten with smacking sounds of approval.

Ritimi appropriated the writing pads and pencils. She insisted I teach her the same kind of designs with which I had decorated my burned notebook. Dutifully, she practiced writing the Spanish and English words I had taught her. She was not interested in learning how to write, even though she eventually learned to draw all the letters of the alphabet, including a few Chinese ideograms I had once been taught in a calligraphy class. To **Ritimi** they remained designs that she painted sometimes on her body, preferring the letters S and W.

Milagros stayed for a few weeks at the **shabono**. He went hunting with the men and helped them in the gardens. Most of the time, however, he spent lounging in his hammock, doing nothing but play with the children. At all hours one could hear their shrieks of delight as **Milagros** balanced the younger ones high in the air on his upraised feet. In the evenings he entertained us with stories about the nape- the white men he had met through the years; the places he had visited; and the eccentric customs he had observed.

Nape was a term applied to all foreigners- that is, all who were not **Yanomama**. The **Iticoteri** made no distinction between nationalities. To them a Venezuelan, Brazilian, Swede, German, or American, regardless of their color, were nape.

Seen through **Milagros**'s eyes, these white men appeared peculiar even to me. It was his sense of humor, his knack for the absurd, and his dramatic rendition that transformed the most mundane, insignificant event into an extraordinary happening. If ever anyone in the audience dared to doubt the veracity of his account, **Milagros**, in a very dignified manner, would turn to me. "White girl, tell them if I'm lying." No matter how much he had exaggerated, I never contradicted him.

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Tutemi joined **Ritimi** and me in the gardens. "I think my time is coming," she said, dropping her wood-filled basket on the ground. "My arms have no strength. My breathing is not deep. I can no longer bend easily."

"Are you in pain?" I asked, seeing **Tutemi**'s face twist into a grimace. She nodded. "I'm also afraid."

Gently **Ritimi** probed the girl's stomach, first on the sides, then the front. "The baby is kicking hard. It's time for it to come out." **Ritimi** turned to me. "Go get old **Hayama**. Tell her that **Tutemi** is in pain. She will know what to do."

"Where will you be?"

Ritimi pointed straight ahead. I cut through the forest, jumping over fallen trunks, heedless of thorns, roots, and stones. "Come quickly," I shouted, gasping for air, in front of **Hayama**'s hut. "**Tutemi** is having her child. She's in pain."

Picking up her bamboo knife, **Ritimi**'s grandmother first went to see an old man living in a hut across the clearing. "I'm sure you heard the white girl," **Hayama** said. Seeing the old man nod, she added, "If we need you, I will send her to get you."

I walked in front of **Hayama**, impatiently waiting every fifty paces for her to catch up. Leaning heavily on the piece of broken bow she used as a cane, she seemed to be moving even more slowly than usual. "Is the old man a **shapori**?" I asked.

"He knows all there is to know about a child that does not want to be born."

"**Tutemi** has only pains."

"When there is pain," **Hayama** said deliberately, "it means that the child **doesn't** want to leave the womb."

"I don't think it means that at all." I was unable to disguise the argumentative tone of my voice. "It's normal for the first child to be difficult," I affirmed, as if I really knew. "White women have pains with almost every child."

"It's not normal," **Hayama** affirmed. "Maybe white babies don't want to see the world."

Tutemi's moans came muffled through the underbrush. She was crouching on the **platanillo** leaves **Ritimi** had spread on the ground. Dark shadows circled her feverish eyes. Minute drops of perspiration shone above her brow and on her upper lip.

"The water has already broken," **Ritimi** said. "But the baby **doesn't** want to come."

"Let us go farther into the forest," **Tutemi** begged. "I don't want anyone at the **shabono** to hear my screams."

Tenderly, old **Hayama** pushed the young woman's bangs back from her forehead, and wiped the sweat from her face and neck. "It will be better in a moment," she said soothingly, as if speaking to a child. Each time the contractions came, **Hayama** pressed hard on **Tutemi**'s stomach. After what I judged to be an interminably long time, **Hayama** told me to get the old **shapori**.

He was prepared. He had taken **epena**, and over the fire a dark concoction was boiling. With a stick he flicked the mucus from his nose, then poured the brew into a gourd.

"What is it made of?"

"Roots and leaves," he said, but did not mention the name of the plant. As soon as we reached the three women, he urged **Tutemi** to empty the gourd to the last drop. While she drank, he danced around her. In a high nasal voice, he pleaded with the **hekura** of the white monkey to release the neck of the unborn child.

Slowly, **Tutemi**'s face relaxed, and her eyes lost their frightened expression. "I think the baby will come now," she said, smiling at the old man.

Hayama held her from behind, stretching **Tutemi**'s arms over her head. While I was wondering whether it was the concoction or the shaman's dance that had induced such a state of relaxation, I missed the actual birth. I put my hand over my mouth to stifle a scream as I saw the umbilical cord wrapped around the neck of the purple-skinned boy.

Hayama cut the cord, then put a leaf on the navel to absorb the blood. She rubbed her forefinger in the afterbirth, then smeared the finger against the child's lips.

"What is she doing?" I asked **Ritimi**.

"She is making sure the boy will learn to speak properly."

Before I had a chance to blurt out that the child was dead, the most disconcerting human cry I have ever heard echoed through the forest.

Ritimi picked up the screaming infant, and motioned me to follow her to the river. She filled her mouth with water, waited for a moment for it to warm up, then squirted it over the baby. Imitating her, I helped her rinse his little body clean of slime and blood.

"Now he has three mothers," **Ritimi** said, handing the baby to me. "Whoever washes a newborn baby is responsible for it should something happen to the mother. **Tutemi** will be happy that you have helped wash her child."

Ritimi filled a large **platanillo** leaf with mud, while I cradled the boy in uncertain arms. I had never held a newborn baby before. Looking in awe at the purplish wrinkled face, at his tiny fists, which he tried to push into his mouth, I wondered what miracle had made him live.

Hayama wrapped the placenta into a tight bundle of leaves, and placed it under a small elevated windscreen the old man had built under a tall ceiba. It was to be burned in a few weeks. With the mud we covered all traces of blood on the ground to prevent wild animals and dogs from sniffing around.

With the child safely in her arms, **Tutemi** led the way back to the **shabono**. Before entering her hut, she placed him on the ground. We who had witnessed the birth had to step three times over the baby, thus marking his acceptance into the settlement.

Etewa did not look up from his hammock: He had been resting there since learning that his youngest wife was in labor. **Tutemi** entered the hut with their newborn son, and sat by the hearth. After squeezing her nipple, she pushed it inside the baby's mouth. Avidly, the boy began to suck, opening his still unfocused eyes from time to time as if imprinting on his mind this source of food and comfort.

Neither parent ate anything that day. On the second and third day **Etewa** caught a basketful of small fish which he cooked and fed to **Tutemi**. Thereafter both of them slowly resumed a normal diet.

The day after giving birth, **Tutemi** returned to work in the gardens with the newborn baby strapped on her back. **Etewa**, on the other hand,

remained resting in his hammock for a week. Any physical effort on his part was believed to be deleterious to the infant's health.

On the ninth day **Milagros** was asked to pierce the boy's **earlobes** with long **rasha** palm thorns, which were kept in the holes. After cutting the sharp points close to the lobes, **Milagros** coated each end with resin so the child would not pull the blunted thorns out. On that same day, the infant was also given the name of **Hoaxiwe**, for it was a white monkey that had wanted to keep the child in the womb. It was only a nickname. By the time the boy started walking, he would be given his real name.

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It was not quite dawn when **Milagros** leaned over my hammock. I felt his calloused hand brushing my forehead and cheeks. I could hardly see his features in the darkness. I knew he was leaving. I waited for him to speak, but fell asleep without finding out whether he had actually wanted to say something.

"The rains will come soon," old **Kamosiwe** announced that evening. "I've seen the size of the young turtles. I've been listening to the croaking of the rain frogs."

Four days later, in the early afternoon, the wind blew with terrifying force through the trees and the **shabono**. The empty hammocks swung back and forth like boats on a tempestuous sea. The leaves on the ground swirled in spiralling dances that died as suddenly as they had begun.

I stood in the middle of the clearing, watching the gusts of wind coming from every direction. Pieces of bark flattened against my shins. Kicking my legs, I tried to shake the bark off, but it stuck to me as if it had been glued on. Giant black clouds darkened the sky. The steady far-off roar of approaching rain grew louder as it moved across the forest. Thunder rumbled through the clouds, and the flickering of white lightning flashed through the afternoon darkness. The groans of a falling tree, hit by lightning, echoed through the forest with the mournful clamor of other uprooted trees crashing to the ground.

Shrieking, the women and children huddled together behind the **plantains** stacked against the sloping roof. Seizing a log from the fire, old **Hayama** rushed into **Iramamowe**'s hut. Desperately, she began to beat one of the poles. "Wake up!" she screamed. "Your father is not here. Wake up! Defend us from the **hekuras**." **Hayama** was addressing **Iramamowe**'s personal **hekura**, for he was out hunting with several other men.

Thunder and lightning receded into the distance as the clouds broke open above us. The rain came in a solid sheet, so dense we could not see across the clearing. Moments later, the sky was clear. I accompanied old **Kamosiwe** to look at the roaring river. Masses of earth toppled from the banks, gouged out by the raging torrent. Each landslide was followed by the tearing of vines, which snapped with sounds like breaking bowstrings.

A great stillness settled over the forest. Not a bird, insect, or frog

could be heard. Suddenly, without any warning, a growl of thunder seemed to come directly out of the sun, cracking over our heads. "But there are no clouds," I shouted, falling on the ground as if struck.

"Don't defy the spirits," **Kamosiwe** warned me. Cutting two large leaves, he motioned me to take cover. Squatting side by side, we watched the rain cascade down from a clear sky. Gusts of wind shook the forest until the curtain of dark clouds hid the sun once more.

"Storms are caused by the dead whose bones have not been burned; whose ashes have not been eaten," old **Kamosiwe** said. "It's these unfortunate spirits, longing to be cremated, who heat up the clouds until fires light up the sky."

"Fires that will finally burn them," I completed his sentence.

"**Ohoo**, you are not so ignorant anymore," **Kamosiwe** said. "The rains have started. You will be with us for many days- you will learn so much more."

Smiling, I nodded. "Do you think **Milagros** has reached the mission?"

Kamosiwe looked at me askance, then broke into a hoarse, raspy laughter, the laughter of a very old man, resounding eerily in the noise of the rain. He still had most of his teeth. Strong and yellowish, they stood out from his receding gums like pieces of aged ivory. "**Milagros** did not go to the mission. He went to see his wife and children."

"At which settlement does **Milagros** live?"

"In many."

"Does he have a wife and children in all of them?"

"**Milagros** is a talented man," **Kamosiwe** said, his one dark eye shining with a devilish glint. "He has a white woman somewhere."

Filled with anticipation, I looked at **Kamosiwe**. I was finally going to learn something about **Milagros**. But the old man remained silent. When he put his hand in mine, I knew his mind had wandered elsewhere. Slowly, I massaged his gnarled fingers.

"Old man, are you really **Milagros**'s grandfather?" I asked, hoping to bring him back to the subject of **Milagros**.

Startled, **Kamosiwe** looked into my face, his one eye scrutinizing me intently as if he had thought of something. Mumbling, he gave me his other hand to massage.

Absentmindedly, I watched his one eye rolling into his socket as he drowsed. "I wonder how old you really are?"

Kamosiwe's eye came to rest on my face, clouded with memories. "If you lay out the time I've lived, it would reach all the way to the moon," **Kamosiwe** murmured. "That's how old I am."

We stayed under the leaves, watching the dark clouds disperse across the sky. Mist drifted through the trees, filtering the light to a ghostly gray.

"The rains have started," **Kamosiwe** repeated softly as we walked back to the **shabono**. The fires in the huts produced more smoke than heat, but the rainy air created a misty warmth. I stretched in my hammock, and fell asleep to the distant and confused sounds of the storming forest.

The morning was cold and damp. **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, and I stayed in our hammocks the whole day, eating baked **plantains**, and listening to the rain pound on the palm-hatched roofs.

"I wish **Etewa** and the others had returned last night from the hunt," **Ritimi** mumbled from time to time, looking at the sky, which changed

only from a faint white to gray.

The hunters returned late in the afternoon of the following day. **Iramamowe** and **Etewa** walked directly into old **Hayama**'s hut carrying her youngest son **Matuwe** in a litter made from bark strips. **Matuwe** had been injured by a falling branch. Carefully, the two men transferred him to his own hammock. His leg hung limply down and his shinbone threatened to pierce the swollen purple skin.

"It's broken," old **Hayama** said.

"It's broken," I repeated with the rest of the women in the hut. I had adopted the habit of stating the obvious. It was a way of expressing concern, love, sympathy all at once.

Matuwe gasped in pain as **Hayama** set the leg straight. **Ritimi** held his foot outstretched while the old woman made a splint with broken pieces of arrow shafts. Deftly, she arranged them along each side of the leg, inserting cotton fibers in between the skin and cane. Around the splint, extending all the way from the ankle to the middle of his thigh, **Hayama** bound fresh strips of a thin, resistant bark.

Totemi and **Xotomi**, the man's young wife, giggled each time **Matuwe** moaned. They were not amused, but were trying to cheer him up. "**Oh, Matuwe**, it **doesn't** hurt," **Xotomi** tried to convince him. "Remember how glad you were when your head was bleeding after you had been hit with a club at the last feast."

"Stay still," **Hayama** said to her son. Fastening a liana rope over one of the rafters, she tied one end to his ankle, the other to his thigh. "Now you cannot move your leg," she said, inspecting her work with satisfaction.

About two weeks later, **Hayama** removed the bark and cane splint. The purple bruised leg had turned green and yellowish but was no longer swollen. She probed around the bone lightly. "It's growing together," she announced, then proceeded to massage the leg with warm water. Every day, for almost a month, she went through the same routine of unfastening the cast, massaging the leg, then tying it back to the rafter.

"The bone is mended," **Hayama** affirmed one day, breaking the cane splint into small pieces.

"But my leg is not healed!" **Matuwe** protested in alarm. "I cannot move it properly."

Hayama calmed him, explaining that his knee had become stiff from having had his leg stretched out for so long. "I'll continue massaging your leg until you can walk as you did before."

The rains brought with them a sense of tranquillity, of timelessness, as day and night blurred into each other. No one worked much in the gardens. For endless hours we lay or sat in our hammocks conversing in that odd way people do when it rains, with long pauses and absentminded stares into the distance.

Ritimi tried to make a basket weaver out of me. I started out with what I thought was the easiest kind- the large **U**-shaped basket used for carrying wood. The women had great fun watching my awkward attempts at trying to master the simple twining technique. I then concentrated my efforts on something I believed to be more manageable- the flat, disklike baskets used for storing fruit or separating the ashes from the bones of the dead. Although I was quite pleased with the finished product, I had to agree with old **Hayama** that the basket did not

look the way it was supposed to.

Grinning at her, I remembered the time a school friend had done her best to teach me how to knit. In the most relaxed manner, while watching **TV**, talking, or waiting for an appointment, she knitted beautiful sweaters, mittens, and skiing caps. I sat tensely beside her, with tight shoulders, my stiff fingers holding the needles only inches away from my face, cursing every time I dropped a stitch.

I was not ready to give up basketry. One had to try at least three times, I told myself, as I began to make one of the flat fishing baskets.

"**Oho**, white girl." **Xotomo** giggled uncontrollably. "You **didn't** twine it tight enough." She put her fingers through the loosely woven vine strips. "The fish will slip through the holes."

Finally I resigned myself to the simple task of splitting the bark and vines needed for weaving into the most perfectly even strands, which were much in demand. Emboldened by my success, I made a hammock. I cut strands about seven feet long, tied the ends firmly together, reinforcing them with intertwined bark rope below the binding. I joined the liana strands loosely with transverse cotton yarn, which I had dyed red with **onoto**. **Ritimi** was so enchanted with the hammock, she replaced **Etewa's** old one with it.

"**Etewa**, I made a new hammock for you," I said as he came in from working in the gardens.

He looked at me skeptically. "You think it will hold me?"

I clicked my tongue in affirmation, showing him how well I had reinforced the ends.

Hesitantly he sat in the hammock. "It seems strong," he said, stretching fully. I heard the rubbing of the vine rope against the pole, but before I could warn him **Etewa** and the hammock were on the ground.

Ritimi, **Tutemi**, **Arasuwe**, and his wives, watching from the hut next to us, burst into guffaws, immediately attracting a large crowd. Slapping each other on their thighs and shoulders, they doubled up with laughter. Later I asked **Ritimi** if she had tied the hammock loosely on purpose.

"Naturally," she said, her eyes shining with loving malice. She assured me that **Etewa** was not in the least upset. "Men enjoy being outwitted by a woman."

Although I had my doubts as to whether **Etewa** had actually enjoyed the incident, he certainly held no grudge against me. He advertised throughout the **shabono** how well he was resting in his new hammock. I was besieged with requests. Sometimes I made as many as three hammocks a day. Several men busied themselves supplying me with cotton, which they separated by hand from the seeds. With a whorl stick they spun the fibers into thread, and twisted them into the strong yarn which I loosely wove in between the strands.

With a finished hammock draped over my arm, I entered **Iramamowe's** hut one afternoon. "Are you going to make arrows?" I asked him. He had climbed up a pole in his hut and was reaching for cane stored under the rafters of the roof.

"Is this hammock for me?" he asked, handing me the cane. He took the hammock, fastened it, then sat astride on it. "It's well made."

"I made it for your eldest wife," I said. "I'll make you one if you teach me how to make arrows."

"It **isn't** time to make arrows," **Iramamowe** said. "I was only

checking if the cane is still dry." He regarded me mockingly, then burst into laughter. "The white girl wants to make arrows," he shouted at the top of his voice. "I will teach her, and take her hunting with me." Still laughing, he motioned me to sit beside him. He spread the cane on the ground, then sorted the shafts according to size. "The long ones are best for hunting. Short ones are best for fishing and killing the enemy. Only a good marksman will use long ones for whatever he pleases. They are often flawed and their trajectory is imprecise."

Iramamowe selected a short and a long shaft. "In here I will fit the arrowhead," he said, splitting one end of each cane. Firmly he tied them together with cotton thread. He cut a few feathers in half, then attached them to the other end by means of resin and cotton thread. "Some hunters decorate their shafts with their personal designs. I only do so when I go raiding. I like my enemy to know who killed him."

Like most **Iticoteri** men, **Iramamowe** was a superb raconteur, animating his stories with precise onomatopoeia, [* onomatopoeia- using words that imitate the sound they denote] dramatic gestures, and pauses. Step by step, he took his listener through the hunt: how he first spotted the animal; how before releasing his arrow he blew on it the powdered roots of one of his magic plants to immobilize his victim, thus making sure his arrow would not fail to hit its target; and how, once hit, the animal resisted dying.

With his eyes fixed on me, he emptied the contents of his quiver on the ground. In great detail he explained about all the arrowheads he had. "This is one of the **palmwood** points," he said, handing me a sharp piece of wood. "It's made from splinters. The ringlike grooves cut into the point are smeared with **mamucori**. They break inside the animal's body. It's the best point for hunting monkeys." He smiled, then added, "And for killing the enemy."

Next he held up a long, wide point, sharpened along its edges and decorated with meandering lines. "This one is good for hunting jaguars and tapirs."

The excited barking of dogs, mingled with the shouts of people, interrupted **Iramamowe's** explanation. I followed him as he rushed toward the river. An anteater the size of a small bear had taken refuge from the barking dogs in the water. **Etewa** and **Arasuwe** had wounded the animal on the neck, stomach, and back. Raised on its hind legs, it pawed the air desperately with its powerful front claws.

"Want to finish it off with my arrow?" **Iramamowe** asked.

Unable to avert my gaze from the animal's long tongue, I shook my head. I was not sure whether he was serious or joking. The animal's tongue hung out of a narrow muzzle, dripping a sticky liquid in which dead ants swam. **Iramamowe's** arrow hit the anteater's tiny ear, and instantly the animal collapsed. The men tied ropes around the massive body, then hoisted it up the bank, where **Arasuwe** quartered the animal so the men could carry the heavy pieces to the **shabono**.

The men singed off the hair, then placed the various pieces on a wooden platform built over the fire. As soon as **Hayama** wrapped the innards in **pishaansi** leaves, she buried them in the embers.

"An anteater," the children cried out. Clapping their hands in delight, they danced around the fire.

"Wait until it's cooked properly," old **Hayama** warned the children,

whenever one poked at the tightly wrapped bundles. "You will get sick if you eat meat that **isn't** well done. It has to cook until no more juice drips from the leaves."

The liver was done first. **Hayama** cut me a piece before the children got to it. It was tender, juicy, and unpleasantly sour, as if it had been marinated in rancid lemon juice.

Later **Iramamowe** brought me a piece of the roasted hind leg. "Why **didn't** you want to try my arrow?" he asked.

"I might have hit one of the dogs," I said evasively, biting into the tough meat. It too tasted sour. I looked up into **Iramamowe's** face, and wondered if he had been aware that I did not want to be even vaguely compared to **Imaawami**, the woman shaman who knew how to call the **hekuras** and hunted like a man.

On stormy afternoons the men took **epena**, and chanted to the **hekura** of the anaconda to twist herself around the trees so as to prevent the wind from breaking their trunks. During one particularly vicious storm, old **Kamosiwe** rubbed white ashes over his wrinkled body. In a hoarse, raspy voice he called out to the spider, his personal **hekura**, to spin her protective silvery threads around the plants in the gardens.

Suddenly his voice changed to a higher pitch, as shrill as the piercing shriek of a parakeet. "I was once an old child who climbed to the tallest treetop. I fell, and was transformed into a spider. Why do you disturb my peaceful sleep?"

Reverting again to his old man's voice, **Ramosiwe** rose from his squatting position. "Spider, I want to blow your sting on those **hekuras** who break and tear the plants in our gardens." With his **epena** cane, he blew all around the **shabono**, aiming the spider sting against the destructive spirits.

The following morning I accompanied **Kamosiwe** into the gardens. Smiling, he pointed to the small hairy spiders busily **reweaving** their webs. Minute drops of moisture clung to the tenuous silvery threads. In the sunshine they glistened like jade pearls, reflecting the greenness of leaves.

We walked through the steaming forest toward the river. Squatting next to each other we silently watched the broken lianas, trees, and masses of leaves speeding by in the muddy waters. Back in the **shabono**, **Kamosiwe** invited me into his hut to share with him his specialty-roasted ants dipped in honey.

A favorite pastime during these rainy nights was for a woman to ridicule her husband for a wrongdoing through a song. A quarrel ensued whenever the woman hinted that her man was better fit to carry a basket than a bow. These disputes always ended up as public arguments, in which others took an active part by expressing their own opinions. Sometimes hours after the quarrel had ended someone would shout across the clearing with a fresh insight into the particular problem, thus renewing the squabble.

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Chapter 19

Whenever the sun pierced through the clouds, I went with the women and men to work in the gardens. The weeds were much easier to pull from the soaked ground, but I had little energy. Like old **Kamosiwe**, I just stood amidst the high blades of the manioc plants, and soaked up the light and warmth of the sun. Counting the birds, which had not appeared for days, crossing the sky, I wished for the hot rainless days. After so many weeks of rain, I longed for the sun to stay long enough to lift the mist.

One morning I felt so dizzy I could not get out of my hammock. I lowered my head toward my knees, and waited for the spell to pass. I did not have the strength to lift my head and answer **Ritimi's** anxious words which were lost in the loud persistent noise around me. It must be the river, I thought: It was not too far away.

But then I realized the noise came from another direction. Desperately, as if my life depended on it, I tried to think where the sound actually came from: It came from within me.

For days I heard nothing but drumming in my head. I wanted to open my eyes. I could not. Through my closed lids I saw the stars burn brighter instead of fading in the sky. Panic seized me at the thought that it would be night forever, that I was descending deeper and deeper into a world of shadows and disconnected dreams.

Waving from misty **riverbanks**, **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, **Etewa**, **Arasuwe**, **Iramamowe**, **Hayama**, old **Kamosiwe** drifted by me. Sometimes they jumped from cloud to cloud, sweeping the mist with leafy brooms. Whenever I called them, they melted into the fog. Sometimes I could see the light of the sun, shining red and yellow, between branches and leaves. I forced my eyes to stay open, and realized it had only been the fire dancing on the palm-thatched roof.

"White people need food when they are sick," I distinctly heard **Milagros's** shouts. I felt his lips on mine as he pushed masticated meat into my mouth.

Another time I recognized the **shapori Puriwariwe's** voice. "Clothes make people ill." I felt him pull my blanket away. "I need to cool her down. Get me white mud from the river." I felt his hands coil around my body, covering me with mud from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. His lips left a trail of coldness on my skin as he sucked the evil spirits out of me. My hours of wakefulness and sleep were filled with his voice.

Wherever I focused my eyes in the darkness, **Puriwariwe's** face appeared. I heard the song of his **hekura**. I felt the sharp hummingbird's beak cut open my chest. The beak turned into light. Not the light of the sun or the light of the moon, but the dazzling radiance of the old **shapori's** eyes. He urged me to look into his deep pupils. His eyes appeared lidless, extending toward his temples. They were filled with dancing birds.

The eyes of a madman, I thought.

I saw his **hekuras** suspended in dewdrops, dancing in the shiny eyes of a jaguar, and I drank the watery tears of the **epena**. A violent tickling in my throat tightened my stomach until I vomited water. It flowed out of the hut, out of the **shabono**, and down the path to the river, melting with the night of smoke and chanting.

Opening my eyes, I sat up in my hammock. I distinctly saw **Puriwariwe** running outside the hut. He stretched his arms to the night, his fingers spread wide as if summoning the energy of the stars. Turning around, he looked at me. "You are going to live," he said. "The evil spirits have left your body." Then he disappeared into the shadows of the night.

After weeks of violent storms, the rains abated to an even, almost predictable pattern. Dawns would arrive opaque and misty, but by midmorning white fluffy clouds would drift across the sky. Hours later the clouds would gather above the **shabono**. They would hang so low that they appeared to be suspended from the trees, ominously darkening the afternoon sky. A heavy downpour would follow, fading to a light drizzle that often continued far into the night.

I did not work much in the gardens during those rainless mornings but usually accompanied the children into the swamps that had formed around the river. There we would catch frogs and pry out crabs from underneath stones.

The children, on all fours, eyes and ears alert to the slightest motion and sound, pounced with uncanny agility on the unsuspecting frogs. With eyes that looked almost transparent because of the diffused light, the little girls and boys worked with the precision of evil gnomes as they pulled the fiber loops around the frogs' necks until the last croak died down. Smiling, with the candor only children have when unaware of their cruelty, they would cut open the frogs' feet so that all the blood, which was believed to be poisonous, could flow out. After the frogs had been skinned, each child would wrap his catch in **pishaansi** leaves and cook them over the fire. With manioc gruel, they tasted delicious.

Mostly, I just sat on a rock in the tall bamboo grass and watched rows of shiny black and yellow scarabs climb with careful, almost imperceptible slowness up and down the light green stems. They looked like creatures of another world, protected by their brilliant armor of obsidian and gold. On windless mornings it was so quiet in the bamboo grass that I could hear the beetles sucking sap from the tender shoots.

Early one morning, **Arasuwe** sat at the head of my hammock. There was a cheerful glow on his face, extending from his high cheekbones to his lower lip, where a **wad** of tobacco protruded. The concentration of wrinkles around his eyes deepened as he grinned, adding a reassuring warmth to his expression. I fixed my gaze on his thick, ribbed nails as he cupped his brown hand to catch the last drops of honey from a calabash. He extended his hand toward me and I dipped my finger in his palm. "This is the best honey I've had for a long time," I said, licking my finger with relish.

"You can come with me **downriver**," **Arasuwe** said. He went on to explain that with two of his wives and his two youngest sons-in-law, one of which was **Matuwe**, he was going to an abandoned garden where months earlier they had felled several palm trees to harvest the tasty palm hearts. "Do you remember how much you liked the crisp, crunchy shoots?" he asked. "By now the decaying pith in the dead trunks must be filled with fat worms."

As I was pondering on how to express that I would not like the grubs as much as I had enjoyed the palm hearts, **Ritimi** came to sit beside me. "I will also go to the gardens," she said. "I have to watch over the white girl."

Arasuwe blew his nose, flicking the mucus away with his forefinger, then laughed. "My daughter, we are going by canoe. I thought you **didn't** like traveling on water."

"It's better than walking through a swampy forest," **Ritimi** said flippantly.

Ritimi came instead of **Arasuwe**'s youngest wife. For a short distance we walked along the riverbank until we reached an embankment. Hidden underneath the thicket was a long canoe.

"It looks like one of the large troughs you use for making soup," I said, eyeing the bark contraption suspiciously.

Proudly, **Arasuwe** explained that both were made in exactly the same fashion. The bark of a large tree was loosened in one piece by pounding the trunk with clubs. Then the ends were heated over a fire to make them pliable enough to be folded back and pinched into a flat-nosed basin, and finally the ends were lashed together with vines. A crude framework of sticks was added to give the boat its stability.

The men pushed the canoe into the water. Giggling, **Arasuwe**'s second wife, **Ritimi**, and I climbed inside. Afraid to upset the **tublike** craft, I did not dare move from my crouching position. **Arasuwe** maneuvered the canoe with a pole into the middle of the river.

With their backs turned to their mother-in-law, the two young men sat as far away from her as they could. I wondered why **Arasuwe** had brought them at all. It was considered incestuous for a man to be familiar with his wife's mother, especially if the woman was still sexually active. Men usually avoided their mothers-in-law altogether, to the extent that they did not even look at them. And under no circumstances did they say their names aloud.

The current seized us, carrying us swiftly down the gurgling, muddy river. There were stretches when the waters were calm, reflecting the trees on either side of the bank with exaggerated intensity. Gazing at the mirrored leaves, I had the feeling we were ripping through an intricately laced veil. The forest was silent. From time to time we caught sight of a bird gliding across the sky. Without flapping its wings, it seemed to be flying asleep. The ride was over all too soon. **Arasuwe** beached the canoe in the sand amidst black basalt rocks.

"Now we have to walk," he said, looking at the dark forest ascending in front of us.

"What about the canoe?" I asked. "We should turn it upside down so the afternoon rain won't fill it with water."

Arasuwe scratched his head, then burst into laughter. He had mentioned on different occasions that I was far too opinionated- not necessarily because I was a woman, but because I was young. Old people, regardless of sex, were respected and held in esteem. Their advice was sought and followed. It was the young ones who were discouraged from voicing their judgments. "We will not use the boat to get back," **Arasuwe** said. "It's too hard to pole upriver."

"Who is going to take it back to the **shahonof**?" I could not help asking, afraid we would have to carry it.

"No one," he assured me. "The boat is only good for going downstream." Grinning, **Arasuwe** turned the canoe upside down. "Maybe someone else will need it to go farther **downriver**."

It felt good to move my cramped legs. We walked silently through the

wet, marshy forest. **Matuwe** was in front of me. He was thin and long legged. His quiver hung so low on his back that it bumped back and forth on his buttocks. I began to whistle a little tune. **Matuwe** turned around. His scowling face made me giggle. I had the overwhelming temptation to poke his buttocks with the quiver, but controlled my impulse. "Don't you like your mother-in-law?" I asked, unable to refrain myself from teasing him.

Grinning shyly, **Matuwe** blushed at my impudence for having spoken **Arasuwe**'s wife's name aloud in front of him. "Don't you know that a man cannot look at, talk to, or be near his mother-in-law?"

His stricken tone made me feel guilty for having teased him. "I **didn't** know," I lied.

Upon arriving at the site, **Ritimi** assured me that it was the same abandoned garden she and **Tutemi** had taken me to after our first encounter in the forest. I did not recognize the place. It was so overgrown with weeds, I had a hard time finding the temporary shelters I knew to stand around the plantain trees.

Slashing the weeds with their machetes, the men looked for the fallen palm tree trunks. After uncovering them, they dug out the decaying pith, then broke it open with their bare hands. **Ritimi** and **Arasuwe**'s wife shrieked ecstatically as they saw the wriggling grubs, some as big as Ping-Pong balls. Squatting beside the men, they helped bite off each larva's head, pulling it away together with the intestines. The white torsos were collected in **pishaansi** leaves. Whenever **Ritimi** damaged a grub, which she did quite often, she ate it raw on the spot, smacking her lips in approval.

Despite their mocking pleas that I help them prepare the grubs, I could not bring myself to touch the squirming blobs, let alone to bite off their heads. Borrowing **Matuwe**'s machete, I cut down banana fronds with which to cover the roofs of the badly weathered shelters.

Arasuwe called me as soon as some of the larvae were roasting on the fire. "Eat it," he urged, pushing one of the bundles in front of me. "You need the fat- you haven't had enough lately. That's why you have diarrhea," he added in a tone that begged no argument.

I grinned sheepishly. With a resoluteness I did not feel, I opened the tightly bound package. The shrunken, whitish grubs were swimming in fat; they smelled like burnt bacon. Watching the others, I first licked the **pishaansi** leaf, then carefully popped a grub into my mouth. It tasted wonderfully similar to the burned gristly fat around a New York steak.

At dusk, soon after we had settled into one of the repaired huts, **Arasuwe** announced in a solemn tone that we had to return to the **shabono**.

"You want to travel at night?" **Matuwe** asked incredulously. "What about the roots we wanted to dig up in the morning?"

"We cannot stay here," **Arasuwe** reiterated. "I can feel it in my legs that something is about to happen at the **shabono**." Closing his eyes, he swung his head to and fro as if the slow, rhythmic movement could provide him with an answer as to what he should do. "We have to reach the **shabono** by dawn," he said determinedly.

Ritimi distributed among our baskets the nearly forty pounds of grubs the men had recovered from the decaying palm trunks, placing the smallest amount into mine. **Arasuwe** and his two sons-in-law took the

half-burned logs from the fire, then we set out in single file. To keep the makeshift torches glowing, the men blew on them periodically, dispersing a shower of sparks amidst the damp shadows.

At times the almost full moon cut through the leaves, casting an eerie, bluish-green light on the path. The tall tree trunks stood like columns of smoke dissolving in the humid air, as if intent on eluding the embrace of vines and parasitic growths hanging across space. Only the trees' crowns were perfectly outlined against the moving clouds.

Arasuwe stopped often, cocking his ear to the slightest sound, his eyes darting back and forth in the darkness. He breathed deeply, dilating his nostrils, as if he could detect something besides the smell of wetness and decay. When he looked at us women, his eyes appeared anxious. I wondered if the memories of raids, ambushes, and God knows what other dangers rushed through his mind. But I did not dwell for too long on the headman's worried expression. I was too concerned in making sure the exposed roots of the giant **ceibas** were not bulging anacondas digesting a tapir or a peccary.

Arasuwe waded into a shallow river. He cupped his hand behind his ear as if trying to catch the faintest sound. **Ritimi** whispered that her father was listening to the echoes of the current, to the murmur of the spirits that knew of the dangers lying ahead. **Arasuwe** placed his hands on the surface of the water, and for a moment held the reflected image of the moon.

As we walked on, the moon faded into a misty, barely discernible image. I wondered if the lonely clouds traversing the sky were trying to keep abreast of us in their journey toward morning. Little by little, the calls of monkeys and birds faded, the night breeze ceased, and I knew dawn was not far away.

We arrived at the **shabono** at that time of still indeterminate grayness when it is no longer night and not yet morning. Many of the **Iticoteri** were still asleep. Those who were up greeted us, surprised to see us back so soon.

Relieved that **Arasuwe**'s fears had been unfounded, I lay down in my hammock.

I was awakened abruptly when **Xotomi** sat beside me. "Eat this quickly," she urged, handing me a baked plantain. "Yesterday I saw the kind of fish you and I like best." Without waiting to hear whether or not I was too tired to go, she handed me my small bow and short arrows. The thought of eating fish instead of grubs quickly dispelled my fatigue.

"I want to come too," little **Sisiwe** said, following us. We headed upriver, where the waters formed wide pools. Not a leaf stirred, not a bird or frog could be heard.

Squatting on a rock, we watched the early rays of the sun filter through the mist-enshrouded canopy of leaves. As if strained through a gauzy veil, the faint rays lit the dark waters of the pool.

"I heard something," little **Sisiwe** whispered, holding on to my arm. "I heard a branch snap."

"I heard it too," **Xotomi** said softly.

I was sure it was not an animal but the unmistakable sound of a human who steps with caution, then stops at the noise he has made.

"There he is," **Sisiwe** shouted, pointing across the river. "It's the enemy," he added, then fled toward the **shabono**.

Grabbing my arm, **Xotomi** pulled me to the side. I turned around. All I saw were the dewy ferns on the opposite bank. At that same instant **Xotomi** let out a piercing scream. An arrow had hit her in the leg. I dragged her into the bushes by the side of the path, insisting we crawl farther into the thicket until we were hidden completely.

"We will wait here until the **Iticoteri** come to rescue us," I said, examining her leg.

Xotomi wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand. "If it's a raid, the men will stay in the **shabono** to defend the women and children."

"They will come," I said with a confidence I was far from feeling. "Little **Sisiwe** went for help." The barbed point had pierced through her calf. I broke the arrow, pulled the head from the ghastly wound that was bleeding from both sides, then wrapped my torn underpants around her leg. Blood soaked through the thin cotton instantly. Worried that the arrow might have been poisoned, I carefully undid the makeshift bandage and examined the wound once again to see if the flesh around it was getting dark. **Iramamowe** had explained to me that a wound caused by a poisoned arrow invariably darkened. "I don't think the arrowhead was smeared with **mamiicori**," I said.

"Yes. I also noticed," she said, smiling faintly. Leaning her head to one side, she motioned me to be still.

"Do you think there is more than one man?" I whispered when I heard the sound of a twig snapping.

Xotomi looked at me, her eyes wide with fear. "There usually are."

"We can't wait here like frogs," I said, taking my bow and arrows. Quietly, I crawled toward the path. "Show your face, you coward, you monkey! You have shot at a woman!" I yelled in a voice that did not sound like my own. For good measure I added the words I knew an **Iticoteri** warrior would say: "I will kill you on the spot when I see you!"

No farther than twelve feet from where I stood a blackened face peeked from behind the leaves. His hair was wet. I had an irrational desire to laugh. I was sure he had not taken a bath, but had slipped crossing the river, for the water was only waist high.

I pointed my arrow at him. For an instant I was at a loss as to what to say next. "Drop your weapons on the path," I finally shouted. Then for good measure I added, "My arrows are poisoned with the best **mamucori** the **Iticoteri** make. Drop your weapons," I repeated. "I'm aiming at your stomach, right where death lies."

Wide-eyed, as if he were apprehending an apparition, the man stepped out on the trail. He was not much taller than I, but was powerfully built. His bow and arrows were clutched tightly in his hands.

"Drop your weapons on the ground," I repeated, stomping my right foot for emphasis.

With careful slowness, the man placed his bow and arrows on the path in front of him.

"Why did you shoot at my friend?" I asked as I saw **Xotomi** crawling out to the path.

"I did not want to shoot at her," he said, his eyes fixed on the torn, bloodied makeshift bandage wrapped around **Xotomi**'s leg. "I wanted to shoot at you."

"At me!" I felt helpless in my anger. I opened and closed my mouth

repeatedly, unable to utter a single word. When I finally regained my speech, I stammered insult upon insult in all the languages I knew, including **Iticoteri**, which had the most descriptive **profanities** of all.

Transfixed, the man stood in front of me, seemingly more surprised by my foul language than at the arrow I still held pointed at him. Neither one of us noticed **Arasuwe** and **Etewa** approach.

"A **Mocototeri** coward," **Arasuwe** said. "I ought to kill you on the spot."

"He wanted to kill me," I said in a cracking voice. I felt all my courage melt away, leaving me shaking. "He shot **Xotomi** in the leg."

"I **didn't** want to kill you," the **Mocototeri** said, eyeing me **supplicantly**. "I only wanted to hit your leg so as to prevent you from running away." He turned to **Arasuwe**. "You can be assured of my good intentions; my arrows are not poisoned." He looked at **Xotomi**. "I hit you accidentally when you dragged the white girl away," he mumbled, as if not fully accepting that he had missed.

"How many more of you are here?" **Arasuwe** asked, squatting beside his daughter. Not for a moment did he take his eyes from the **Mocototeri** as he ran his fingers over the wound. "It's not bad," he said, straightening up.

"There are two more." The **Mocototeri** imitated the call of a bird, and was immediately answered by similar cries. "We wanted to take the white girl with us. Our people want her to stay at our **shabono**."

"How do you think I could have walked if I was injured?" I asked.

"We would have carried you in a hammock," the man said promptly, smiling at me.

Shortly, two other **Mocototeri** emerged from the thicket. Grinning, they stared at me, not in the least embarrassed or afraid for having been caught.

"How long have you been here?" **Arasuwe** asked.

"We have been watching the white girl for several days," one of the men said. "We know she likes to catch frogs with the children." The man smiled broadly as he turned toward me. "There are many frogs around our **shabono**."

"Why have you waited so long?" **Arasuwe** asked.

In the frankest manner the man observed that there had always been too many women and children around me. He had hoped to capture me at dawn when I went to relieve myself, for he had heard that I preferred going far into the forest by myself. "But we **didn't** see her go, not even once."

Grinning, **Arasuwe** and **Etewa** looked at me, as if waiting for me to elaborate on the matter. I stared back at them. Since the rains had started, I had noticed a lot more snakes around the usual places set aside for bodily functions, but I was not going to discuss with them where I went instead.

With the same enthusiasm as if he were telling a story, the **Mocototeri** went on to explain that they had not come to kill any of the **Iticoteri**, or to abduct any of their women. "All we wanted was to take the white girl with us." The man laughed, then uttered, "**Wouldn't** it have surprised you and your people if suddenly the white girl had disappeared without leaving a trace?"

Arasuwe conceded that indeed it would have been quite a feat. "But

we would have known it was the **Mocototeri** who had taken her. You were careless enough to leave footprints in the mud. I saw plenty of evidence as I was scouting around the **shabono** that **Mocototeri** had been here. Last night I had the certainty something was amiss- that's why I returned so promptly from our trip to the old gardens." **Arasuwe** paused for a moment, as if giving the three men time for his words to sink in, then declared, "Had you taken the white girl with you, we would have raided your settlement and taken her back, as well as some of your women."

The man who had shot **Xotomi** in the leg picked up his bow and arrows from the ground. "Today was a good time, I thought. There was only one woman and a child with the white girl." He looked helplessly at me. "But I hit the wrong person. There must be powerful **hekuras** in your settlement protecting the white girl." He shook his head, as if full of doubt, then fixed his gaze on **Arasuwe**. "Why does she use a man's weapon? We saw her one morning at the river with the women, shooting fish like a man. We did not know what to think of her. That is why I failed to hit her. I no longer knew what she was."

Arasuwe commanded the three men to walk toward the **shabono**.

I was overwhelmed with the absurdity of the whole situation. Only the thought that **Xotomi** had been hurt kept me from laughing, yet a convulsive smile kept rising to my lips. I tried to keep a sober expression but I could feel my mouth twitching. I carried **Xotomi** piggyback, but she laughed so hard her leg started to bleed again.

"It will be easier if I lean against you," she said. "My leg **doesn't** hurt too much."

"Are the **Mocototeri** prisoners?" I asked.

She looked at me uncomprehendingly for an instant, then finally said, "No. Only women are taken captive."

"What will happen to them at the **shabonof**?"

"They will be fed."

"But they are enemies," I said. "They shot you in the leg. They ought to be punished."

Xotomi looked at me, then shook her head as if knowing that it was beyond her to make me understand. She asked me if I would have killed the **Mocototeri** if he had not dropped his weapons on the ground.

"I would have shot him," I said loud enough for the men to hear. "I would have killed him with my poisoned arrows."

Arasuwe and **Etewa** glanced back. The stern expression on their faces relaxed into a smile. They knew my arrows were not poisoned. "Yes, she would have shot you," **Arasuwe** told the **Mocototeri**. "The white girl is not like our women. Whites kill very fast."

I wondered if I actually would have shot my arrow at the **Mocototeri**. I certainly would have kicked him in the groin or stomach had he not dropped his bow and arrows. I was aware of the folly of trying to overpower a stronger opponent, but I saw no reason a small person could not startle an unsuspecting assailant with a quick punch or kick. That, I was sure, would have given me enough time to run away. A kick would certainly have shocked the unaware **Mocototeri** even more than my bow and arrows. That thought gave me much comfort.

Arriving at the **shabono**, we were met by the **Iticoteri** men staring at us down the shaft of their drawn arrows. The women and children were

hiding inside the huts. **Ritimi** came running toward me. "I knew you would be fine," she said, helping me carry her half-sister into old **Hayama**'s hut.

Ritimi's grandmother washed **Xotorni**'s leg with warm water, then poured **epena** powder into the wound. "Don't get out of your hammock," she admonished the girl. "I will get some leaves to wrap around your calf."

Exhausted, I went to rest in my hammock. Hoping to fall asleep, I pulled the sides over me. But I was awakened shortly by **Ritimi**'s laughter. Leaning over me, she covered my face with resounding kisses. "I heard how you scared the **Mocototeri**."

"Why did only **Arasuwe** and **Etewa** come to rescue us?" I asked. "There might have been many **Mocototeri** men."

"But my father and husband **didn't** come to rescue you," **Ritimi** informed me candidly. She made herself comfortable in my hammock, then explained that no one in the **shabono** had realized I had gone with **Xotomi** and little **Sisiwe** to catch fish. It was purely accidental that **Arasuwe** and **Etewa** had found **Xotomi** and myself.

Arasuwe, following his premonitions, had gone to scout the **shabono**'s surroundings upon returning from our night-long trek. Although he suspected that something was amiss, he had not actually known there were **Mocototeri** outside.

Her father, **Ritimi** declared, was only performing his headman's duty and checking to see if there was evidence of intruders. It was a task a headman had to perform by himself, for usually no one was willing to accompany him on such a dangerous mission. No one was expected to.

Only lately had I come to realize that although **Arasuwe** had been introduced to me by **Milagros** as the headman of the **Iticoteri**, it was an uncertain title. The powers of a headman were limited. He wore no special insignia to distinguish him from the other men, and all adult males were involved in important decisions. Even if a judgment had been reached, each man was still free to do what he pleased.

Arasuwe's importance stemmed from his kinship following. His brothers, numerous sons, and sons-in-law gave him power and support. As long as his decisions satisfied the people of his **shabono**, there was little dispute as to his authority.

"How come **Etewa** was with him?"

"That was totally unforeseen," **Ritimi** said, laughing. "He was probably returning from a clandestine rendezvous with one of the women of the **shabono** when he stumbled upon his father-in-law."

"You mean no one would have come to rescue us?" I asked incredulously.

"Once the men know that the enemy is around, they will not purposely go outside. It's too easy to be ambushed."

"But we could have been killed!"

"Women are hardly ever killed," **Ritimi** stated with utter conviction. "They would have captured you. But our men would have raided the **Mocototeri** settlement and brought you back," she argued with astounding simplicity, as if it were the most natural course of events.

"But they shot **Xotomi**'s leg." I felt like crying. "They intended to maim me."

"That's only because they **didn't** know how to capture you," **Ritimi**

said, putting her arms around my neck. "They know how to deal with Indian women. We are easy to abduct. The **Mocototeri** must have been at their wits' end with you. You should be happy. You are as brave as a warrior. **Iramamowe** is certain you have special **hekuras** protecting you, so powerful they even deviated the arrow intended for you into **Xotomi**'s leg."

"What will happen to the **Mocototeri**?" I asked, looking into **Arasuwe**'s hut. The three men were sitting in hammocks, eating baked **plantains** as if they were guests. "It is strange how you treat the enemy."

"Strange?" **Ritimi** looked at me, puzzled. "We treat them right. **Didn't** they reveal their plan? **Arasuwe** is glad they **didn't** succeed." **Ritimi** mentioned that the three men would probably stay with the **Iticoteri** for some time- especially if they suspected that there was a good chance their settlement was to be raided by the **Iticoteri**. The two **shabonos** had been raiding back and forth for many years- as far back as her grandfather's and great-grandfather's time, and even before.

Ritimi pulled my head toward her and whispered in my ear, "**Etewa** has been wishing to take revenge on the **Mocototeri** for a long time."

"**Etewa!** But he was so happy to go to their feast," I said, bewildered. "I thought he liked them. I know **Arasuwe** believes they are a treacherous lot- even **Iramamowe**. But **Etewa!** I was sure he was delighted to dance and sing at their party."

"I told you once that one **doesn't** go to a feast only to dance and sing but to find out what other people's plans are," **Ritimi** whispered. She looked at me anxiously. "**Etewa** wants his enemy to think that he has no intention of avenging his father."

"Was his father killed by the **Mocototeri**?"

Ritimi put her hand to my lips. "Let us not talk about it. It's bad luck to mention a person who has been killed in a raid."

"Is there going to be a raid?" I managed to ask before **Ritimi** pushed a piece of baked plantain in my mouth.

She only smiled at me but did not answer. The thought of a raid made me feel extremely uncomfortable. I had a hard time swallowing the plantain. Somehow I had associated raids with the past. The few times I had asked **Milagros** about them, he had been vague with his answers. Only now did I wonder if there had been regret in **Milagros**'s voice when he stated that the missionaries had been quite successful in their attempt to put an end to **intervillage** feuding.

"Is there going to be a raid?" I asked **Etewa** as he entered the hut.

He looked at me, his face set in a scowl. "That's not a question for a woman to ask."

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 20

It was dusk when **Puriwariwe** walked into the **shabono**. I had not seen him since my illness, since the night he had stood in the middle of the clearing, arms outstretched as if pleading with the darkness.

From **Milagros** I had learned that for six consecutive days and nights

the old **shapori** had taken **epena**. The old man had been on the verge of collapsing under the weight of the spirits he had called into his chest. Yet perseveringly he had beseeched the **hekuras** to cure me from the onslaught of a tropical fever.

Ritimi had also emphasized that it had been a particularly hard struggle to cure me in that the **hekuras** resent being called in the rainy season. "It was the **hekura** of the hummingbird that saved you," she had explained. "In spite of its small size, the hummingbird is a powerful spirit. It's used by an accomplished **shapori** as a last resort."

I had not been comforted in the least when **Ritimi** had wrapped her arms around my neck, assuring me that if I had died my soul would not have wandered aimlessly in the forest but would have ascended peacefully to the house of thunder, for my body would have been burned and my pulverized bones would have been eaten by her and her relatives.

I joined **Puriwariwe** in the clearing. "I'm well now," I said, squatting beside him.

He looked at me with veiled, almost dreamy eyes, then ran his hand over my head. It was a small dark hand that moved rapidly, yet felt heavy and slow. A vague tenderness softened his features, but he did not say a word. I wondered if he knew that I had felt the beak of a hummingbird cutting into my chest during my illness. I had told no one.

A group of men, their faces and bodies painted black, gathered around **Puriwariwe**. They blew **epena** into each other's noses, and listened to his chant, pleading with the **hekuras** to come out of their hiding places in the mountains. The men's black figures were more like shadows, barely illuminated by the fires of the huts. Softly, they repeated the shaman's songs. I felt a chill run up my spine as the quickened pace of their unintelligible words became more menacing and forceful.

Upon returning to the hut I asked **Ritimi** what the men were celebrating.

"They are sending **hekuras** to the **Mocototeri** settlement to kill the enemy."

"Will the enemy really die?"

Drawing up her knees, she looked pensively beyond the palm fringe of the hut into the pitch-dark sky, bereft of moon and stars. "They will die," she said softly.

Convinced there was not going to be a real raid, I dozed off and on in my hammock, listening to the chanting outside. More than hearing the men, I visualized the fragments of sound, endlessly rising and falling, as being carried away by the smoke from the hearths.

Hours later I got up and sat outside the hut. Most of the men had retired to their hammocks. Only ten remained in the clearing, **Etewa** among them. With closed eyes, they repeated **Puriwariwe**'s song. His words came to me clearly through the humid air:

Follow me, follow my vision.

Follow me over the treetops.

Look at the birds and butterflies; such colors you will never see on the ground.

I'm rising into heaven, toward the sun.

The **shapori**'s song was interrupted abruptly by one of the men. "I've been struck by the sun- my eyes are burning," he shouted as he stood up. He looked helplessly around in the darkness. His legs gave way under

him and, he collapsed with a thud on the ground. No one took any notice.

Puriwariwe's voice became more insistent, as if he were trying to raise the men collectively toward his vision. He repeated his song again and again to those still squatting around him. Urging the men not to get sidetracked in the dew of their visions, he warned them of **spearlike** bamboo leaves and poisonous snakes lurching from behind trees and roots on the path to the sun.

Above all, he urged the men not to pass into human sleep, but to step from the darkness of the night to the white darkness of the sun. He promised them that their bodies would be soaked with the glow of the **hekuras**, that their eyes would shine with the sun's precious light.

I remained outside the hut until the dawn erased the shadows on the ground. Expecting to find some visible evidence of their journey to the sun, I walked from man to man, peering intently into each face.

Puriwariwe watched me curiously, a mocking grin on his haggard face. "You'll find no outward indication of their flight," he said as if he had read my thoughts. "Their eyes are dull and red from the night's vigil," he added, pointing to the men who were staring indifferently into the distance, totally unconcerned with my presence. "That precious light you expect to see reflected in their pupils, only shines inside them. Only they can see it."

Before I had a chance to ask him about his journey to the sun, he had walked out of the **shabono** into the forest.

In the days that followed, a gloomy oppressive mood enveloped the settlement. At first it was only a vague feeling, but I finally became obsessed with the certainty I was being purposely kept in the dark about some impending event. I became morose, distant, and irritable. I struggled against my sensation of isolation. I tried to hide my ill-focused apprehension, yet I felt as if I were being attacked by unidentifiable forces. Whenever I asked **Ritimi** or any of the other women if there was some approaching change, they would not even acknowledge my question. Instead they would comment on some silly incident, hoping to make me laugh.

"Are we going to be raided?" I finally asked **Arasuwe** one day.

He turned his perplexed face toward me as if he were trying to untangle my words.

I felt confused, nervous, and close to tears. I told him that I was not stupid, that I had noticed how the men were constantly on the alert and how the women were afraid to go by themselves into the gardens or to fish in the river. "Why can't someone tell me what is going on?" I yelled.

"There is nothing going on," **Arasuwe** said calmly. Folding his arms behind his neck, he stretched comfortably in his hammock. He began to talk about something unrelated to my question, chuckling frequently at his own tale.

But I was not to be soothed. I did not laugh with him. I did not even pay attention to his words. He seemed totally bewildered as I stomped back to my hut.

I was miserable for days, feeling alternately resentful and sorry for myself. I did not sleep well. I kept repeating to myself that I, who had so totally embraced this new life, was suddenly treated like a stranger. I felt angry and betrayed.

I could not accept that **Arasuwe** had not taken me into his

confidence. Not even **Ritimi** had been willing to put me at ease. If only **Milagros** were here, I wished fervently. Surely he would dispel my anxiety. He would tell me everything.

One night, when I could not quite lose myself in sleep, but hovered in a half-waking state, I was suddenly hit by an insight. It did not come in words, but translated itself as a whole process of thoughts and memories that flashed like pictures before me, and put everything into a proper perspective.

I felt elated. I began to laugh with relief that turned into sheer joy. I could hear my laughter echo through the huts. Sitting up in my hammock, I noticed that most of the **Iticoteri** were laughing with me.

Arasuwe squatted by my hammock. "Have the spirits of the forest made you mad?" he inquired, holding my head between his hands.

"Quite mad," I said, still laughing. I looked into his eyes; they shone in the darkness. I gazed at **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, and **Etewa** standing next to **Arasuwe**, their curious, sleepy faces aglow with laughter. Words blurted out of me in an unending procession, piling onto one another with astonishing velocity. I was speaking in Spanish, not because I wanted to conceal anything, but because my explanation would not have made sense in their language. **Arasuwe** and the others listened as if they understood, as if they sensed my need to unburden myself of the turmoil within me.

I had realized that I was, after all, an outsider, and my demand to be informed of events not even the **Iticoteri** talked about among themselves was due to my feelings of self-importance. What had turned me into an intolerable individual was the thought of being left out- excluded from something I believed I had a right to know.

I had not questioned why I believed I had the right to know. It had made me miserable, blinding me to all the joyful moments I had so much cherished before. The gloom and oppressiveness I had felt was not outside, but within me; communicating itself to the **shabono** and its people.

I felt **Arasuwe**'s calloused hand on my shaven tonsure. I did not feel ashamed of my feelings, but was glad to realize that it was up to me to restore the sense of magic and wonder at being in a different world.

"Blow **epena** in my nose," **Arasuwe** said to **Etewa**. "I want to make sure the evil spirits stay away from the white girl."

I heard murmuring, a rustling of voices, a soft laughter, then **Arasuwe**'s monotonous chant. I fell into a peaceful sleep, the best I had had for days.

Little **Texoma**, who had not come into my hammock for days, awoke me at dawn. "I heard you laugh last night," she said, snuggling against me. "You had not laughed for so many days, I was afraid you would not laugh ever again."

I gazed into her bright eyes as it I might find in them the answer that would enable me in the future to laugh away all the anxiety and turmoils of my spirit.

An unusual stillness enshrouded the **shabono** as the shades of night closed in around us. The lulling touch of **Tutemi**'s fingers as she searched my head for lice almost put me to sleep. The women's noisy chatter subsided to whispers as they went about preparing the evening meals and nursing their babies.

As if obeying an unspoken command, the children forsook their vociferous evening games, and gathered in **Arasuwe**'s hut to listen to old **Kamosiwe**'s tales. He seemed to be totally engrossed in his own words, gesturing dramatically with his hands as he talked. Yet his own eye was fixed intently on the long tubes of sweet potatoes sticking out from the embers. I watched in awe as the old man picked the roots out of the fire with his bare hand. Not waiting for the potatoes to cool, he crammed them into his mouth.

From where I sat I could see the waning moon appear over the treetops, obscured by the traveling clouds that shone white against the dark sky. The night stillness was pierced by an eerie sound- something between a scream and a growl. The next instant **Etewa**, his face and body painted black, materialized out of the shadows. He stood in front of the fires that had been lit in the clearing and clacked his bow and arrows high above his head. I did not see from which hut the others appeared, but eleven more men, their faces and bodies equally blackened, joined **Etewa** in the clearing.

Arasuwe pushed and pulled each of them until they all stood in a perfectly straight line, then, after positioning the last man in place, he joined them. The headman began to sing in a deep, nasal tone. The others repeated the last line of his song in a chorus. I could distinguish each separate voice in the murmured harmony, though I understood none of the words.

The longer they sang, the angrier the men seemed to become. At the end of each song, they let out the most ferocious screams I had ever heard. Oddly, I had the feeling that the louder they yelled, the more remote was their rage, as if it was no longer part of their black-painted bodies.

Abruptly they became silent. The faint light of the fires accentuated the wrathful expression on their rigid, mask-like faces; and the feverish glow in their eyes. I could not see if **Arasuwe** gave the command, but in unison they shouted, "How I will enjoy watching my arrow hit the enemy. How I will enjoy seeing his blood splash all over the ground."

Holding their weapons above their heads, the warriors broke the line, and gathered into a tight circle. They began to shout, first softly, then in such piercing voices that I felt a chill run down my spine.

They were silent once more, and **Ritimi** whispered in my ear that the men were listening to the echo of their screams so they could determine from which direction it came. The echoes, she explained, carried the spirits of the enemy.

Groaning, clacking their weapons, the men began to prance about the clearing. **Arasuwe** calmed them down. Two more times they gathered into a tight circle and shouted with all their might. Instead of walking into the forest, as I had expected and feared, the men moved toward the huts standing close to the entrance of the **shabono**. They lay down in the hammocks, and forced themselves to vomit.

"While they chanted, they devoured their enemies," she said. "Now they have to get rid of the rotten flesh."

I sighed with relief, yet I felt oddly disappointed that the raid had been acted out symbolically.

Shortly before dawn, I was awakened by the wailing of women. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was not dreaming. As if no time had

elapsed, the men stood outside in exactly the same straight formation they had assumed earlier in the night. Their cries had lost their fierceness, as if the wails of the women had dampened their wrath. They flung the plantain bundles, which had been stacked at the **shabono**'s entrance, over their shoulders, then marched dramatically down the path leading to the river.

Old **Kamosiwe** and I followed the men at a distance. I thought it was raining, but it was only dew dripping from leaf to leaf. For a moment the men stood still, their shadows perfectly outlined against the light sand of the riverbank. The half-moon had traveled across the sky, shimmering faintly through the misty air.

As if the sand had sucked in their shadows, the men vanished before my eyes. All I heard was the sound of rustling leaves, of snapping branches receding into the forest. The mist closed in on us like an impenetrable wall, as though nothing had happened, as if all I had seen was only a dream.

Old **Kamosiwe**, sitting beside me on a rock, touched my arm lightly. "I no longer hear the echoes of their steps," he said, then slowly walked into the water. I followed him. I shivered with coldness. I felt the little fish that hide beneath the submerged roots brush against my legs, but I could not see them in the dark waters.

Old **Kamosiwe** giggled as I rubbed him dry with leaves. "Look at the **sikomasik**," he said rapturously, pointing to the white mushrooms growing on a rotten tree trunk.

I picked them up for him, wrapping them in leaves. When roasted over the fire, they were considered a delicacy, particularly by the old people.

Kamosiwe held the end of his broken bow toward me;

I pulled him up the slippery path leading to the **shabono**. The mist did not rise the whole day, as if the sun were afraid to witness the men's journey through the forest.

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Chapter 21

Little **Texoma** sat next to me on the log in the bamboo grass. "**Aren't** you going to catch any frogs?" I asked her.

She looked at me woefully. Her eyes, usually so bright, were dull. Slowly they filled with tears.

"What makes you sad?" I asked, cradling her in my arms. Children were never left to cry for fear that their soul might escape through their mouths. Lifting her on my back, I headed toward the **shabono**. "You are as heavy as a basket full of ripe **plantains**," I said in an effort to make her laugh.

But the little girl did not even smile. Her face remained pressed against my neck; her tears rolled unchecked down my breasts. Carefully, I laid her down in her hammock. She clung to me tenaciously, forcing me to lie beside her. Soon she was asleep. It was not a peaceful sleep. From time to time her little body trembled as if she were in the throes of some

dreadful nightmare.

With **Tutemi**'s baby strapped to her back, **Ritimi** entered the hut. She began to cry as she looked at the sleeping child next to me. "I'm sure one of the evil **Mocototeri shapori** has lured her soul away." **Ritimi** wept with such heartbreaking sobs, I left **Texoma**'s hammock and sat next to her.

I did not know quite what to say. I was sure **Ritimi** was not only crying for her little daughter, but also for **Etewa**, who had been gone with the raiding party for almost a week. Since her husband's departure, she had not been her usual self. She had not worked in the gardens; neither had she accompanied any of the women to gather berries or wood in the forest.

Listless and dejected, she moped around the **shabono**. Most of the time she lay in her hammock, playing with **Tutemi**'s baby. No matter what I did or said to cheer her up, I was unable to erase the forlorn expression on her face. The rueful little smile with which **Ritimi** responded to my efforts only made her look all the more despondent.

I put my arms around her neck and planted loud kisses on her cheek, reassuring her all the time that **Texoma** had nothing but a cold. **Ritimi** was not to be consoled. Weeping did not bring her any release or tire her out, but only intensified her distress.

"Maybe something has happened to **Etewa**," **Ritimi** said. "Maybe a **Mocototeri** has killed him."

"Nothing has happened to **Etewa**," I stated. "I can feel it in my legs."

Ritimi smiled slightly, as if doubting my words. "But why is my little daughter sick?" she insisted.

"**Texoma** is sick because she got chilled playing in the swamps with the frogs," I stated matter-of-factly. "Children get sick very fast, and recuperate just as speedily."

"Are you sure that's the way it is?"

"Absolutely sure," I said.

Ritimi looked at me doubtfully, then said, "But none of the other children are sick. I know **Texoma** has been bewitched."

Not knowing how to answer, I suggested that it would be best to call **Ritimi**'s uncle. Moments later I returned with **Iramamowe**. During his brother **Arasuwe**'s absence, **Iramamowe** assumed the duties of a headman. His bravery made him the most qualified man to defend the **shabono** from potential raiders. His reputation as a shaman insured the settlement of protection against evil **hekurus** sent by enemy sorcerers.

Iramamowe looked at the child, then asked me to fetch his **epena** cane and the container with the hallucinogenic powder. He had a young man blow the snuff into his nose, then chanted to the **hekurus**, pacing up and down in front of the hut. From time to time he jumped high in the air, yelling at the evil spirits- which he believed had lodged in the child's body- to leave **Texoma** alone.

Gently **Iramamowe** massaged the child, starting with her head, down her chest, her stomach, all the way to her feet. He flicked his hands repeatedly, shaking off the evil **hekurus** he had drawn out of **Texoma**. Several other men took **epena** and chanted with **Iramamowe** throughout the night. He alternately massaged and sucked the disease from her little body.

However, the child was not any better the following day. Motionless,

she lay in her hammock. Her eyes were red and swollen. She refused all food, including the water and honey I offered her.

Iramamowe diagnosed that her soul had wandered from her body and proceeded to build a platform with poles and lianas in the middle of the clearing. He fastened assai palm leaves in his hair: He drew circles around his eyes and mouth with a mixture of **onoto** and coals. Prancing around the platform, he imitated the cries of the harpy eagle. With a branch from one of the bushes growing around the **shabono** he swept the ground thoroughly in an effort to locate the wandering soul of the child.

Unable to find the soul, he gathered several of **Texoma**'s playmates around him. He decorated their hair and faces the same as his, then lifted them onto the platform. "Examine the ground from above," he told the children. "Find your sister's soul."

Imitating the cries of the harpy eagle, the children jumped up and down on the precariously built structure. They swept the air with the branches the women had handed them; but they too were unable to catch the lost soul.

Taking the branch **Ritimi** gave me, I joined the others in the quest. We swept the paths leading to the river, to the gardens, and to the swamps, where **Texoma** had been catching frogs. **Iramamowe** exchanged his branch for mine. "You carried her to the **shabono**," he said. "Maybe you can find her soul."

Without any thoughts as to the futility of the task, I swept the ground with the same eagerness as the others. "How does one know the soul is nearby?" I asked **Iramamowe** as we retraced our steps back to the **shabono**.

"One just knows," he said.

We searched in every hut, sweeping under hammocks, around each hearth, and behind stacks of **plantains**. We lifted baskets from the ground. We moved bows and arrows leaning against the sloping roof. We scared spiders and scorpions out of their nests in the thatched roof. I gave up the hunt when I saw a snake slithering from behind one of the rafters.

Laughing, old **Hayama** cut the reptile's head off with one swift blow of **Iramamowe**'s machete. She wrapped the still wriggling, headless snake in **pishaansi** leaves, then placed it on the fire. **Hayama** also collected the spiders falling on the ground. These too were wrapped in leaves and roasted. Old people were particularly fond of the soft bellies. The legs **Hayama** saved, to be ground later. The powder was believed to heal cuts, bites, and scratches.

By dusk little **Texoma** showed no signs of improvement. Motionless, she lay in her hammock, her eyes staring vacantly at the thatched roof. I was filled with an indescribable sense of helplessness as **Iramamowe** once again bent over the child to massage and suck out the evil spirits.

"Let me try to cure the child," I said.

Iramamowe smiled almost imperceptibly, focusing his gaze alternately on me and **Texoma**. "What makes you think you can cure my grand-niece?" he asked with deliberate thoughtfulness. There was no mockery in his tone- only a vague curiosity. "We have not found her soul. A powerful enemy **shapori** has lured it away. Do you think you can counteract an evil sorcerer's curse?"

"No," I hastily assured him. "Only you can do that."

"What will you do then?" he asked. "You said once that you never cured anyone. What makes you think you can now?"

"I will help **Texoma** with hot water," I said. "And you will cure her with your chants to the **hekurus**."

Iramamowe deliberated for a moment: Gradually his thoughtful expression relaxed. He held his hand over his mouth as if he were hiding an urge to giggle. "Did you learn much from the **shapori** you knew?"

"I remember some of the ways they cured," I answered, but did not mention that the cure I intended for **Texoma** was my grandmother's way of dealing with a fever that had not broken. "You said you have seen **hekurus** in my eyes. If you chant to them, maybe they will help me."

An easy smile came and lingered around **Iramamowe**'s lips. He seemed almost convinced by my reasoning. Yet he shook his head as if full of doubt. "Curing is not done this way. How can I ask the **hekurus** to help you? Will you also want to take **epena**?"

"I won't need to take the snuff," I assured him, then remarked that if a powerful **shapori** could command his **hekurus** to steal the soul of a child, then an accomplished sorcerer like himself could certainly command his spirits, which according to him were already acquainted with me, to come to my aid.

"I will call the **hekurus** to assist you," **Iramamowe** declared. "I will take **epena** for you."

While one of the men blew the hallucinogenic substance into **Iramamowe**'s nostrils, **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, and **Arasuwe**'s wives brought me **calabashes** filled with hot water that old **Hayama** had heated in the large aluminum pots. I soaked my cut-up blanket in the hot water and, using the legs of my jeans as gloves, I wrung each thin strip of cloth until not a drop of moisture was to be squeezed out. Carefully, I wrapped them around **Texoma**'s body, then covered her with the heated palm fronds some of the older boys had cut for me.

I could hardly move among the crowd gathered in the hut. Silently they watched my every motion, intent and alert, so as not to miss anything. **Iramamowe** squatted beside me, chanting tirelessly into the night. As the hours passed, the people retired to their hammocks. I was not put off by their show of disapproval, but kept changing the compresses as soon as they cooled off. **Ritimi** sat silently in her hammock, her interlaced fingers resting limply on her lap in an attitude of supreme hopelessness. Whenever she glanced at me she broke into tears.

Texoma seemed oblivious to my ministrations. What if she had something other than a cold? I thought. What if she got worse? My assurance faltered. I mumbled a prayer for her with a fervor I had not had since I was a child. Looking up, I noticed **Iramamowe** gazing at me. He seemed anxious, as if aware of the mixture of feelings- magic, religion, and fear- fighting inside me. Determinedly, he went on chanting.

Old **Kamosiwe** came and joined us. He squatted close to the hearth. The cold of dawn had not yet crept into the hut, but the mere fact that there was a fire made him huddle over it instinctively. Softly, he began to chant. His murmured song filled me with comfort: It seemed to carry the voices of past generations. The rain prattled on the thatched roof with a determined vigor, then relaxed into a light drizzle that plunged me into a

kind of stupor.

It was almost dawn when **Texoma** began tossing in her hammock. Impatiently she tore at the wet pieces of blanket, at the palm fronds wrapped around her. With eyes opened wide in surprise, she sat up, then smiled at old **Kamosiwe**, **Iramamowe**, and myself crouching beside her hammock. "I'm thirsty," she said, then gulped down the water and honey I gave her.

"Will she be well?" **Ritimi** asked hesitantly.

"**Iramamowe** lured her soul back," I said. "The hot water has broken her fever. Now she needs to be kept warm and sleep peacefully."

I walked into the clearing, and stretched my cramped legs. Old **Kamosiwe**, leaning against a pole, looked like a child with his forearms tightly wrapped around his chest to keep warm. **Iramamowe** stopped beside me on the way to his hut. We did not talk, but I was certain we shared a moment of absolute understanding.

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Chapter 22

At the sound of approaching steps, **Tutemi** motioned me to lower myself beside the moldy leaves of the squash vines. "It's the raiding party," she whispered. "Women are not supposed to see from which direction the warriors return."

Unable to curb my curiosity, I slowly stood up. There were three women with the men: one of them was pregnant.

"Don't look," **Tutemi** pleaded, pulling me down. "If you see the path on which the raiders return, the enemy will capture you."

"How beautiful the men look with the bright feathers streaming from their **armbands**, and the **onoto** designs on their bodies," I said. "But **Etewa** is missing! Do you think he has been killed?" I asked in dismay.

Tutemi looked at me, a dazed expression on her face. There was no nervousness in her movements as she separated the large squash leaves to peek at the retreating figures. Her anxious face beamed with a smile as she grabbed my arm. "Look, there is **Etewa**." She pulled my head close to hers so I could see where she was pointing. "He is **unucai**."

Trailing a distance behind the others, **Etewa** walked slowly, with his shoulders hunched forward as if he were burdened by a heavy weight on his back. He was not adorned with feathers or paint. Only short little sticks of arrow cane were stuck through his pierced **earlobes** and one arrow cane stick was tied to each wrist like a bracelet.

"Is he ill?"

"No! He is **unucai**," she said admiringly. "He has killed a **Mocototeri**."

Unable to share **Tutemi**'s excitement, I could only stare at her in dumb incredulity. I felt my eyes fill with tears, and turned my gaze away from her. We waited until **Etewa** was out of sight, then slowly headed toward the **shabono**.

Tutemi quickened her pace upon hearing the welcoming shouts from the men and women in the huts. Surrounded by the exultant **Iticoteri**, the raiders stood proudly in the clearing. Turning away from her

husband, **Arasuwe**'s youngest wife approached the three captive women, who had not been included in the jubilant greetings. Silently they stood apart, their apprehensive gazes fixed on the approaching **Iticoteri** woman.

"Painted with **onoto**- how disgusting," **Arasuwe**'s wife yelled. "What else can one expect from a **Mocototeri** woman? Do you think you have been invited to a feast?" Glaring at the three women, she picked up a stick. "I will beat you all. If I had been captured, I would have run away," she shouted.

The three **Mocototeri** huddled closer to each other.

"At least I would have arrived crying pitifully," **Arasuwe**'s wife hissed, pulling the hair of one of the women.

Arasuwe stepped in between his wife and the **Mocototeri**. "Leave them alone. They have cried so much they have soaked the path with their tears. We made them stop. We **didn't** want to listen to their wails." **Arasuwe** took the stick away from his wife. "We demanded they paint their faces and bodies with **onoto**. These women will be happy here. They will be treated well!" He turned to the rest of the **Iticoteri** women who had gathered around his wife. "Give them something to eat. They are hungry like us. We haven't eaten for two days."

Arasuwe's wife was not intimidated. "Were your men killed?" she asked the three women. "Did you burn them? Have you eaten their ashes?" She faced the pregnant woman. "Was your husband also killed? Do you expect an **Iticoteri** man to become a father to your child?"

Pushing his wife roughly away, **Arasuwe** announced, "Only one man was killed. He was shot by **Etewa**'s arrow. He was the man who killed **Etewa**'s father the last time the **Mocototeri** raided us so treacherously." **Arasuwe** turned to the pregnant woman. There was no sympathy in his eyes or in his voice as he continued, "You were captured by the **Mocototeri** some time ago. You have no brothers among them who will rescue you. You are now an **Iticoteri**. Do not cry any longer." **Arasuwe** went on to explain to the three captives that they would be better off with his people. The **Iticoteri**, he stressed, had enjoyed meat almost every day as well as plenty of roots and **plantains** throughout the rainy season. No one had gone hungry.

One of the captives was only a young girl, perhaps ten or eleven years old. "What will happen to her?" I asked **Tutemi**.

"Like the others, she will be taken as a wife," **Tutemi** said. "I was probably her age when I was abducted by the **Iticoteri**." A wistful little smile curved her lips. "I was lucky **Ritimi**'s mother-in-law chose me as a second wife for **Etewa**. He has never beaten me. **Ritimi** treats me like a sister. She does not quarrel with me, nor does she make me work too..." **Tutemi** broke in **mid-sentence** as **Arasuwe**'s youngest wife resumed her shouting at the **Mocototeri** women.

"How disgusting to come all painted. All you need is to stick flowers in your ears and start to dance." She followed the three women into her husband's hut. "Did the men rape you in the forest? Is that why you stayed away so long? You must have enjoyed it." Pushing the pregnant woman, she added, "Did they also sleep with you?"

"Shut up!" **Arasuwe** yelled, "or I'll beat you till I draw blood." **Arasuwe** turned to the women who had followed behind. "You should rejoice that your men have returned unharmed. You should be content

that **Etewa** has killed a man, that we have brought three captives. Go to your huts and prepare food for your men."

Grumbling, the women dispersed to their respective hearths.

"Why is only **Arasuwe**'s wife so upset?" I asked **Tutemi**.

"Don't you know?" she asked, smiling maliciously. "She is afraid he will take one of the women as his fourth wife."

"Why does he want so many?"

"He is powerful," **Tutemi** stated categorically. "He has many sons-in-law who bring plenty of game and help him work in the gardens. **Arasuwe** can feed many women."

"Were the captives raped?" I asked.

"One was." **Tutemi** was momentarily puzzled by my shocked expression, then went on to explain that a captured woman was usually raped by all the men in the raiding party. "It's the custom."

"Did they also rape the young girl?"

"No," **Tutemi** said casually. "She is not yet a woman. Neither did they rape the pregnant one- they are never touched."

Ritimi had remained in her hammock throughout the whole commotion. She told me she had no reason to get worked up about the **Mocototeri** women, for she knew **Etewa** would not take a third wife. I was happy to notice that her sadness and dejection, which had been so much a part of her during the last few days, had vanished.

"Where is **Etewa**?" I asked. "Is he not coming to the **shabono**?"

Ritimi's eyes appeared almost feverish with excitement as she explained that her husband, since he had killed an enemy, was searching for a tree not too far from the settlement on which he could hang his old hammock and quiver. However, before he could do so, he had to strip the tree's trunk and branches of its bark.

Ritimi's eyes expressed a deep concern as she faced me. She warned me against gazing at such a tree. She was certain I would not confuse it with the kind that is stripped of its bark to make troughs and canoes. Those trees, she explained, still looked like trees. Whereas the ones stripped by a man who has killed looked like a ghostly shadow, all white among the greenness around them, with hammock and quiver, bow, and arrows dangling from the peeled branches. Spirits- evil ones in particular- liked hiding in the vicinity of such places. I had to promise **Ritimi** that if I ever found myself in the neighborhood of such a tree, I would run from the spot as fast as possible.

In a voice so low I thought she was talking to herself, **Ritimi** confided her fears to me. She hoped **Etewa** would not collapse under the weight of the man he had killed. The **hekuras** of a slain man lodge themselves in the killer's chest, where they remain until the dead man's relatives have burned the body and eaten the pulverized bones. The **Mocototeri** would postpone for as long as possible the burning of the body in the hope that **Etewa** would die from weakness.

"Will the men talk about the raid?" I asked.

"As soon as they have eaten," **Ritimi** said.

With his bow and arrows in hand, **Etewa** walked across the clearing toward the hut where **Iramamowe**'s son had been initiated as a shaman. The men who had been with **Etewa** on the raid covered the sides of the hut with palm fronds. Only a small entrance was left open at the front. They brought him a water-filled calabash and built a fire inside.

Etewa was to remain in the hut until **Puriwariwe** would announce that the dead **Mocototeri** had been burned. Day and night **Etewa** had to be on the alert in case the dead man's spirit came prowling about the hut in the form of a jaguar. Were **Etewa** to talk, touch a woman, or eat during those days, he would die.

Old **Hayama**, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, came into our hut. "I want to find out what's going on at **Arasuwe**'s place," the old woman said, sitting beside me. **Xotomi** sat on the ground, reclining her head against my legs, dangling from my hammock. A purple scar- a reminder of the arrow wound- marred the smooth line of her calf. That did not worry **Xotomi**: She was grateful the wound had not become infected.

"**Matuwe** caught one of the women," **Hayama** said proudly. "It's a good time for him to get another wife. I'd better select the right one for him. I'm sure he will make a mistake if it's left up to him to make the choice."

"But he has a wife," I stammered, looking at **Xotomi**.

"Yes," the old woman agreed. "But if he is to have a second wife, this is the best time. **Xotomi** is young. It will be easy for her to be friends with another woman now. **Matuwe** should take the youngest of the three captives." **Hayama** brushed her hand over **Xotomi**'s shaven tonsure. "The girl is younger than you. She will obey you. If you menstruate, she can cook for us. She can help you in the gardens and with the gathering of wood. I'm getting too old to work much."

Xotomi examined the three **Mocototeri** women in **Arasuwe**'s hut. "If **Matuwe** is to take another wife, I wish him to take the young girl. I will like her. She can warm his hammock when I'm pregnant."

"Are you?" I asked.

"I'm not certain," she said, smiling smugly.

Hayama had told me some time ago that a pregnant woman usually waited three to four months, sometimes even longer, before telling her husband of her state. The man was a tacit accomplice in this deception, for he also dreaded the restrictive food and behavior taboos. Whenever a woman suffered a miscarriage or gave birth to a deformed child, she was never at fault. It was the husband who was always blamed. In fact, if a woman repeatedly bore a sickly infant, she was encouraged to conceive by another man. Her own husband, however, had to obey the taboos and raise the baby as his own.

Hayama went over to **Arasuwe**'s hut. "I will take this **Mocototeri** girl with me. She will make a fine wife for my son," she said, taking the girl by the hand. "She will live with me in my hut."

"I captured a woman," **Matuwe** said. "I don't want this child. She is too thin. I want a strong woman who will bear healthy sons."

"She will grow strong," **Hayama** said calmly. "She is still green, but soon she will be ripe. Look at her breasts. They are already large. Besides," she added, "**Xotomi** will not mind if you take her." **Hayama** faced the men gathered inside and outside **Arasuwe**'s hut. "No one is to touch her. I will take care of her until she becomes my Son's wife. From today on she is my daughter-in-law."

No objections were raised by the men as **Hayama** took the girl into our hut. Shyly, the **Mocototeri** sat on the ground, close to the hearth. "I will not beat you," **Xotomi** said, taking the girl's hand in hers. "But you

must do what I tell you."

Matuwe grinned sheepishly at us across the hut. I wondered if he was proud to have two wives, or actually embarrassed to be forced into taking a child when he had captured a woman.

"What will happen to the other captives?" I asked.

"**Arasuwe** will take the pregnant one," **Hayama** declared.

"How do you know?" Without waiting for her answer, I asked about the third one.

"She will be given to someone as a wife after she has been taken by any of the men in the **shabono** who wish to do so," **Hayama** said.

"But she has already been raped by the raiders," I said indignantly.

Old **Hayama** burst into laughter. "But not by the men who **didn't** participate in the raid." The old woman patted my head. "Don't look so stricken. It is the custom. I was captured once. I was raped by many men. I was lucky and found a chance to escape. No, don't interrupt me, white girl," **Hayama** said, putting her hand over my mouth. "I **didn't** run away because I had been raped. I forgot that very fast. I escaped because I had to work too hard and was not given enough food."

As the old woman had predicted, **Arasuwe** took the pregnant woman for himself.

"You have three wives already," the youngest one shouted, her face contorted in anger. "Why do you want another one?"

Giggling nervously, **Arasuwe**'s two other wives watched from their hammocks as the youngest pushed the pregnant woman on the burning coals of the hearth. **Arasuwe** jumped out of his hammock, took a burning log from the fire, and handed it to the fallen **Mocototeri** woman. "Burn my wife's arm," he urged the **Mocototeri** woman as he held his youngest wife pinned against one of the poles in the hut. Sobbing, the pregnant woman covered her burned shoulder with her hand.

"Burn me!" **Arasuwe**'s wife dared her, twisting away from her husband's grip. "If you do, I will burn you alive- but no one will eat your bones. I shall scatter them in the forest, so we can piss on them..." She stopped, her eyes widened in genuine astonishment as she discovered the extent of the woman's injured shoulder. "You are really burnt! Does it hurt much?"

Looking up, the **Mocototeri** wiped the tears from her face. "I'm in great pain."

"Oh, you poor woman." Solicitously, **Arasuwe**'s wife helped her to stand up, guiding her over to her own hammock. She took leaves from a calabash and gently placed them on the woman's shoulder. "It will heal very fast. I will make sure of it."

"Don't weep any longer," **Arasuwe**'s oldest wife said, sitting next to the **Mocototeri** woman. She patted her leg affectionately. "Our husband is a good man. He will treat you well. I will make sure no one in the **shabono** mistreats you."

"What will happen when the baby is born?" I asked **Hayama**.

"That's hard to say," the old woman conceded. She remained quiet for a moment as if deep in thought. "She may kill it. Yet it is a boy **Arasuwe** might ask his oldest wife to raise him as if it were his own."

Hours later, **Arasuwe** began his tale about the events of the raid. He talked in a slow, nasal tone. "We traveled slowly the first day and stopped to rest often. Our backs ached from the heavy loads of **plantains**. That

first night we hardly slept, for we didn't have enough firewood to keep warm. The rain fell with such force the night sky seemed to melt with the darkness around us. The following day we walked somewhat faster, arriving in the vicinity of the Mocototeri settlement. We were still far enough away that the enemy hunters would not discover our presence that night, yet close enough that we didn't dare light a fire in our camp."

I could only see Arasuwe's face in profile. Fascinated, I watched the red and black designs on his cheeks moving animatedly with the rhythm of his speech, as if they had a life of their own. The feathers in his earlobes added a softness to his stern, tired face, a playfulness that belied the horror of his tale.

"For a few days we carefully watched the comings and goings of our enemy. Our aim was to kill a Mocototeri without alarming their shabono of our presence. One morning we saw the man who had killed Etewa's father walk into the thicket after a woman. Etewa shot him in the stomach with one of his poisoned arrows. The man was so dazed he did not even shout. By the time he recovered from his surprise, Etewa had shot a second arrow in his stomach and another in his neck, right behind his ear. He fell on the ground, dead.

"Walking like a stunned man, Etewa headed home, accompanied by my nephew. Meanwhile Matuwe had found the woman hiding in the thicket. He threatened to kill her if she so much as opened her mouth to cough. Matuwe, together with my youngest son-in-law, headed toward our settlement with the reluctant woman. We were all to meet later at a predetermined location.

As the rest of us were deciding whether to split into even smaller groups, we saw a mother with her little son, a pregnant woman, and a young girl, all heading into the forest. We could not resist the temptation. Quietly, we followed them." Leaning back in his hammock, hands locked behind his head, Arasuwe regarded his spellbound audience.

Taking advantage of the headman's pause, one of the men who had been on the raid stood up. Motioning the people to make space for him to move, he opened his narration with exactly the same words Arasuwe used. "We traveled slowly the first day."

But that was all his and the headman's narratives had in common. Gesticulating a great deal, the man mimicked with exaggerated flare the moods and expressions of different members of the raiding party, thus adding a touch of humor and melodrama to Arasuwe's dry, matter-of-fact rendition.

Encouraged by his audience's laughter and cheers, the man told at great length about the two youngest members of the raiding party. They were no older than sixteen or seventeen. Not only had they complained of sore feet, the cold, and their aches and pains, but they had been afraid of prowling jaguars and spirits on the second night when they had all slept without lighting a fire. The man interspersed his account with detailed information on the variety of game and ripening wild fruit- color, size, and shape- he had spotted on the way.

Arasuwe resumed his own report as soon as the man paused. "When the three women and the girl were far enough from the shabono," the headman continued, "we threatened to shoot them if they tried to run away or scream. The small boy managed to sneak into the bushes. We did not pursue him, but retreated as fast as possible, making sure not to leave

footprints behind. We were sure that as soon as the Mocototeri discovered the dead man they would follow us.

"Just before dusk, the mother of the boy who had sneaked away cried out in pain. Sitting on the ground, she pressed her foot between her hands. She wept bitterly, complaining that a poisonous snake had bitten her. Her heartbreaking wails saddened us so much we did not even make sure there had been a snake. 'What good has it been,' she sobbed, 'for my little son to run away if he no longer has a mother to take care of him?' Screaming that she could not bear the pain any longer, the woman hobbled into the bushes. It took us a moment to realize we had been tricked. We searched the forest thoroughly, but we couldn't discover in which direction she had fled."

Old Kamosiwe laughed heartily. "It's good that she tricked you. It never pays to abduct a woman who has left behind a small child. They cry until they become ill and, worse: They almost always escape."

The men talked until the rainy dawn enshrouded the shabono. In the middle of the clearing stood the solitary hut where Etewa was enclosed. It was so quiet and apart- so close, yet so far removed from the voices and laughter.

A week later, Puriwariwe visited Etewa. As soon as he had eaten a baked plantain and honey, the old man asked Iramamowe to blow epena into his head. Chanting, Puriwariwe danced around Etewa's hut. "The dead man has not yet been burned," he announced. "His body has been placed in a trough. It is rotting high up in a tree. Do not break your silence yet. The hekuras of the dead man are still in your chest. Prepare your new arrows and bow. Soon the Mocototeri will burn the rotting flesh for the worms are already crawling out of the carcass." The old shapori circled Etewa's hut once more, then danced across the clearing into the forest.

Three days later, Puriwariwe announced that the Mocototeri had burned the dead man. "Take out the sticks from your earlobes, untie the ones from your wrists," he said, helping Etewa stand up. "In a few days take your old bow and arrows to the same peeled tree on which you hung your hammock and quiver."

Puriwariwe led Etewa into the forest. Arasuwe, together with some of the men who had been on the raid, followed behind.

They returned in the late afternoon. Etewa's hair had been cut, his tonsure shaven. His body had been washed and painted afresh with onoto. Cane rods, decorated with red macaw feathers, had been inserted in his earlobes. He also wore the new fur armbands, adorned with feathers, and the thick cotton waist belt Ritimi had made for him. Arasuwe offered Etewa a basket full of tiny fish he had cooked for him in pishaansi leaves.

Three days later, Etewa ventured for the first time by himself into the forest. "I've shot a monkey," he announced hours later, standing in the clearing. As soon as a group of men had gathered around him, he gave them precise information as to where the animal could be found.

To insure the aid and protection of the hekuras during future hunts, Etewa went two more times by himself into the forest. On each occasion he returned without the kill, then informed others where they could locate it. Etewa did not eat of the monkey and the two peccaries he had shot.

One afternoon he returned with a curassow hung from his back. He scalped the bird, saving the strip of skin where the curly black feathers were attached. It would serve as an armband. The wing feathers he saved for feathering his arrows. He cooked the almost two-foot-long bird on a wooden platform he had built over the fire. Tasting to see if the curassow was done thoroughly, he then proceeded to divide it between his children and two wives.

"Is the white girl your child or your wife?" old **Hayama** shouted from her hut as **Etewa** handed me a piece of the dark breast meat.

"She is my mother," **Etewa** said, joining the laughing **Iticoteri**.

Days later, **Arasuwe** supervised the cooking of plantain **pap**. **Etewa** emptied a small gourd into the soup. **Ritimi** told me they were the last of the powdered bones of **Etewa's** father. Tears rolled down the men's and women's cheeks as they swallowed the thick soup. I took the calabash ladle **Etewa** offered me and cried for his dead father.

As soon as the trough was empty, **Arasuwe** shouted at the top of his voice, "What a waiter! man we have amongst us. He has killed his enemy. He has carried the dead man's **hekuras** in his chest without succumbing to hunger or loneliness during his **confinment**."

Etewa walked around the clearing. "Yes, I am **waiteri**," he sang. "The **hekuras** of a dead man can kill the strongest warrior. It is a heavy burden to carry them for so many days. A person can die of sorrow." **Etewa** began to dance. "I no longer think about the man I killed. I dance with the shadows of the night, not with the shadows of death." The longer he danced, the lighter and faster his steps became, as though through the movements he was finally able to shake off the burden he had borne in his chest.

Many an evening the events of the raid were retold by the men. Even old **Kamosiwe** had a version. All the stories had in common with the original one was that **Etewa** had killed a man, that three women had been captured. In time only a vague memory of the actual facts remained, and it became a tale of the distant past like all the other stories the **Iticoteri** were so fond of telling.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono](#): Chapter 23

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[Shabono](#): A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

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Chapter 23

As if only a moment had passed, the memories of the bygone days, weeks, and months drifted through my mind in vivid detail.

The pressure of tiny feet kneading on my stomach woke me from my reveries. Words of protest died on my lips as **Tutemi** lowered **Hoaxiwe** on top of me. I cradled the baby in my arms, lest he awaken little **Texoma** who had fallen asleep in my hammock while waiting for me to get up. I reached for **Hoaxiwe's** frog skulls threaded on a liana string hanging at the head of my hammock and rattled them in front of him. Gurgling with delight, the baby tried to reach them.

"Are you awake?" **Texoma** mumbled, touching my cheek lightly. "I thought you were going to sleep the whole day."

"I've been thinking about all I've seen and learned since I first came

here," I said, taking her small hand in mine: The narrow palm, the long, delicately shaped fingers were oddly mature for a five-year-old child, and contrasted sharply with her dimpled face. "I **didn't** realize the sun's already up."

"You **didn't** even notice my brother and cousins leaving your hammock as soon as the **plantains** were baked," **Texoma** said. "Were you thinking very hard?"

"No," I laughed. "It was more like dreaming. It seems as if no time has passed since the day I arrived at the **shabono**."

"To me it's like a long time," **Texoma** said seriously, caressing her half-brother's soft hair. "When you first arrived, this tiny baby was still sleeping inside **Tutemi's** belly. I remember well the day my mothers found you." Giggling, the little girl buried her face in my neck. "I know why you wept that day. You were afraid of my great-uncle **Iramamowe**-he has an ugly face."

"That day," I whispered conspiringly, "I was afraid of all the **Iticoteri**." Feeling a warm wetness on my stomach, I held **Hoaxiwe** away from me. **Etewa**, sitting astride his hammock, smiled in amusement as he watched the arc of his son's urine spanning over the fire.

"Of all of us?" **Texoma** asked. "Even of my father and grandfather? Even of my mothers and old **Hayama**?" Bending over my face, she gazed at me with an expression of incredulity, almost of anguish, as if she were searching for something in my eyes. "Were you also afraid of me?"

"No. I **wasn't** afraid of you," I assured her, bouncing the laughing **Hoaxiwe** on my thighs.

"I **wasn't** afraid of you either." Sighing with relief, **Texoma** lay back in the hammock. "I **didn't** hide like most of the children did when you first walked into our hut. We had heard that whites were tall and hairy like monkeys. But you looked so little, I knew you **couldn't** be a real white."

As soon as her basket was securely fastened to her back, **Tutemi** lifted her baby from my lap. Expertly she placed him in the wide, softened-bark sling she wore across her chest. "Ready," she said, smiling, then looked questioningly at **Etewa** and **Ritimi**.

Grinning, **Etewa** picked up his machete and his bow and arrows.

"Will you come later?" **Ritimi** asked me as she adjusted the long, slender rod stuck through the septum of her nose. The corners of her mouth, free of the usual smooth sticks, turned up in a smile, dimpling her cheeks. As if sensing my indecision, **Ritimi** did not wait for my reply but followed her husband and **Tutemi** to the gardens.

"**Hayama** is coming," **Tutemi** whispered. "She is wondering why you haven't come to eat her baked plantain." The little girl slid from the hammock, and ran toward a group of children playing outside.

Muttering, **Hayama** walked through **Tutemi's** hut. Her loose skin hung in long vertical wrinkles down her thighs and belly. Her face was set in a stern mien as she handed me a half-gourd filled with plantain mush. Sighing, she sat in **Ritimi's** hammock, letting her hand trail along the ground as she rocked herself to and fro, apparently entranced by the rhythmic squeaking of the liana knot against the pole. "It's too bad I've not been able to fatten you up," the old woman said after a long silence.

I assured her that her **plantains** had worked wonders- that given a bit more time I might even become fat.

"There isn't much time," Hayama said softly. "You are leaving for the mission."

"What?" I cried, struck by the definiteness of her tone. "Who says so?"

"Before he left, Milagros made Arasuwe promise that if we were to move to one of our old gardens deeper in the forest, we were not to take you." The nostalgic, almost dreamy gaze of her eyes softened Hayama's expression as she reminded me of the various families who several weeks before had left for the old gardens. Believing they were to return soon, I had not paid much attention to their departure at the time.

Hayama went on to explain that Arasuwe's household, as well as those of his brothers, cousins, sons, and daughters, had not yet followed the others for the simple reason that the headman was waiting to hear from Milagros.

"Is the shabono going to be abandoned?" I asked. "What about the gardens here? They were only recently expanded. What will happen to all the new plantain shoots?" I said excitedly.

"They will grow." Hayama's face crinkled with cheerful amusement. "The old people and many of the children will remain here. We will build temporary shelters close to the plantain patches, for no one likes to live in ancillary shabono. We will take care of the gardens until the others return. By then the bananas and rasha fruit will be ripe and once again it will be time to feast."

"But why are so many Iticoteri leaving?" I asked. "Isn't there enough food here?"

Hayama did not actually say that there was a food shortage, yet she stressed the fact that old gardens, which have not been visited for a long time, become a feeding ground for monkeys, birds, agouti, peccary, and tapir. Men have an easy time hunting and the women still find plenty of roots and fruits in such gardens to last until the game has been exhausted. "Besides," Hayama went on, "a temporary move is always good, especially after a raid. If I weren't too old, I would also go."

"Like a holiday," I said.

"Yes. A holiday!" Hayama laughed, once I explained what was meant by the word. "Oh, how much I d like to go and sit in the shade, stuffing myself with kafu fruit."

Kafu trees were prized for their bark and bast fibers. The clusters of fruit, each about ten inches long, hang on a common stalk. The gelatinous, fleshy fruit is filled with tiny seeds and tastes like an overripe fresh fig.

"If I can't move with Arasuwe and his family to the old gardens," I said, squatting at the head of Hayama's hammock, "then I will stay here with you. There is no reason for me to return to the mission. We'll await the return of the others together."

Hayama's eyes shone with an unnatural brightness as they rested on my face. In a slow, deliberate tone, she made it clear that, although it was not customary to raid an empty shabono or to kill old people and children, the Mocototeri would undoubtedly make trouble if they were to learn, which the old woman assured me they would, that I had been left behind in an unprotected settlement.

I shuddered, remembering how several weeks before a group of Mocototeri men, armed with clubs, had arrived at the shabono demanding the return of their women. After both groups had shouted threats and insults at each other, Arasuwe told the Mocototeri that he

had purposely freed one of the abducted women on his way home. He stressed the fact that not for an instant had he been taken in by the woman's trick of having been bitten by a snake. However, after more bickering on both sides, the headman reluctantly handed over the girl old Hayama had chosen as a second wife for her youngest son. Threatening to retaliate at a later date, the Mocototeri left.

It was Etewa who had explained to me that although the Mocototeri had had no intention of starting a shooting war- they had left their bows and arrows hidden in the forest- the headman had acted wisely in returning the girl so promptly. The Iticoteri were outnumbered, as several men had already left for the abandoned gardens.

"When will Arasuwe join the others in the old gardens?" I asked Hayama.

"Very soon," she said. "Arasuwe has sent several men to find Milagros. Unfortunately, they have been unable to get in touch with him so far."

I smiled to myself. "It seems that regardless of what Arasuwe promised, I'll end up going with Ritimi and Etewa," I said smugly.

"You won't," Hayama assured me, then grinned maliciously. "It's not only from the Mocototeri we have to protect you, but a shapori might abduct you on the way to the gardens, and keep you as his woman in a faraway hut."

"I doubt it," I said, giggling. "You told me once that no man would want me this skinny." I told the old woman about the incident in the mountains with Etewa.

Pressing her folded arms across her hanging bosom, Hayama laughed until tears rolled down her wrinkled cheeks. "Etewa would take any woman that's available," she said. "But he's afraid of you." Hayama leaned over her hammock, then whispered, "A shapori isn't an ordinary man. He wouldn't want you for his pleasure. A shapori needs the femaleness in his body." She lay back in the hammock. "Do you know where that femaleness is?"

"No."

The old woman looked at me as if she thought I was slow-witted. "In the vagina," she finally said, almost choking on her laughter.

"Do you think that Puriwariwe might abduct me?" I asked mockingly. "I'm sure that he's too old to care about women."

Genuine amazement widened her eyes. "Haven't you seen? Hasn't anyone told you that that old shapori is stronger than any man in the shabono?" she asked. "There are nights when that old man goes from hut to hut, sticking his cock inside every woman he can find. And he doesn't get tired. At dawn, when he returns to the forest, he's as ready as ever." Hayama assured me that Puriwariwe could not possibly abduct me, for he no longer needed anything. She warned me, however, that there were other shamans, less powerful than the old man, who might.

Closing her eyes, she sighed loudly. I thought she had fallen asleep, but, as if sensing my motion to get up, the old woman turned to me abruptly. She placed both her hands on my shoulders, then asked me in a voice that shook with emotion, "Do you know why you like being with us?"

I looked at her uncomprehendingly, and as I opened my mouth to respond Hayama went on to say, "You are happy here because you have

no responsibilities. You live like us. You have learned to speak quite well, and know many of our customs. To us you are neither child or adult, man or woman. We make no demands on you. If we did, you would resent it." **Hayama's** eyes were so dark as they held my gaze, they made me uncomfortable. In her wrinkled face they seemed too large and bright, as if glowing with an inexhaustible inner energy. After a long pause, she added provokingly, "Were you to become a woman **shapori**, you would be very unhappy."

I felt threatened. Yet, as I stammered inaneities to defend myself, I suddenly realized that she was right and I was seized by a desperate desire to laugh.

Gently the old woman pressed her fingers over my lips. "There are powerful **shapori** living in remote places where the **hekuras** of animals and plants dwell," **Hayama** said. "In the dark of night, those men consort with beautiful female spirits."

"I'm glad I'm not a beautiful spirit," I said.

"No. You are not beautiful." **Hayama** with her cajoling laugh and mocking gaze made it impossible for me to take offense at her uncomplimentary remark. "Yet to many of us you are strange." There was great tenderness in her voice as she tried to make me understand why the **Mocototeri** wanted to take me to their **shabono**. Their interest in me was not due to the usual reasons Indians befriend whites- to get machetes, cooking pots, and clothes- but because the **Mocototeri** believed I had powers. They had heard of how I had cured little **Texoma** about the **epena** incident, and how **Iramamowe** had seen **hekuras** reflected in my eyes. They had even seen me use a bow and arrow.

All my endeavors to make the old woman realize that it required no special powers, only common sense, to help a child with a cold were in vain. I argued that even she herself could be considered to have healing powers- she set bones and smeared secret concoctions made from animal parts, roots, and leaves on bites, scratches, and cuts. But my reasonings were futile. To her there was a vast difference between setting a bone, and coaxing the lost soul of a child back into its body. That, she stressed, only a **shapori** could do.

"But **Iramamowe** brought her soul back," I asserted. "I only cured her cold."

"He didn't," **Hayama** insisted. "He heard you chant."

"That was a prayer," I said feebly, realizing that a prayer was in no way different from **Iramamowe's** **hekura** chants.

"I know whites are not like us," **Hayama** interrupted me, determined to prevent me from arguing further. "I'm talking about something different altogether. Had you been born an **Iticoteri**, you would still be different from **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, or me." **Hayama** touched my face, running her long, bony fingers over my forehead and cheeks. "My sister Angelica would never have asked you to accompany her into the forest. **Milagros** would never have brought you to stay with us if you were like the whites he knows." She regarded me thoughtfully, then, as if struck with an afterthought, added, "I wonder if any other whites would have been as happy as you have been with us."

"I'm sure they would have," I said softly. "There aren't many whites who have a chance to come here."

Hayama shrugged her shoulders. "Do you remember the story about

Imawaami, the woman **shapori**?" she asked.

"That's a myth!" Afraid that the old woman was trying to make some connection between **Imawaami** and myself, I hastily added, "It's like the story of the bird who stole the first fire from the alligator's mouth."

"Maybe," **Hayama** said dreamily. "Lately, I have been thinking about the stories my father, grandfather, and even my great-grandfather used to tell about the white men they had seen traveling along the big rivers. There must have been whites journeying through the forest long before my great-grandfather's time. Perhaps **Imawaami** was one of them."

Hayama moved her eager face close to mine, then continued in a whisper. "It must have been a **shapori** who captured her, believing the white woman was a beautiful spirit. But she was more powerful than the **shapori**. She stole his **hekuras** and became a sorceress herself." **Hayama** looked at me provokingly, as if daring me to contradict her.

I was not surprised by the old woman's reasoning. The **Iticoteri** were in the habit of bringing their mythology up to date, or of incorporating facts into their myths. "Do Indian women ever become **shapori**?" I asked.

"Yes," **Hayama** said promptly. "Female **shapori** are strange creatures. Like men, they hunt with bow and arrows. They decorate their bodies with the spots and broken circles of a jaguar. They take **epena**, and lure the **hekuras** into their chests with their songs. Women **shapori** have husbands who serve them. But if they have children, they once again become ordinary women."

"Angelica was a **shapori**, wasn't she?" I was unaware I had thought out loud. The thought came with the certainty of a revelation.

I recalled the time Angelica had awakened me from a nightmare at the mission, the way her incomprehensible song had soothed me. It had not resembled the melodious song of the **Iticoteri** women but the monotonous chant of the shamans. Like them, Angelica seemed to possess two voices- one that **originated** from somewhere deep inside her, the other from her throat.

I remembered the days of walking with **Milagros** and Angelica through the forest and how Angelica's remarks about the spirits of the forest lurking in the shadows- that I should always dance with them, but never let them become a burden- had enchanted me. I clearly visualized how Angelica had danced that morning- her arms raised above her head, her feet moving with quick jerky steps in the same manner that the **Iticoteri** men danced when in an **epena** trance.

Until now I had never thought it in the least odd that Angelica, as opposed to the other Indian women at the mission, had considered it very natural for me to have come to hunt in the jungle.

Hayama's words awoke me from my musings. "Did my sister tell you she was a **shapori**?" A profound grief filled **Hayama's** eyes; tears gathered at their corners. The drops never rolled down her cheeks but lost themselves in a network of wrinkles.

"She never told me," I murmured, then lay down in my hammock. With one leg on the ground I pushed myself back and forth, adjusting the rhythm of my hammock to **Hayama's** so that the vine knots would squeak in unison.

"My sister was a **shapori**," **Hayama** said after a long silence. "I don't know what happened to her after she left our **shabono**. While she was with us, she was a respected **shapori**, but she lost her powers when she

had **Milagros**. **Hayama** sat up abruptly. "His father was a white man."

Afraid that my curiosity might escape through my eyes, I closed them. I did not dare breathe, lest the smallest sound put an end to the old woman's reveries. There was no way of learning which country **Milagros**'s father had come from. Regardless of their origins, any non-Indian was considered a nape.

"**Milagros**'s father was a white man," **Hayama** repeated. "A long time ago, when we lived closer to the big river, a nape came to stay at our settlement. Angelica believed she could get his power. Instead she got pregnant."

"Why **didn't** she abort?"

A broad grin crossed **Hayama**'s lined face. "Perhaps Angelica was too confident," the old woman murmured. "Maybe she believed she could still be a **shdpori** after having a child by a white man." **Hayama**'s mouth opened wide with laughter, revealing yellowish teeth. "There is nothing white about **Milagros**," she said mischievously. "Even though my sister took him away. In spite of all he learned from the white man, **Milagros** will always be an **Iticoteri**." **Hayama**'s eyes shone with a strong, unwavering stare, and her face revealed a certain indefinable, pent-up triumph.

The thought that I would soon be returning to the mission filled me with apprehension. On several occasions since my illness I had tried to imagine what it would be like to return to **Caracas** or to **Los Angeles**. How would I react to seeing relatives and friends? During those moments, I had known I would never leave of my own accord.

"When will **Milagros** take me back to the mission?" I asked.

"I don't think **Arasuwe** will wait for **Milagros**. The headman can no longer postpone his departure," **Hayama** said. "**Iramamowe** will take you back."

"**Iramamowe**!" I exclaimed in disbelief. "Why not **Etewa**?"

Patently, **Hayama** explained that **Iramamowe** had been near the mission on several occasions: He knew the way better than any of the **Iticoteri**. There was also the possibility of **Etewa** being discovered by **Mocototeri** hunters, in which case he would be killed and I would be abducted. "**Iramamowe**, on the other hand," **Hayama** assured me, "can make himself invisible in the forest."

"But I can't!" I protested.

"You will be guarded by **Iramamowe**'s **hekurus**," **Hayama** said with utter conviction. Cumbersomely, the old woman stood up, rested for a moment with her hands on her thighs, then took my arm and slowly walked me over to her own hut. "**Iramamowe** has protected you before," **Hayama** reminded me, then eased herself into her hammock.

"Yes," I agreed. "But I can't go to the mission without **Milagros**. I need sardines and crackers."

"That stuff will only make you sick," she said contemptuously.

Hayama assured me that I would not suffer from hunger on the way, for **Iramamowe**'s arrows would hit plenty of game. Besides, she would give me a basketful of **plantains**.

"I'm too weak to carry such a heavy load," I objected, knowing that **Iramamowe** would carry nothing besides his bow and arrows.

Hayama regarded me with gentle mockery. She stretched in her hammock, opened her mouth in an interminable yawn, and promptly fell

asleep.

I walked into the clearing. A group of children, mostly little girls, were playing with a puppy. Each girl tried to make the animal suck from her flat nipples.

Except for a few old people resting in their hammocks, and several menstruating women crouching near the hearths, most of the huts were deserted. I went from dwelling to dwelling, wondering if they knew I was soon to leave. An old man offered me his tobacco **wad**. Smiling, I declined. "How can anyone refuse such a treat?" his eyes seemed to say as he reinserted the **wad** between his lower lip and gum.

Late in the afternoon I walked into **Iramamowe**'s hut. His oldest wife, who had just returned from the river, was hanging two water-filled gourds on the rafters. We had become good friends since the time her son **Xorowe** had been initiated as a **shapori**, and we had spent many afternoons talking about him. Occasionally **Xorowe** returned to the **shabono** to cure people afflicted with colds, fevers, and diarrhea. He chanted to the **hekurus**' with the same zeal and strength as the more experienced shamans did. Yet, according to **Puriwariwe**, it would still be some time before **Xorowe** could send his own spirits to cause harm among an enemy settlement. Only then would he be accepted as a full-fledged sorcerer.

Iramamowe's wife poured some water into a small calabash, then added some honey. Greedily, I watched the runny paste, studded with bees in the various stages of their metamorphic process. After stirring it thoroughly with her finger she offered me the gourd. Smacking my lips between each sip, I finished the drink, and licked the bottom clean. "What a delight," I exclaimed. "I'm sure it's from the **amoshi** bees." They were a stingless variety, and greatly prized for their dark aromatic honey.

Smiling in agreement, **Iramamowe**'s wife motioned me to sit beside her in her hammock. She examined my back for flea and mosquito bites. Discovering two recent ones, she sucked out the poison. The light entering the hut grew dimmer. It seemed that such a long time had passed since I had talked with **Hayama** that morning. Drowsily, I closed my eyes.

I dreamt I was with the children by the river. Thousands of butterflies fluttered out of the trees, swirling through the air like autumn leaves. They alighted on our hair, faces, and bodies, covering us with the tenuous golden light of dusk. Despondently I gazed at their wings, like delicate hands waving farewell. "You cannot be sad," the children were saying. I looked into each face, and kissed the laughter on their lips.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono](#): Chapter 24

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Chapter 24

Instead of the bamboo knife she always used, **Ritimi** trimmed my hair with a sharp grass blade. Frowning with concentration, she made sure the hair was cut evenly all around my head.

"Not my tonsure," I said, covering the top of my head with my folded hands. "It hurts."

"Don't be so cowardly," **Ritimi** laughed. "You don't want to arrive at the mission looking like a barbarian."

I could not make her understand that among whites I would be considered an oddity with a bald spot on the top of my head. **Ritimi** insisted that it was not merely for aesthetic reasons but practical ones as well that she needed to shave the crown of my head.

"Lice," she pointed out, "like that particular spot best. I'm certain **Iramamowe** will not delouse you in the evenings."

"Maybe you should shave my hair completely," I suggested. "That's the best way to get rid of them."

Horrified, **Ritimi** stared at me. "Only the very sick have their heads shaved. You would look ugly."

Nodding in agreement, I submitted to her ministrations. Upon finishing, she rubbed the bald spot with **onoto**. Then, she very carefully painted my face with the red paste. She drew a wide straight line just below my bangs and wavy ones across my cheeks with dots between each of the lines. "What a shame I did not pierce your nose and the corners of your mouth when you first arrived," she said disappointedly. Removing the polished slender stick from her septum, she held it under my nose. "How beautiful you would have looked," she sighed with comical resignation, and proceeded to paint my back with wide **onoto** lines rounding toward my buttocks. On the front, starting below my breasts, she drew wavy lines all the way to my thighs. Lastly she encircled my ankles with broad red bands. Looking down my legs, I had the feeling I was wearing socks.

Tutemi tied a newly made cotton belt around my waist, the front fringe resting on my pubis. Pleased at my appearance, she clapped her hands and jumped up and down excitedly. "Oh, the ears!" she cried, motioning **Ritimi** to hand her the white feather tufts held together on a thin string. **Tutemi** tied them on my earrings. Around my upper arms and below my knees she fastened red-dyed cotton strands.

Encircling my waist with her arm, **Ritimi** took me from hut to hut, so I could be admired by the **Iticoteri**. For one last time I saw myself reflected in the women's shiny eyes; and delighted in the men's mocking smiles. Yawning, old **Kamosiwe** stretched his skinny arms until they seemed about to be pulled from their sockets. He opened his one eye, studying my face as if he were trying to memorize my features. With slow, deliberate movements, he unfastened the small pouch he wore around his neck, and took out the pearl I had given him. "Whenever I let this stone roll on my palm, I will think of you."

Unwilling to believe that never again would I stand there in the **shabono**, that never again would I awake to the children's laughter as they climbed into my hammock at dawn, I wept.

There were no good-byes. I simply followed **Iramamowe** and **Etewa** into the forest. **Ritimi** and **Tutemi** were behind me, as if we were going to collect firewood. Silently we walked along the path the whole day, stopping only momentarily to snack.

The sun was setting behind the horizon of trees when we came to a halt beneath the dark shadows of three giant **ceibas**. They had grown so close together that they appeared to be one. **Ritimi** fastened the basket she had been carrying for me on my back. It was packed with **plantains**, roasted monkey meat, a honey-filled calabash, several empty gourds, my

hammock, and my knapsack which contained my jeans and a torn shirt.

"You won't grow sad if you paint your body with **onoto** each time you bathe in the river," **Ritimi** said, tying a small gourd around my waist. It had been polished with abrasive leaves. Smooth and white, it hung from my cotton belt like a giant teardrop.

The forest, the three smiling faces, blurred before me. Without another word, **Ritimi** led the way into the thicket. Only **Etewa** turned around before melting into the shadows. A grin lit his face as he waved the way he had so often seen **Milagros** do when he bid me farewell.

I gave free rein to the vast desolation inside me. It did not make me feel any better, but only heightened my despondency. Yet, in spite of my wretchedness, I was strangely aware of the three **ceibas** in front of me. As if in a dream, I recognized the trees. I had been on this very spot before. **Milagros** had squatted in front of me. Impassively, he had watched the rain wash my face and body of Angelica's ashes. Today it was **Iramamowe** squatting on the same spot, gazing at the tears rolling uncontrollably down my cheeks.

"It was here that I first saw **Ritimi**, **Tutemi**, and **Etewa**," I said. Suddenly I realized it had been **Ritimi**'s deliberate choice to accompany me this far. I understood all she had left unsaid, how deeply she felt. She had given me back a basket and a gourd, the two items I was carrying that distant day. Only now the gourd was not filled with ashes, but with **onoto**, a symbol of life and happiness. A quiet loneliness, humble and accepting, filled my heart. I carefully dried my tears so as not to erase the **onoto** designs.

"Perhaps one day **Ritimi** will find you on this spot again," **Iramamowe** said, his habitually stern face softened by a fleeting smile. "Let's walk a bit farther before we rest for the night." Lifting the heavy bunch of **plantains** from my basket, he hung it over his shoulder. He was slightly **swaybacked** and his belly stuck out.

Iramamowe must have felt the same urge to walk as I did. My feet seemed to move of their own accord, knowing exactly where to step in the darkness. I never lost sight of **Iramamowe**'s arrow quiver, immobilized under the load of **plantains**. Moving through the darkness, I had the illusion that it was not I but the forest that was leaving.

"We'll sleep here," **Iramamowe** said, inspecting the weathered lean-to that stood away from the path. He built a small fire inside, then hung his hammock next to mine.

I lay awake watching the stars and the faint moon through the opening of the hut. Mist thickened the darkness until there was no light left. Trees and sky formed one mass through which I imagined bows falling from the clouds like heavy rain; and **hekuras** rising from invisible crevices in the earth: They danced to the sound of a shaman's song.

The sun was high over the treetops when **Iramamowe** woke me. After finishing a baked plantain and a piece of monkey meat, I offered him my calabash with honey.

"You'll need it for the days of walking," he said. A friendly glance softened his words of refusal. "We will find more on the way," he promised, reaching for his machete and his bow and arrows.

We walked at a steady pace, much faster than I remember ever having walked in my life. We crossed rivers, we moved up and down hills that bore no familiar landmark. Days spent walking, nights spent sleeping

chased each other with predictable swiftness. My thoughts did not reach beyond each day or night. There was nothing between them but a short-lived dawn and dusk during which we ate.

"I know this place!" I exclaimed one afternoon, breaking the long silence. I pointed to the dark rocks jutting from the earth. They formed a perpendicular wall along the river's edge. But the longer I gazed at the river and trees, already purple in the twilight, the less sure I felt I had been there before. I climbed over a tree trunk that extended all the way into the water. The day had been deadly still, but now the leaves began to stir gently, sending forth a fresh whisper along the river. Arching branches and creepers brushed the water's surface, burying themselves in the dark liquid that harbored no fish and discouraged mosquitoes.

"Are we close to the mission?" I asked, turning to **Iramamowe**.

He did not answer. After a moment, as if annoyed by the silence he was unwilling to break, he motioned me to follow.

I felt tired- each step was an effort- yet I could not remember having gone very far that day. I lifted my head as I heard the cry of a bird. A yellow leaf, like a giant butterfly, fluttered from a branch. As if afraid to fall and rot on the ground, the leaf clung to my thigh. **Iramamowe** held out his hand behind him, gesturing me to remain still. Stealthily he stalked along the riverbank. "We will eat meat tonight," he whispered, then disappeared in the uncertain light, his body but a line against the shimmering river's surface.

Lying down on the dark sand, I watched the sky ablaze for a moment as the earth swallowed the sun. I drank the last of the honey **Iramamowe** had found that morning, then fell asleep with its sweetness on my lips. Awakened by the sound of crackling flames, I turned on my stomach. On a small platform built over the fire **Iramamowe** was roasting an almost two-foot-long agouti.

"It's not good to sleep at night without the protection of a fire," he said, facing me. "The spirits of the forest might bewitch you."

"I am so tired," I yawned, moving closer to the fire. "I could sleep for days."

"It will rain during the night," **Iramamowe** announced as he planted the three poles that would make our shelter around the roasting meat. I helped him cover the roof and sides with the wild banana fronds he had cut while I slept. He fastened the hammocks close to the fire, so we could push the logs to the flames without having to get up.

The agouti tasted like roast pork, tender and juicy. What we did not finish **Iramamowe** tied to a stick high above the fire. "We'll eat the rest in the morning." Grinning, as if pleased with himself, he stretched fully in his hammock. "It will give us strength to climb the mountains."

"Mountains?" I asked. "I only went over hills when I came with Angelica and **Milagros**." I bent over **Iramamowe**. "The only time I climbed up a mountain was when I returned to the **shabono** with **Ritimi** and **Etewa** from the **Mocototeri** feast. Those mountains were close to the **shabono**." I touched his face. "Are you sure you know the way to the mission?"

"What a question to ask," he said, closing his eyes, and crossing his arms over his chest. His bristly eyebrows slanted toward his temples. There were a few hairs at the edge of his upper lip. The skin over his high cheekbones was stretched taut, only a faint trace of the **onoto** designs

still recognizable. As if annoyed by my scrutiny, he opened his eyes: They reflected the light of the fire, but his gaze revealed nothing.

I lay down in my hammock. I ran my fingers along my forehead and cheeks, wondering if the **onoto** lines and dots had also faded on my face. Tomorrow I'll bathe in the river, I thought. And my uneasiness, which is probably nothing but exhaustion, will vanish as soon as I paint myself anew with **onoto**. Yet, no matter how I tried to reassure myself, I was unable to still my mounting distrust. My body and mind were tight with a vague premonition I could not put into words. The air became chilly. Leaning over, I pushed one of the logs closer to the flames.

"It will be even colder in the mountains," **Iramamowe** mumbled. "I will make us a drink from plants that will keep us warm."

Reassured by his words, I began to inhale and exhale with exaggerated depth, deliberately pushing all thoughts away, until I was aware of nothing but the sound of the rain, the smoke-warmed air, the smell of damp earth. And I slept a calm, untroubled sleep that lasted throughout the night.

In the morning we bathed in the river, then painted each other's faces and bodies with **onoto**. **Iramamowe** was specific about the designs he desired: A serpentine line across his forehead, extending down to his jaws, then around his mouth; a circle between his brow, at the corners of his eyes, and two on each cheek. On his chest he wanted wavy lines, running all the way to his navel, and on his back the lines had to be straight. A smile of gentle mockery softened his face as he covered me from head to foot with uniform circles.

"What do they mean?" I asked eagerly. **Ritimi** had never decorated me thus.

"Nothing," he said, laughing. "This way you don't look so skinny."

At first the ascent up the narrow trail was easy. The undergrowth was free of serrated grasses and thorny weeds. A warm mist enshrouded the forest, creating a diaphanous light through which the crowns of the tall palm trees seemed to hang suspended from the sky. The sound of waterfalls echoed eerily through the misty air, and each time I brushed against a branch or leaf tiny drops of moisture clung to me. The afternoon rain, however, turned the path into a muddy menace. I bruised my toes repeatedly on the roots and stones beneath the slippery surface.

We made camp late in the afternoon, halfway up the summit. Exhausted, I sat on the ground and watched **Iramamowe** pound three strong poles into the earth. I did not have the strength to help him cover the triangular structure with palm fronds and giant leaves.

"Are you coming back this way on your return to the **shabonof**?" I asked, wondering why he was reinforcing the hut so well. It appeared altogether too sturdy for a one-night shelter.

Iramamowe gave me a sidelong glance but did not answer.

"Is there going to be a storm tonight?" I asked in an exasperated tone.

An irrepressible smile played around his lips, and his face looked uncannily childish as he squatted beside me. A mischievous sparkle, as if he were planning some prank, shone in his eyes. "Tonight you will sleep well," he finally said, then proceeded to build a fire inside the cozy hut. He fastened my hammock in the back: His own he hung close to the narrow entrance. "Tonight we will not feel the cold air," he said, looking for the gourd in which were soaking the shredded leaves and pale yellow

flowers of a plant he had found the previous day, growing over some rocks in a sunny spot along the river's edge. He unsealed the calabash, added more water, then placed it over the fire. Softly he began to chant, his eyes fixed on the dark simmering liquid.

Trying to figure out the words of his song, I fell asleep. I was awakened shortly by him. "Drink this," he urged, holding the gourd close to my lips. "It has been cooled by the mountain dew."

I took a sip. It tasted like herb tea, bitter but not unpleasantly so. After a few more gulps, I pushed the calabash toward him.

"Drink it all," **Iramamowe** said coaxingly. "It will keep you warm. You will sleep for days."

"Days?" I emptied the gourd, smiling at his remark as if it were a joke. A faint touch of malice seemed to be lurking somewhere within him. By the time it fully dawned on me that he was not being facetious, a pleasant numbness seeped through my body, melting my anxiety into a comforting heaviness that made my head feel as if it were lead. I was sure it would break off my neck. The image of my head rolling on the ground, a ball with two glass eyes, threw me into spasms of laughter.

Crouching by the fire, **Iramamowe** watched me with growing curiosity. Slowly, I stood up. I've lost my physicality, I thought. I had no control over my legs as I tried to place one foot in front of the other. Dejected, I slumped on the ground, next to **Iramamowe**. "Why don't you laugh?" I asked, surprised at my own words. What I really wanted to know was if the sound of drops prattling on the thatched roof was a storm. I wondered if I had actually spoken, for the words kept reverberating in my head like a distant echo. Afraid to miss his answer, I moved closer to him.

Iramamowe's face became taut as the cry of a nocturnal monkey broke the night's stillness. His nostrils flared, his full lips set in a straight line. His eyes, piercing into mine, grew larger, shining with a deep loneliness, a gentleness that contrasted oddly with his severe masklike face.

As if I were animated by a slow-motion mechanism, I crawled to the edge of the hut, each of my movements a gigantic effort. I felt as if all my tendons had been replaced with elastic strings. I relished the sensation of being able to stretch in any direction, into the most absurd postures I could imagine.

From the pouch hanging around his neck, **Iramamowe** poured **epena** into his palm. He drew the hallucinogenic powder deep into his nostrils, then began chanting. I felt his song inside me, surrounding me, drawing me toward him. Without any hesitation I drank from the gourd he once again held to my lips. The dark liquid no longer tasted bitter.

My sense of time and distance became distorted. **Iramamowe** and the fire were so far away, I feared I had lost them across the wide expanse of the hut. Yet the next instant, his eyes were so close to mine I saw myself reflected in their dark pupils. I was crushed by the weight of his body, and my arms folded beneath his chest. He whispered words into my ears that I could not hear. A breeze parted the leaves, revealing the shadowy night, the treetops brushing the stars- countless stars, massed together as if in readiness to fall. I reached out: My hand grasped leaves adorned with diamond drops. For an instant, they clung to my fingers, then disintegrated like dew.

Iramamowe's heavy body held me: His eyes sowed seeds of light inside me: His gentle voice urged me to follow him through dreams of day and night, dreams of rainwater and bitter leaves. There was nothing violent about his body imprisoning mine. Waves of pleasure mingled with visions of mountains and rivers, faraway places where **hekuras** dwell. I danced with the spirits of animals and trees, gliding with them through mist, through roots and trunks, through branches and leaves. I sang with the voices of birds and spiders, jaguars and snakes. I shared the dreams of all those who feed on **epena**, on bitter flowers and leaves.

I no longer knew if I was awake or dreaming. At moments I vaguely remembered old **Hayama**'s words about shamans needing the femaleness in their bodies. But those memories were neither clear nor lasting: They remained dim, unexamined premonitions. **Iramamowe** always knew whenever I was about to fall into real sleep, whenever my tongue was ready to ask, whenever I was about to weep.

"If you can't dream, I'll make you," he said, taking me in his arms, and rubbing away my tears against his cheek. And my desire to refuse the gourd sitting by the fire like a forest spirit vanished. Greedily I drank the dark bearer of visions until once again I was suspended in a timelessness that was neither day or night. I was one with the rhythm of **Iramamowe**'s breath, with the beat of his heart, as I merged with the light and the darkness inside him.

A time came when I felt I was moving through an undergrowth of trees, leaves, and motionless vines. I knew I was not walking; yet I was descending from the cold forest, sunk in mist. My feet were tied and my upside-down head shook as though it were being emptied. Visions flowed from my ears, nostrils, and mouth, leaving a faint line on the steep path. And for one last instant I glimpsed **shabonos** inhabited by men and women shamans of another time.

When I awoke, **Iramamowe** was crouched by the fire, his face alight with the flames and a faint streak of moon shining into the hut. I wondered how many days had elapsed since the night he had first offered me the bitter-tasting brew. There was no gourd by the fire. I was certain we were no longer in the mountains. The night was clear. The soft breeze stirring the treetops disentangled my thoughts and I drifted into a dreamless sleep as I listened to the monotonous sound of **Iramamowe**'s **hekura** songs.

The persistent growling of my stomach awoke me. I felt dizzy as I stood on uncertain legs in the empty hut. My body was painted with wavy lines. How strange it had all been, I thought. I felt no regret: I was not filled with hate or repulsion. It was not that I was numbed emotionally. Rather I felt the same indescribable sensation I experienced upon awakening from a dream that I could not quite explain.

Near the fire lay a bundle containing roasted frogs. I sat on the ground and gnawed on the tiny bones until they were clean. **Iramamowe**'s machete reclining against one of the poles reassured me that he was somewhere close by.

Following the sound of the river, I walked through the tangled growth. Startled to see **Iramamowe** beaching a small canoe only a short distance away, I hid behind some bushes. I recognized the craft as being one made by the **Maquiritare** Indians. I had seen that kind, made from a hollowed tree trunk, at the mission. The thought that we might be close

to one of their settlements, or perhaps even to the mission, made my heart beat faster. **Iramamowe** gave no indication of having heard or seen me approach. Furtively, I returned to the shelter, wondering how he came into possession of the canoe.

Moments later, with a vine rope and a large bundle slung over his back, **Iramamowe** walked into the hut. "Fish," he said, dropping the rope and bundle on the ground.

I blushed, and embarrassed at my blushing, laughed.

Unhurriedly, he balanced the wrapped fish between the logs, making sure enough heat but no direct flames reached the **platanillo** leaves. Totally engrossed in the sound of the simmering fish, he remained squatting by the fire. As soon as all the juices were cooked away, he removed the bundle from the logs with a forked stick and opened it. "It's good," he said, scooping a handful of white, flaky meat into his mouth, then pushed the bundle toward me.

"What happened in the mountains?" I asked,

Startled by my belligerent tone, his mouth gaped open. A piece of unchewed fish fell into the ashes. Automatically, without checking the dirt sticking to it, he put the morsel back into his mouth, then reached for the liana rope on the ground.

An irrational fear seized me. I was convinced that **Iramamowe** was going to tie me up and carry me farther into the forest. I was no longer aware that only a short while before I had been certain we were near a **Maquiritare** settlement, or even the mission. All I could think of was old **Hayama**'s story about shamans who kept captive women hidden in faraway places. I was convinced **Iramamowe** would never take me back to the mission. The thought that had he wanted to keep me hidden in the forest he would not have brought me down from the mountains did not cross my mind at that moment.

I did not trust his smile, nor the gentle glint in his eyes. I picked up the water-filled gourd standing by the fire and offered it to him. Smiling, he dropped the rope. I moved closer as if I intended to bring the calabash to his lips. Instead, I smashed it between his eyes with all my strength. Caught totally unawares, he fell backward, staring at me in dumb incredulity as the blood ran down on both sides of his nose.

Heedless of thorns, roots, and the sharp grass, I sped through the thicket toward the place where I had seen the canoe. But I miscalculated where **Iramamowe** had anchored it, for when I reached the river there was nothing but stones strewn along the bank: The craft was farther upriver. With a swiftness I hardly believed myself capable of, I leaped from rock to rock. Gasping for breath, I slumped beside the canoe, pushed halfway up the sandy bank. A cry escaped my throat when I saw **Iramamowe** standing in front of me.

Squatting, he opened his mouth and laughed. His laughter came in bursts, extending from his face to his feet with such force the ground shook beneath me. Tears ran down his cheeks, mingling with the blood from the gash between his brows. "You forgot this," he said, dangling my knapsack in front of me. He opened it, then handed me my jeans and shirt. "Today you will reach the mission."

"Is this the river on which the mission stands?" I asked, staring at his bloodstained face. "I don't recognize this place."

"You have been here with Angelica and **Milagros**," he assured me.

"The rains change the rivers and the forest the way the clouds change the sky."

I pulled up my jeans; loosely they hung from my waist, threatening to slide over my hips. The damp moldy-smelling shirt made me sneeze. I felt awkward and turned uncertain eyes to **Iramamowe**. "How do I look?"

He walked around me, examining me meticulously from every angle. Then, after a moment's deliberation, he squatted once more and pronounced with a laugh, "You look better painted with **onoto**."

I squatted beside him. The wind was still: There was no movement on the river. Shadows from the tall trees reached across the water, darkening the sand at our feet. I wanted to apologize for smashing the gourd in his face, and to explain my suspicions. I wanted him to tell me of the days in the mountains, but was reluctant to break the silence.

As if cognizant and amused by my dilemma, **Iramamowe** lowered his face to his knees and laughed softly, as if sharing his mirth with the drops of blood falling between his wide spread toes. "I wanted to take the **hekuras** I once saw in your eyes," he murmured. He went on to say that not only he but also **Puriwariwe**, the old **shapori**, had seen the **hekuras** within me. "Every time I lay with you and felt the energy bursting inside you, I hoped to lure the spirits into my chest," **Iramamowe** said. "But they **didn't** want to leave you." He turned his eyes to me, intense with protest. "The **hekuras** would not answer my call; they would not heed my songs. And then I became afraid that you might take the **hekuras** from my body."

Anger and an indescribable sadness rendered me speechless for a moment. "Did we stay longer than a day and a night in the mountains?" I finally asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Iramamowe nodded, but did not say for how long we had remained in the hut. "When I was certain that I could not change your body; when I realized that the **hekuras** would not leave you, I carried you in a sling to this place."

"Had you changed my body would you have kept me in the forest?"

Iramamowe looked at me sheepishly. A smile of relief parted his lips, yet his eyes were veiled with a vague regret. "You have the soul and shadow of an **Iticoteri**," he murmured. "You have eaten the ashes of our dead. But your body and head is that of a nape." A silence punctuated his last sentence before he softly added, "There will be nights when the wind will bring your voice mingled with the cries of monkeys and jaguars. And I will see your shadow dancing on the ground, painted by the moonlight. On those nights I will think of you." He stood up and pushed the canoe into the water. "Stay close to the bank- otherwise the current will take you too swiftly," he said, motioning me to climb inside.

"**Aren't** you coming?" I asked, alarmed.

"It's a good canoe," he said, handing me a small paddle. It had a beautifully shaped handle, a rounded shaft, and the oval blade was shaped like a pointed concave shield. "It will take you safely to the mission."

"Wait!" I cried before he let go of the craft. My hands trembled as I fumbled with the zippered side pocket of my knapsack. I took out the leather pouch, and handed it to him. "Do you remember the stone the shaman **Juan Caridad** gave me?" I asked. "It's yours now."

Something between shock and surprise seemed to momentarily

paralyze his face. Slowly his fingers closed over the pouch, and his features relaxed into a smile. Without a word, he pushed the canoe into the water. Folding his arms across his chest, he watched me drift **downriver**. I turned my head often, until he was out of sight. There was a moment when I thought I still saw his figure, but it was only the wind playing with the shadows that tricked my eyes.

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Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Chapter 25

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Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South
American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 25

The trees on either side of the banks, the clouds traveling across the sky shadowed the river. Hoping to shorten the time between the world left behind and the one now awaiting me, I paddled as fast as I could. But I soon got tired, and then only used the small paddle to push myself free whenever I got too close to the bank.

At times the river was clear, reflecting the lush greenness with exaggerated intensity. There was something peaceful about the darkness of the forest and the deep silence around me. The trees seemed to be nodding in farewell as they bent slightly with the afternoon breeze; or perhaps they were only lamenting the passing of day, of the sun's last rays fading in the sky. Shortly before twilight deepened, I maneuvered the canoe toward the opposite bank, where I had seen stretches of sand amidst the dark rocks.

As soon as the craft hit the sand, I jumped out and dragged the canoe farther up the bank, close to the forest edge, where drooping vines and branches formed a safe, dark nook. I turned around and gazed at the distant mountains, violet in the dusk, and I wondered if I had been up there for more than a week before **Iramamowe** carried me to the hut where I had awakened that morning. I climbed to the highest rock and scanned the landscape for the lights of the mission. It had to be farther than **Iramamowe** estimated, I thought. Only darkness crept from out of the river, crawling up the rocks as the last vestiges of sunlight disappeared from the sky. I was hungry but did not dare explore the sandy river shore for turtle eggs.

I could not decide whether I should place my knapsack under my head as a pillow or wrap it around my cold feet as I lay inside the canoe. Through the tangled mass of branches above me I saw the clear sky, filled with innumerable tiny stars shining like golden specks of dust. As I drifted off to sleep, my feet tucked in my knapsack, I hoped that my feelings, like the light of the stars spanning the sky, would reach those I had loved in the forest.

I awoke shortly. The air was filled with the sounds of crickets and frogs. I sat up, then looked around me as if I could dispel the darkness. Shafts of moonlight spilled through the branches, painting the sand with grotesque shadows that seemed to come alive with the rustling of wind. Even with my eyes closed, I was painfully conscious of the shadows brushing against the canoe. And each time a cricket interrupted its continuous chirping I opened my eyes, waiting for the sound to resume. Dawn finally silenced the cries, murmurs, and whistling of the forest. The

mist-coated leaves looked as if they had been sprinkled with fine silver dust.

The sun rose over the treetops, tinting the clouds orange, purple, and pink. I bathed, washed my clothes with the fine river sand, spread them over the canoe to dry, then painted myself with **onoto**.

I was glad I had not arrived at the mission the day before, as I had first hoped, but that I still had time to watch the clouds change the sky. To the east, heavy clouds gathered, darkening the horizon. Lightning flashed in the distance, thunder followed after long intervals, and white lines of rain moved across the sky toward the north, keeping ahead of me. I wondered if alligators were basking in the sun amid the driftwood scattered on the bank. I had not floated **downriver** for long before the waters widened. The current became so strong I had a hard time keeping from swirling around in the shallow waters along the bank beset with rocks.

For an instant I thought I was hallucinating when I saw on the opposite bank a long dugout slowly pushing its way upriver. I stood up, frantically waving my shirt in the air, then cried with sheer happiness as the dugout crossed the wide expanse of water and headed toward me. With calculated precision, the almost thirty-foot-long canoe beached just a few paces away.

Smiling, twelve people climbed out of the canoe- four women, four men, and four children. They looked odd in their Western clothes and the purple designs on their faces. Their hair was cut like mine, but the crown of their head was not shaved.

"**Maquiritare**?" I asked.

Nodding, the women bit their lips as if trying to contain their giggles. Their chins quivered until they burst into uncontrollable laughter that was echoed by the men. Hastily, I put on my jeans and shirt. The oldest woman came closer. She was short and sturdy, her sleeveless dress revealing round fat arms and long breasts, which hung to her waist. "You are the one who went into the forest with the old **Iticoteri** woman," she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to have found me paddling down-river in a dugout made by her people. "We know about you from the father at the mission." After formally shaking my hand, the old woman introduced me to her husband, their three daughters, their respective husbands and children.

"We left early this morning," the old woman's husband said. "We have been visiting relatives who live nearby."

"She has become a real savage," the youngest of the three daughters cried, pointing to my cut feet with such an expression of outrage that it was all I could do not to giggle. She searched my canoe and shook the empty knapsack. "She has no shoes," she said in disbelief. "She is a real savage!"

I looked at her bare feet.

"Our shoes are in the canoe," she affirmed, and proceeded to bring an assortment of footwear from the boat. "See? We all have shoes."

"Do you have any food with you?" I asked.

"We do," the old woman assured me, then asked her daughter to put the shoes back into the canoe, and bring one of the bark boxes.

The box was lined with **platanillo** leaves and filled with cassava bread. I huddled over the food, almost hugging it as I dunked piece after

piece into a water-filled calabash before popping it into my mouth. "My stomach is full and happy," I said after I had eaten halfway down the box.

The **Maquiritare** regretted that they had no meat but only sugarcane with them. The old man cut a foot-long piece, peeled the **bamboolike** bark with his machete, then handed it to me. "It will give you strength," he said.

I chewed and sucked on the pale hard fibers until they were dry and tasteless. The **Maquiritare** had heard about **Milagros**. One of the sons-in-law knew him personally, but none of them knew where **Milagros** was.

"We will take you to the mission," the old man said.

I made a feeble attempt to convince him that it was not necessary for him to retrace his steps, but my words lacked conviction. Eagerly I boarded the craft, sitting between the women and children. To take advantage of the full speed of the current, the men steered the canoe right into the middle of the river. They paddled without saying a word to each other, yet each man was so attuned to the others' rhythm that they were able to anticipate each other's precise needs in advance. I remembered **Milagros** had once mentioned to me that the **Maquiritare** were not only the greatest boat builders of the **Orinoco** area, but also the best navigators.

Exhaustion pressed heavily on my eyes. The rhythmic splashing of the paddles made me so drowsy, my head kept lolling forward and sideways. The bygone days and nights drifted through my mind like fragmented dreams of another time. It seemed all so vague, so far away, as if it had all been an illusion.

It was noon when I was awakened by Father **Coriolano**, who had come into the room to bring me a mug filled with coffee. "Eighteen hours of sleep is a good start," he said. His smile held the same reassuring warmth with which he had greeted me the day before as I stepped out of the **Maquiritare**'s boat.

My eyes were still heavy with sleep as I sat on the canvas **cot**. My back was stiff from resting in a flat position. Slowly, I sipped the hot black brew, so strong, and thickened with sugar it made me nauseous.

"I also have chocolate," Father **Coriolano** said.

I straightened the calico shift I had been given to sleep in, and followed him into the kitchen. With the flair of a chef preparing a fancy meal, he stirred two tablespoons of dried milk powder, four of Nestle's chocolate powder, four of sugar, and a few grains of salt into a pot of water boiling on a kerosene stove.

He drank my unfinished coffee while I spooned the delicious-tasting chocolate. "I can radio your friends in **Caracas** to pick you up with their plane anytime you want."

"**Oh**, not yet," I said faintly.

The days passed slowly. In the mornings I wandered around the gardens along the riverbank and at noon I sat under the large mango tree that bore no fruit outside the chapel. Father **Coriolano** did not ask me what my plans were, or how long I intended to stay at the mission. He seemed to have accepted my presence as something inevitable.

In the evenings I spent hours talking to Father **Coriolano** and to **Mr.** Barth, who often came to visit. We chatted about the crops, the school, the dispensary- always impersonal subjects. I was grateful that neither of

them asked me where I had been for over a year, what I had done, or what I had seen. I would not have been able to answer- not because I wanted to be secretive, but because there was nothing to say. If we exhausted our conversation, **Mr.** Barth would read us articles from newspapers and magazines, some over twenty years old. Regardless of whether we were listening or not, he rattled on as he pleased, now and then interrupting himself to roar with laughter.

In spite of their humor and affable nature, there were evenings when shadows of loneliness crossed their faces as we sat in silence listening to the rain pattering on the corrugated roof; or to the solitary cry of a howler monkey settling for the night. It was then that I wondered if they too had learned the secrets of the forest: secrets of misty caves; of the sound of sap running through branches and trunks; of spiders spinning their silvery webs. At those times I wondered if that was what Father **Coriolano** had tried to warn me about when he had talked of the dangers of the forest. And I wondered if it was this that kept them from returning to the world they had left behind.

At night, enclosed in the four walls of my room, I felt a vast emptiness. I missed the closeness of the huts, the smell of people and smoke. Carried by the sound of the river flowing outside my window, I dreamt I was with the **Iticoteri**. I heard **Ritimi**'s laughter, I saw the children's smiling faces, and there was always **Iramamowe**, squatting outside his hut calling to the **hekuras** that had eluded him.

Walking along the river's edge one afternoon, I was overcome by an uncontrollable sadness. The noise of the river was loud, drowning out the voices of the people chatting nearby. It had rained at noon and the sun peeked through the clouds without properly shining. Aimlessly I walked up and down the sandy beach. Then in the distance I saw the lonely figure of a man approaching. Dressed in khaki pants and a red checkered shirt, he looked indistinguishable from any of the Westernized Indians around the mission. Yet there was something familiar about the man's swaggering gait.

"**Milagros!**" I cried, then waited until he stood before me. His face looked unfamiliar under the torn straw hat through which his hair stuck out like blackened palm fibers. "I'm so glad you came."

Smiling, he motioned me to squat beside him. He brushed his hand over the top of my head. "Your hair has grown," he said. "I knew you would not leave until you saw me."

"I'm going back to **Los Angeles**," I said. There had been so many things I wanted to ask him, but now that he was beside me, I no longer saw the need to have anything explained. We watched the twilight spread over the river and the forest. The darkness filled with the sounds of frogs and crickets. A full moon ascended the sky. It grew smaller as it climbed and covered the river with silver ripples. "Like a dream," I murmured.

"A dream," **Milagros** repeated. "A dream you will always dream. A dream of walking, of laughter, of sadness." There was a long pause before he continued. "Even though your body has lost our smell, a part of you will always keep a bit of our world," he said, gesturing toward the distance. "You will never be free."

"I **didn't** even thank them," I said. "There is no thank you in your language."

"Neither is there good-bye," he added.

Something cold, like a drop of rain or dew, touched my forehead. When I turned to face him, **Milagros** was no longer by my side. From across the river, out of the distant darkness, the wind carried the **Iticoteri's** laughter. "Good-bye is said with the eyes." The voice rustled through the ancient trees, then vanished, like the silvery ripples on the water.

The End: **Shabono** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner**

Glossary follows...

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Florinda Donner-Grau - Shabono: Glossary

Version 2007.01.01

Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South

American **Rainforest** - 1982 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Glossary

ASHUKAMAKI (Ah shuh kah mah kee) A vine used to thicken the curare poison.

AYORI-TOTO (Ah yo ree toh toh) A vine used to poison fish.

EPENA (Eh peh nah) A hallucinatory snuff derived from either the bark of **theepena** tree or the seeds of the **hisioma** tree. Both substances are prepared and taken in the same fashion.

HEKURAS (Heh kuh rahs) Tiny humanoid spirits that dwell in rocks and mountains. Shamans contact the **hekuras** by taking the hallucinatory snuff **epena**. Through chants the shamans lure the **hekuras** into their chests. Successful shamans can control these spirits at will.

MAMUCORI (Mah muh ko ree) A thick vine used to make the curare poison.

MOMO (Moh moh) A nutlike edible seed.

NABRUSHI (Nah bru shee) A six-foot-long club used for fighting.

NAPE (Nah peh) A foreigner. Anyone who is not an Indian, regardless of color, race, or nationality.

OKO-SHIKI (Oh koh shee kee) Magical plants used for malevolent purposes.

ONOTO (Oh no toh) A red vegetable dye derived from the crushed, boiled seeds of the **Bixa orellana**. The dye is used for decorating the face and body as well as baskets, arrowheads, and ornaments.

PISHAANSI (Pee sha han see) A large leaf used for wrapping meat, for cooking, or as a receptacle.

PLATANILLO (Plah tah neeyo) A large, broad, sturdy leaf used for wrapping and as ground cover.

POHORO (Ph oh roh) Wild cacao.

RASHA (Rah sha) The cultivated spiny-trunked peach palm. Highly valued for its fruit, which it produces for fifty years and longer. After the plantain, it is probably the most important plant in the gardens. These palms are owned individually by whoever planted them.

SHABONO (Sha boh noh) A permanent **Yanomama** settlement consisting of a circle of huts around an open clearing.

SHAPORI (Sha poh ree) A shaman, witch doctor, sorcerer.

SIKOMASIK (See kouw mah seek) A whitish edible mushroom that grows on decaying tree trunks.

UNUCAI (Uh nuh kah ee) A man who has killed an enemy.

WAITERI (Wah ee teh ree) A brave, courageous warrior.

WAYAMOU (Wah yah mow) The formal, ritualized ceremonial language used by the men when bartering.

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Florinda Donner-Grau - The Witch's Dream: Book Start

Version 2007.03.04

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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FRONT FLAP

\$16.95

"The work of **Florinda Donner** has a most special significance for me... In solitude and against terrifying odds [she] has remained faithful to the warriors' path, and has followed don **Juan's** teachings to the letter."

-**Carlos Castaneda**

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Not since the publication of **Carlos Castaneda's** Teachings of Don **Juan** has there been a book as extraordinary as this- a young woman's initiation into the world of healers who succeed by ancient lore in curing the diseases that in our world are treated, often less successfully, by drugs, surgery, or psychoanalysis.

Florinda Donner immersed herself in the world of sorcery, witchcraft, and healing as the apprentice of a famous healer, **Mercedes Peralta**, in a small town in northeastern Venezuela. Just as **Carlos Castaneda** became the **Boswell** of don **Juan, Florinda**

(continued on back flap)

BACK FLAP

(continued from front flap)

Donner has succeeded in taking us into the mind and heart of a spiritual healer and illuminating the process, not as an outsider, but as a participant and an initiate.

She writes with both remarkable precision and a brilliant flair for the poetry and supernatural complexity of a world in which the healer and the patient relate to one another in the language of sorcery and dreams.

The Witches Dream is a landmark piece of work, a revelation of the power of the human mind over the human body.

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About the Author:

FLORINDA DONNER lives in Paris and **Sonora**, Mexico. She is also the author of **Shabono**.

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ARKANA

The Witch's Dream

Florinda Donner-Grau is an anthropologist and the author of
Shabono 1982, Witch's Dream 1985, and Being in Dreaming 1991.

She lives in Los Angeles, California, USA, and Sonora, Mexico.

The Witch's Dream

A Healer's Way of Knowledge

FLORINDA DONNER-GRAU

With a Foreword by CARLOS CASTANEDA

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TO ALL THOSE WHOM I CANNOT MENTION BY NAME

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Foreword

The work of Florinda Donner has a most special significance for me.
It is, in fact, in agreement with my own work, and at the same time it
deviates from it. Florinda Donner is my co-worker. We are both
involved in the same pursuit; both of us belong to the world of don Juan
Matus. The difference stems from her being female. In don Juan's world,
males and females go in the same direction, on the same warrior's path,
but on opposite sides of the road. Therefore, the views of the same
phenomena obtained from those two positions have to be different in
detail but not in flavor.

This proximity to Florinda Donner under any other circumstance
would unavoidably engender a sense of loyalty rather than one of
ruthless examination. But under the premises of the warrior's path,
which we both follow, loyalty is expressed only in terms of demanding
the best of ourselves. That best, for us, entails total examination of
whatever we do.

Following don Juan's teachings, I have applied the warrior's premise
of ruthless examination to Florinda Donner's work. I find that for me
there are three different levels, three distinct spheres, of appreciation in
it.

The first is the rich detail of her descriptions and narrative. To me,
that detail is ethnography. The minutiae of daily life, which is
commonplace in the cultural setting of the characters she describes, is
something thoroughly unknown to many of us readers.

The second has to do with art. I would dare say that an ethnographer
should also be a writer. In order to place us vicariously in the
ethnographic horizon he or she describes, an ethnographer would have
to be more than a social scientist: An ethnographer would have to be an
artist.

The third is the honesty, simplicity, and directness of the work. It is
here, without doubt, where I am most exigent. Florinda Donner and I
have been molded by the same forces; therefore, her work must conform
to a general pattern of striving for excellence. Don Juan has taught us
that our work has to be a complete reflection of our lives.

I can't help having a warrior's sense of admiration and respect for
Florinda Donner, who in solitude and against terrifying odds has

maintained her equanimity, has remained faithful to the warrior's path, and has followed don **Juan**'s teachings to the letter.

- **CARLOS CASTANEDA**

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Author's Note

The state of **Miranda**, in northeastern Venezuela, was populated by **Carib** and **Ciparicoto** Indians during **prehispanic** times. During colonial times, two other racial and cultural groups became prominent there: the Spanish colonizers; and the African slaves that the Spaniards brought to work their plantations and mines.

The descendants of those Indians, Spaniards, and Africans make up the mixed population that presently inhabits the small hamlets, villages, and towns scattered over the inland and coastal areas.

Some of the towns in the state of **Miranda** are famous for their healers; many of whom are also spiritualists, mediums, and sorcerers.

In the **midseventies**, I made a trip to **Miranda**. Being at that time an anthropology student interested in healing practices, I worked with a woman healer. To honor her request for anonymity, I have given her the name **Mercedes Peralta**, and I have called her town **Curmina**.

As faithfully and accurately as I could, and with the healer's permission, I recorded in a field diary everything about my relation with her, from the moment I came to her house. I also recorded separately what some of her patients told me about themselves.

The present work consists of portions of my field diary, and the stories of those patients who were selected by **Mercedes Peralta** herself.

The parts taken from my field diary are written in the first person. I have, however, rendered the patient's stories into the third person. This is the only liberty I have taken with the material, other than changing the names and the personal data of the characters of the stories.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 1

It began for me with a transcendental event; an event that shaped the course of my life. I met a **nagual**. He was an Indian from northern Mexico.

The dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy defines **nagual** as the Spanish adaptation of a word that means sorcerer or wizard in the **Nahuatl** language of southern Mexico.

Traditional stories of **naguals**- men of ancient times who possessed extraordinary powers and performed acts that defied the imagination- do exist in modern Mexico.

But in an urban or even rural setting today, actual **naguals** are purely legendary. They seem to live only in folktales, through hearsay, or in the world of fantasy.

The **nagual** I met, however, was real. There was nothing illusory about him.

When I asked him out of well-meant curiosity what made him a **nagual**, he presented a seemingly simple, and yet utterly complex idea as an explanation for what he did and what he was.

He told me that **nagualism** begins with two certainties: the certainty that human beings are extraordinary beings living in an extraordinary world; and the certainty that neither men nor the world should ever be taken for granted under any circumstances.

From those sweet, simple premises, he said, grows a simple conclusion: **Nagualism** is at once taking off one mask and wearing another.

Naguals take off the mask that makes us see ourselves and the world we live in as ordinary, lusterless, predictable, and repetitious; and put on the second mask, the one that helps us see ourselves- and our surroundings- for what we really are; breathtaking events that bloom into transitory existence once, and are never to be repeated again.

After meeting that unforgettable **nagual**, I had a moment's hesitation due solely to the fear I felt on examining such an imposing paradigm.

I wanted to run away from that **nagual** and his quest, but I could not do it. Some time later, I took a drastic step and joined him and his party.

But this is not a story about that **nagual**, although his ideas and his influence bear heavily in everything I do. It is not my task to write about him or even to name him. There are others in his group who do that.

When I joined him, he took me to Mexico to meet a strange, striking woman- without telling me that she was perhaps the most knowledgeable and influential woman of his group.

Her name was **Florinda Matus**. In spite of her worn, drab clothes, she had the innate elegance of most tall, thin women.

Her pale complexioned face, gaunt and severe, was crowned by braided white hair and highlighted by large, luminous eyes.

Her husky voice and her joyful, youthful laughter eased my irrational fear of her.

The **nagual** left me in her charge.

The first thing I asked **Florinda** was whether she was a **nagual** herself.

Smiling rather enigmatically, she further refined the definition of the word. She said, "To be a sorcerer or a wizard or a witch **doesn't** mean to be a **nagual**. But any of them can be one if he or she is responsible for and leads a group of men and women involved in a specific quest of knowledge."

When I asked her what that quest was, she responded that for those men and women it was to find the second mask; the one that helps us see ourselves and the world for what we really are- breathtaking events.

But this is not the story of **Florinda** either, despite the fact that she is the woman who guides me in every act I perform. This is, rather, the story of one of the many things she made me do.

"For women the quest of knowledge is indeed a very curious affair," **Florinda** told me once. "We have to go through strange maneuvers."

"Why is that so, **Florinda**?"

"Because women really don't care."

"I care."

"You say you care. You really don't."

"I'm here with you. **Doesn't** that speak for my caring?"

"No. What happened is that you like the **nagual**. His personality overwhelms you. I am the same myself. I was overwhelmed by the preceding **nagual**; the most irresistible sorcerer there was."

"I admit you are right but only partially. I do care about the **nagual's** quest."

"I don't doubt it. But that's not enough. Women need some specific maneuvers, in order to get at the core of themselves."

"What maneuvers? What core of ourselves are you talking about, **Florinda**?"

"If there is something inside us that we don't know about- such as hidden resources, unsuspected guts and cunning, or nobility of the spirit in the face of sorrow and pain- it will come out if we are confronted by the unknown while we are alone; without friends, without familiar boundaries, without support."

"If nothing comes out of us under those circumstances, it's because we have nothing."

"And before you say you really care for the **nagual's** quest, you must first find out for yourself whether there is something inside you. I demand that you do that."

"I don't think I am any good at being tested, **Florinda**."

"My question is: Can you live without knowing whether or not you have something hidden inside you?"

"But what if I am one of those who have nothing?"

"If that's the case, then I will have to ask you my second question: Can you go on being in the world you have chosen if you have nothing inside you?"

"Why, of course I can continue to be here. I've already joined you."

"No. You only think you have chosen my world. To choose the **nagual's** world is not just a matter of saying you have. You must prove it."

"How do you think I should go about doing that?"

"I'll give you a suggestion. You don't have to follow it, but if you do, you should go alone to the place where you were born. Nothing could be easier than that. Go there and take your chances, whatever they may be."

"But your suggestion is impractical. I don't have good feelings about that place. I **didn't** leave in good standing."

"So much the better: The odds will be stacked against you. That's why I picked your country. Women don't like to be bothered too much: If they have to bother with things, they go to pieces. Prove to me that you are not that way."

"What would you suggest I do in that place?"

"Be yourself. Do your work. You said that you want to be an anthropologist. Be one. What could be simpler?"

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 2

Years later, following **Florinda's** suggestions, I finally went to Venezuela, the country of my birth.

On the surface, I went to gather anthropological data on healing practices. Actually, I was there to carry out, under **Florinda's** guidance, the maneuvers necessary to discover whether I possessed hidden resources, without which I could not remain in the **nagual's** world.

The agreement that my journey must be a solitary one was nearly drawn out of me by force. With strong words and decisive gestures, **Florinda** served notice that under no circumstances should I seek counsel from anyone around me during the trip.

Knowing that I was in college, she strongly advised me not to use the trappings of academic life while in the field. I should not ask for a grant, have academic supervisors, or even ask my family and friends for help.

I should let circumstances dictate the path to follow; once I had taken it, I must plunge into it with the fierceness of women on the warrior's path.

I arranged to go to Venezuela on an informal visit. I would see my relatives, I thought, and gather information on any possibility for a future study in cultural anthropology.

Florinda praised me for my speed and thoroughness.

I thought she was humoring me. There was nothing to praise me for.

I mentioned to her that what worried me was her lack of instructions. Again and again I asked her for more details about my role in Venezuela.

As the date of my departure approached, I became increasingly anxious about the outcome of it all. I insisted, in no uncertain terms, that I needed more specific instructions.

Florinda and I were sitting in wicker chairs, comfortably padded by soft cushions, under the shade of one of the many fruit trees growing in her huge court patio.

In her long unbleached muslin dress, her wide-brimmed hat, fanning herself with a lace fan, **Florinda** looked like someone from another time.

"Forget about specific information," she said impatiently. "It won't do you any good."

"It certainly will do me a lot of good," I insisted. "I really don't understand why you're doing this to me, **Florinda**."

"Blame it on the fact that I am in the **nagual's** world; on the fact that I am a woman and that I belong to a different mood."

"Mood? What do you mean by a different mood?"

She gazed at me with remote, disinterested eyes. "I wish you could hear yourself talking. What mood?" she mocked me. Her face expressed tolerant contempt. "I don't go for seemingly orderly arrangements of thought and deed. For me, order is different from arranging things neatly. I don't give a damn about stupidity and I have no patience. That's the mood."

"That sounds dreadful, **Florinda**. I was led to believe that in the **nagual's** world, people are above pettiness and don't behave impatiently."

"Being in the **nagual's** world has nothing to do with my impatience," she said, making a humorous, hopeless gesture. "You see, I'm impeccably impatient."

"I really would like to know what it means to be impeccably impatient."

"It means that I am, for instance, perfectly conscious that you are boring me now with your stupid insistence on having detailed instructions. My impatience tells me that I should stop you. But it is my impeccability that will make you shut up at once.

"All this boils down to the following: If you persist in asking for details guided only by your bad habit of having everything spelled out, in spite of my telling you to stop, I'll hit you. But I'll never be angry at you, or hold it against you."

In spite of her serious tone I had to laugh. "Would you really hit me, **Florinda**? Well, hit me if you have to," I added, seeing her determined face. "But I've got to know what I am going to do in Venezuela. I'm going crazy with worry."

"All right! If you insist on knowing the details I consider important, I'll tell you.

"I hope you understand we're separated by an abyss, and this abyss can't be bridged by talk.

Males can build bridges with their words: Women can't. You're imitating males now.

"Women have to make the bridge with their acts. We give birth, you know. We make people.

"I want you to go away so that in aloneness you'll find out what your strengths or weaknesses are."

"I understand what you say, **Florinda**, but consider my position."

Florinda relented, dismissing the retort that arose to her lips.

"All right, all right," she said wearily, motioning me to move my chair next to hers.

"I'm going to give you the details I consider important for your trip.

Fortunately for you, they are not the detailed instructions you are after.

What you want is for me to tell you exactly what to do in a future situation, and when to do it. That's something quite stupid to ask. How can I give you instructions about something that doesn't yet exist?

I'll give you, instead, instructions on how to arrange your thoughts, feelings, and reactions. With that in hand, you'll take care of any eventuality that might arise."

"Are you really serious, **Florinda**?" I asked in disbelief.

"I'm deadly serious," she assured me.

Leaning forward in her chair, she went on speaking with a half smile about to break into a laugh.

"The first detailed item to consider is taking stock of yourself. You see, in the **nagual**'s world, we must be responsible for our actions."

She reminded me that I knew the warrior's path. In the time I had been with her, she said, I had received extensive training in the laborious practical philosophy of the **nagual**'s world.

Therefore, any detailed instructions she might give me now would have to be, actually, a detailed reminder of the warrior's path.

"In the warrior's path, women don't feel important," she went on, in the tone of someone reciting from memory, "because importance waters down fierceness.

"In the warrior's path women are fierce. They remain fiercely impassive under any conditions.

"They don't demand anything, yet they are willing to give anything of

themselves.

"They fiercely seek a signal from the spirit of things in the form of a kind word, an appropriate gesture; and when they get it, they express their thanks by redoubling their fierceness.

"In the warrior's path, women don't judge. They fiercely reduce themselves to nothing in order to listen, to watch; so that they can conquer and be humbled by their conquest; or be defeated and be enhanced by their defeat.

"In the warrior's path, women don't surrender. They may be defeated a thousand times, but they never surrender.

And above all, in the warrior's path, women are free."

Unable to interrupt her, I had kept gazing at **Florinda**, fascinated though not quite grasping what she was saying.

I felt acute despair when she stopped as though she had nothing more to tell me. Without quite wanting to, I began crying uncontrollably. I knew that what she had just told me could not help me to resolve my problems.

She let me cry for a long time and then she laughed. "You really are weeping!" she said in disbelief.

"You are the most heartless, unfeeling person I've ever met," I said between sobs. "You're ready to send me God knows where, and you don't even tell me what I should do."

"But I just did," she said still laughing.

"What you just said has no value in a real-life situation," I retorted angrily. "You sounded like a dictator spouting slogans."

Florinda regarded me cheerfully. "You'll be surprised how much use you can get out of those stupid slogans," she said.

"But now, let us come to an understanding. **Fm** not sending you any place. You're a woman in the warrior's path, you're free to do what you wish, you know that.

"You haven't yet grasped what the **nagual**'s world is all about. I'm not your teacher; I'm not your mentor; I'm not responsible for you. No one but yourself is.

"The hardest thing to grasp about the **nagual**'s world is that it offers total freedom. But freedom is not free.

"I took you under my wing because you have a natural ability to see things as they are; to remove yourself from a situation and see the wonder of it all.

"That's a gift: You were born like that. It takes years for average persons in the **nagual**'s world to remove themselves from their involvement with themselves and be capable of seeing the wonder of it all."

Regardless of her praise, I was nearly beyond myself with anxiety.

She finally calmed me down by promising that just before my plane left she would give me the specific detailed information I wanted.

I waited in the departure lobby of the airline, but **Florinda didn't** show up at all.

Despondent and filled with self-pity, I gave free rein to my despair and disappointment. With no concern for the curious glances around me, I sat down and wept.

I felt lonelier than I had ever felt before.

All I could think of was that no one had come to see me off: No one

had come to help me with my suitcase. I was used to having relatives and friends see me off.

Florinda had warned me that anyone who chose the **nagual**'s world had to be prepared for fierce aloneness.

She had made it clear that to her, aloneness did not mean loneliness but a physical state of solitude.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Never had I realized how sheltered my life had been.

In a hotel room in **Caracas**, alone and without any idea of what to do next, I came to experience first hand the solitariness **Florinda** had talked about.

My parents were not in Venezuela at the time, and I was unable to contact my brothers by telephone.

All I felt like doing was sitting on the hotel bed and watching **TV**. I **didn't** want to touch my suitcase. I even thought of taking the plane back to **Los Angeles**.

Only after tremendous effort did I begin to unpack.

Neatly tucked inside a pair of folded slacks I found a piece of paper with **Florinda**'s handwriting. I read it avidly.

Don't worry about details. Details tend to adjust themselves to serve the circumstances if one has conviction. Your plans should be as follows. Pick anything and call that the beginning. Then go and face the beginning. Once you are face to face with the beginning, let it take you wherever it may. I trust that your convictions won't let you pick a capricious beginning. Be realistic and frugal, so as to select wisely. Do it now!!

P.S. Anything would do for a start.

Possessed by **Florinda**'s decisiveness, I picked up the phone, and dialed the number of an old friend of mine: I was not sure she would still be in **Caracas**.

The polite lady who answered the phone gave me other possible numbers to call because my friend was no longer at that address.

I called all of them, for I could no longer stop. The beginning was taking hold of me.

Finally I located a married couple I knew from childhood; my parents' friends.

They wanted to see me immediately, but they were going to a wedding in an hour, so they insisted on taking me along. They assured me it was all right.

At the wedding I met an **ex**-Jesuit priest, who was an amateur anthropologist.

We talked for hours on end. I told him of my interest in anthropological studies.

As if he had been waiting for me to say a magical word, he began to expound on the controversial value of folk healers, and the social role they play in their societies.

I had not mentioned healers or healing in general as a possible topic

for my study, although it was foremost in my mind.

Instead of feeling happy that he seemed to be addressing himself to my inner thoughts, I was filled with an apprehension that verged on fear.

When he told me that I should not go to the town of **Sortes**, even though it was purported to be the center of spiritualism in western Venezuela, I felt genuinely annoyed with him.

He seemed to be anticipating me at every turn. It was precisely to that small town that I had planned to go if nothing else happened.

I was just about to excuse myself and leave the party, when he said in quite a loud tone that I should seriously consider going to the town of **Curmina**, in northern Venezuela, where I could have phenomenal success because the town was a new, true center of spiritualism and healing.

"I don't know how I know it, but I know you're dying to be with the witches of **Curmina**," he said in a dry, matter-of-fact tone.

He took a piece of paper, and drew a map of the region.

He gave me exact distances in kilometers from **Caracas** to the various points in the area where he said spiritualists, sorcerers, witches, and healers lived.

He placed special emphasis on one name: **Mercedes Peralta**. He underlined it and, totally unaware of it, first encircled it, then drew a heavy square around it and boxed it in.

"She's a spiritualist, a witch, and a healer," he said smiling at me. "Be sure you go and see her, will you?"

I knew what he was talking about. Under **Florinda**'s guidance, I had met and worked with spiritualists, sorcerers, witches, and healers in northern Mexico and among the Latino population of southern California.

From the very beginning **Florinda** classified them.

Spiritualists are practitioners who entreat the spirits of saints or devils to intercede for them, with a higher order, on behalf of their patients.

Their function is to get in touch with spirits and interpret their advice. The advice is obtained in meetings during which spirits are called.

Sorcerers and witches are practitioners who affect their patients directly.

Through their knowledge of occult arts, they bring unknown and unpredictable elements to bear on the two kinds of people who come to see them: patients in search of help; and clients in search of their witchcraft services.

Healers are practitioners who strive exclusively to restore health and well-being.

Florinda made sure she added to her classification the possible combinations of all three.

In a joking way, but in all seriousness, she claimed that in matters of restoring health, I was predisposed to believe that non-Western healing practices were more holistic than Western medicine.

She made it clear that I was wrong.

Healing, **Florinda** said, depended on the practitioner and not on a body of knowledge.

Florinda maintained that there was no such thing as non-Western healing practices.

Healing, unlike medicine, was not a formalized discipline.

She used to tease that in my own way, I was as prejudiced as those who believe that if a patient is cured by means of medicinal plants, massages, or incantations, either the disease was psychosomatic or the cure was the result of a lucky accident that the practitioner did not understand.

Florinda was convinced that a person who successfully restored health, whether a doctor or a folk healer, was someone who could alter the body's fundamental feelings about itself and the body's link with the world- that is, someone who offered the body, as well as the mind, new possibilities so that the habitual mold to which body and mind had learned to conform could be systematically broken down.

Other dimensions of awareness would then become accessible, and the commonsense expectations of disease and health could become transformed as new bodily meanings became **crystalized**.

Florinda had laughed when I expressed genuine surprise upon hearing such thoughts which were revolutionary to me at the time.

She told me that everything she said stemmed from the knowledge she shared with her companions in the **nagual**'s world.

Having followed the instructions in **Florinda**'s note, I let the situation guide me: I let it develop with minimal interference on my part.

I felt I had to go to **Curmina**, and look up the woman that the **ex**-Jesuit priest had talked about.

When I first arrived at **Mercedes Peralta**'s house, I did not have to wait long in the shadowy corridor before a voice called me from behind the curtain directly in front of me that served as a door.

I climbed the two steps leading to a large, dimly lit room that smelled of cigar smoke and ammonia.

Several candles, burning on a massive altar that stood against the far wall, illuminated the figurines and pictures of saints arranged around the blue-robed Virgin of **Coromoto**.

It was a finely carved statue with red smiling lips, rouged cheeks, and eyes that seemed to fix me with a benign, forgiving gaze.

I stepped closer.

In the corner, almost hidden between the altar and a high rectangular table, sat **Mercedes Peralta**.

She appeared to be asleep, with her head resting against the back of her chair; her eyes closed.

She looked extremely old.

I had never seen such a face. Even in its restful immobility, it revealed a frightening strength.

The glow of the candles, rather than softening her sharply chiseled features, only accentuated the determination etched in the network of wrinkles.

Slowly, she opened her eyes.

They were large and almond shaped. The whites of her eyes were slightly discolored.

At first her eyes were almost blank, but then they became alive and stared at me with the unnerving directness of a child.

Seconds passed and gradually under her unwavering gaze, which was neither friendly nor unfriendly, I began to feel uncomfortable.

"Good afternoon, dona **Mercedes**," I greeted her before I started to lose all my courage and run out of the house.

"My name is **Florinda Donner**, and I am going to be very direct so as not to waste your valuable time."

She blinked repeatedly, adjusting her eyes to look at me.

"I **ve** come to Venezuela to study healing methods," I went on, gaining confidence. "I study at a university in the United States, but I truly would like to be a healer. I can pay you if you take me as your student. But even if you don't take me as your student, I can pay you for any information you would give me."

The old woman did not say a word.

She motioned me to sit down on a stool, then rose and gazed at a metal instrument on the table. There was a comical expression on her face as she turned to look at me.

"What is that apparatus?" I asked daringly.

"It's a nautical compass," she said casually. "It tells me all kinds of things."

She picked it up and placed it on the topmost shelf of a glass cabinet that stood against the opposite wall.

Apparently struck by a funny thought, she began to laugh. "I **m** going to make something clear to you right now," she said.

"Yes, I **ll** give you all kinds of information about healing, not because you ask me, but because you **re** lucky: I already know that for sure.

"What I don't know is if you **re** strong as well."

The old woman was silent, then she spoke again in a forced whisper without looking at me; her attention on something inside the glass cabinet.

"Luck and strength are all that count in everything," she said.

"I knew the night I saw you by the plaza that you are lucky, and that you were looking for me."

"I don't understand what you **re** talking about," I said.

Mercedes Peralta turned to face me, then laughed in such a discordant manner that I felt certain she was mad. She opened her mouth so wide I could see the few molars she still had left.

She stopped abruptly, sat on her chair, and insisted that she had seen me exactly two weeks ago late at night in the plaza.

She had been with a friend, she explained, who was driving her home from a seance that had taken place in one of the coastal towns.

Although her friend had been baffled to see me alone so late at night, she herself had not been in the least surprised. "You reminded me instantly of someone I once knew," she said. "It was past midnight. You smiled at me."

I did not remember seeing her, or being alone in the plaza at that hour.

But it could have been that she had seen me the night I had arrived from **Caracas**. After waiting in vain for the week-long rain to stop, I had finally risked the drive from **Caracas** to **Curmina**.

I knew full well that there would be landslides: It turned out that instead of the usual two hours, the drive took me four.

By the time I had arrived, the whole town was asleep, and I had trouble finding the hostel near the plaza, which had also been recommended to me by the former priest.

Mystified by her insistence that she knew I was coming to see her, I told her about him and what he had said to me at the wedding in

Caracas.

"He was quite insistent that I look you up," I said. "He mentioned that your ancestors were sorcerers and healers- famous during colonial times, and that they were persecuted by the Holy Inquisition."

A flicker of surprise widened her eyes slightly. "Did you know that in those days accused witches were sent to Cartagena in Colombia to be tried?" she asked and immediately went on to say, "Venezuela wasn't important enough to have an Inquisitorial tribunal."

She paused and, looking straight into my eyes, asked, "Where had you originally planned to study healing methods?"

"In the state of Yaracuy," I said vaguely.

"Sortes?" she inquired. "Maria Lionza?"

I nodded.

Sortes is the town where the cult of Maria Lionza is centered.

Maria Lionza is said to have been born of an Indian princess and a Spanish conquistador, and she is purported to have had supernatural powers.

Today, she is revered by thousands in Venezuela as a saintly miraculous woman.

"But I took the ex-priest's advice and came to Curmina instead," I said.

"I've already talked with two women healers. Both agreed that you're the most knowledgeable; the only one who could explain healing matters to me."

I talked about the methods I wanted to follow, making it all up on the spur of the moment: direct observation, and participation in some of the healing sessions while tape recording them- and, most important of all, systematic interviewing of the patients I observed.

The old woman nodded, giggling from time to time.

To my great surprise, she was totally amenable to my proposed methods. She proudly informed me that years ago she had been interviewed by a psychologist from a university in Caracas, who had stayed for a week right there in her house.

"To make it easier for you," she suggested, "you can come and live with us. We have plenty of rooms in the house."

I accepted her invitation, but told her that I had planned to stay for at least six months in the area.

She seemed unperturbed. As far as she was concerned, I could stay for years.

"I'm glad you're here, Musiua," she added softly.

I smiled. Although born and raised in Venezuela, I have been called a musiua (moo-see-yua) all my life.

It is usually a derogatory term, but depending on the tone in which it is said, it can be turned into a rather affectionate expression referring to anyone who is blond and blue-eyed.

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Version 2007.02.25

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by [Florinda](#)

[Donner-Grau](#)

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Men and women with closed eyes were sitting beside me on old wooden chairs arranged in a circle.

Startled by the faint rustle of a skirt swishing past me, I opened my eyes, and gazed at the candle burning on the altar in the semidarkness of the room.

The flame flickered and sent up a single black thread of smoke.

On the wall appeared a woman's shadow with a stick in its hand. The shadow seemed to impale the heads of the men and women.

I could barely stifle a nervous giggle upon realizing that it was Mercedes Peralta, placing big, hand-rolled cigars in everyone's mouth.

She took the candle from the altar, and lit each cigar with it.

Then she returned to her chair in the middle of the circle.

In a deep monotonous voice she began to chant an unintelligible, repetitious incantation.

Suppressing a fit of coughing, I tried to synchronize my smoking with the rapid puffing of the people around me.

Through teary eyes I watched their solemn, masklike faces becoming momentarily animated with every puff until they seemed to dissolve in the thickening smoke.

Like a disembodied object, Mercedes Peralta's hand materialized out of that vaporous haze. Snapping her fingers, she repeatedly traced the air with the imaginary lines connecting the four cardinal points.

Imitating the others, I began to sway my head to and fro, to the rhythmic sound of her snapping fingers, and her low-voiced incantations.

Ignoring my growing nausea, I forced myself to keep my eyes open so as not to miss a single detail of what was occurring around me.

This was the first time I had been allowed to attend a meeting of spiritualists. Dona Mercedes was going to serve as the medium and contact the spirits.

Dona Mercedes' own definition of spiritualists, witches, and healers was the same as Florinda's; with the exception that she recognized another independent class: Mediums.

Dona Mercedes defined mediums as the interpreting intermediaries who serve as conduits for the spirits to express themselves.

She understood that mediums were so independent that they did not have to belong to any of the three other categories. And they could also be all four categories in one.

"There is a disturbing force in the room." A man's voice interrupted dona Mercedes' incantations.

Smoldering cigars perforated the smoky darkness like accusing eyes as the rest of the group mumbled their agreement.

"I'll see to it," dona Mercedes said, rising from her chair.

She went from person to person, pausing for an instant behind each one.

I yelled out in pain as I felt something sharp piercing my shoulder.

"Come with me," she whispered into my ear. "You aren't in a trance."

Afraid I would resist, she took me firmly by the arm, and led me to the red curtain that served as a door.

"But you yourself asked me to come," I insisted before I was pushed out of the room. "I won't bother anyone if I sit quietly in a corner."

"You'll bother the spirits," she murmured, and noiselessly drew the curtain shut.

I walked to the kitchen at the back of the house, where I usually worked at night transcribing tapes, and organizing my gradually growing field notes.

Swarms of insects clustered around the single bulb dangling from the kitchen ceiling.

Its weak light illuminated the wooden table standing in the middle of the room, but left the room's corners in shadows; where the flea-ridden, mangy dogs slept.

One side of the rectangular kitchen was open to the yard.

Against the other three soot-blackened walls stood a raised adobe cooking pit, a kerosene stove, and a round metal tub filled with water.

I walked into the moonlit yard.

The cement slab where dona **Mercedes'** companion **Candelaria** spread out well-soaped clothes to whiten in the sun each day shone like a silvery puddle of water.

The wash hanging on the lines looked like white stains against the darkness of the stucco wall encircling the yard.

Outlined by the moon, fruit trees, medicinal plants, and vegetable patches formed a uniform dark mass humming with insects and the strident call of crickets.

I returned to the kitchen, and checked the pot simmering on the stove.

No matter what time of day or night, there was always something to eat. Usually it was a hearty soup made of meat, chicken, or fish, depending on what was available, and an assortment of vegetables and roots.

I searched for a soup plate among the dishes piled on the wide adobe shelves built into the wall. There were dozens of unmatched china, metal, and plastic plates.

I served myself a large bowl of chicken soup, but before sitting down, I remembered to scoop out some water from the nearby tub and replenish the pot on the stove.

It had not taken me long to familiarize myself with the habits of that eccentric household.

I started to write down what had transpired in the meeting. Trying to recollect every detail of an event or every word of a conversation was always the best exercise to fight off the sense of loneliness that invariably came upon me.

The cold nose of a dog rubbed against my leg. I searched for leftover pieces of bread, fed them to the dog, and then returned to my notes.

I worked until I felt sleepy and my eyes burned, strained by the weak light. I collected my tape recorder and papers, then headed toward my room, situated at the other end of the house.

I paused for an instant in the inside patio.

It was patched with moonlight. A faint breeze stirred the leaves of the gnarled grape vine; its jagged shadows painted lacy patterns on the brick courtyard.

I felt her presence before actually seeing the woman: She was squatting on the ground, almost hidden by the large terra-cotta pots scattered throughout the patio.

A wooly mop of hair crowned her head like a white halo, but her dark face remained indistinct, blending in with the shadows around her.

I had never seen her in the house before.

I recovered from my initial fright by reasoning that she must be one of dona **Mercedes'** friends, or perhaps one of her patients, or even one of **Candelaria's** relatives, who was waiting for her to come out of the seance.

"Pardon me," I said. "I'm new here. I work with dona **Mercedes.**"

The woman nodded as I spoke. She gave me the impression she knew what I was talking about; but she did not break her silence.

Possessed by an inexplicable uneasiness, I tried not to succumb to hysterical fright. I kept repeating to myself that I had no reason to panic because an old woman was squatting in the patio.

"Were you at the seance?" I asked in an uncertain voice.

The woman shook her head affirmatively.

"I was there, too," I said, "but dona **Mercedes** kicked me out."

I felt relieved all of a sudden and wanted to make fun of the situation.

"Are you afraid of me?" the old woman asked abruptly. Her voice had a cutting, raspy, yet youthful sound.

I laughed. I was about to say no with a flippant air, when something held me back. I heard myself saying that I was terrified of her.

"Come with me," the woman ordered me matter-of-factly.

Again my first reaction was to follow her boldly; but instead, I heard myself saying something I had not intended. "I have to finish my work. If you care to talk to me, you can do it here and now."

"I command you to come!" the woman's voice boomed.

All the energy of my body seemed to drain out of me at once.

Yet, I stated, "Why don't you command yourself to stay."

I could not believe I had said that. I was ready to apologize, when a strange reserve of energy flowed into my body, and made me feel almost under control.

"Have it your way," the woman said, and stood up from her squatting position.

Her height was inconceivable. She grew and grew until her knees were at my eye level.

At that point I felt my energy leaving me and I let out a series of wild, piercing screams.

Dona **Mercedes'** companion **Candelaria** came rushing to my side. She covered the distance between the room where the meeting of spiritualists was taking place and the patio before I had time to gasp for air, and scream once more.

"Everything is all right now," she repeated in a soothing voice that seemed to come from far away.

Gently, she rubbed my neck and back, but I could not stop from shaking.

And then without wanting to, I began to cry.

"I **shouldn't** have left you by yourself," she said apologetically. "But who would've thought a **musiua** would see her?"

Before any of the other participants in the meeting came out to see what was going on, **Candelaria** took me to the kitchen. She helped me into a chair and gave me a glass of rum.

I drank it and told her what had happened in the patio.

The instant I had finished both the rum and my account, I felt drowsy, distracted, but far from drunk.

Not only did **Candelaria** put me to bed, she also placed a **cot** alongside so that she would be there when I awoke.

"Leave us alone, **Candelaria**," dona **Mercedes** said, stepping into my room.

After a long silence, dona **Mercedes** began, "I don't know how to say this, but you're a medium.

"I knew this all along." Her feverish eyes seemed to be suspended in a crystalline substance as she studied my face intently.

"The only reason they did let you sit in the seance was because you're lucky. Mediums are lucky."

In spite of my apprehension I had to laugh.

"Don't laugh about this," she admonished. "It's serious.

In the patio you called a spirit all by yourself, and the most important spirit of them all came to you; the spirit of one of my ancestors. She **doesn't** come often, but when she does, it's for important reasons."

"Was she a ghost?" I asked stupidly.

"Of course she was a ghost," she said firmly. "We understand things the way we've been taught. There are no deviations from that.

Our beliefs are that you saw a most frightening spirit; and that a live medium can communicate with the spirit of a dead medium."

"Why would that spirit come to me?" I asked.

"I don't know. She came to me once to warn me," she replied, "but I **didn't** follow her advice."

Dona **Mercedes**' eyes became gentle, and her voice grew softer as she added, "The first thing I told you when you arrived was that you're lucky.

I was lucky, too, until someone broke my luck.

You remind me of that person. He was as blond as you are.

His name was **Federico** and he also had luck, but he had no strength whatsoever.

The spirit told me to leave him alone. I **didn't**, and I am still paying for it."

At a loss as to how to take the sudden turn of events, or the sadness that had come upon her, I placed my hand over hers.

"He had no strength whatsoever," she repeated. "The spirit knew it."

Although **Mercedes Peralta** was always willing to discuss anything pertaining to her practices, she had quite emphatically discouraged my curiosity regarding her past. Once, and I don't know whether I caught her unaware or whether it was a deliberate move on her part, she revealed that she had suffered a great loss many years ago.

Before I had a chance to decide whether she was actually encouraging me to ask personal questions, she lifted my hand to her face, and held it against her cheek. "Feel these scars," she whispered.

"What happened to you?" I asked, running my fingers over the rough scar tissue on her cheeks and neck.

Until I touched them, the scars had been indistinguishable from the wrinkles. Her dark skin felt so brittle I was afraid it would disintegrate in my hand.

A mysterious vibration emanated from her entire body. I could not shift my gaze from her eyes.

"We won't talk about what you saw in the patio," she said emphatically. "Things like that pertain only to the world of mediums, and you should never discuss that world with anyone. I would certainly

advise you not to be afraid of that spirit, but do not beckon her foolishly."

She helped me get out of my bed, and led me outside to the same spot in the patio where I had seen the woman. As I stood there inspecting the darkness around us, I realized that I had no idea whether I had slept a few hours or an entire night and day.

Dona **Mercedes** seemed to be aware of my confusion. "It's four in the morning," she said. "You've slept almost five hours."

She crouched where the woman had been. I squatted beside her between the shrubs of jasmine hanging down from wooden lattices; like perfumed curtains.

"It never occurred to me that you **didn't** know how to smoke," she said, and laughed her dry raspy laughter.

She reached inside her skirt pocket, pulled out a cigar, and lit it.

"At a meeting of spiritualists, we smoke hand-rolled cigars. Spiritualists know that the smell of tobacco pleases the spirits."

After a short pause, she put the lit cigar in my mouth. "Try to smoke," she ordered.

I drew on it, inhaling deeply. The heavy smoke made me cough.

"Don't inhale," she said impatiently. "Let me show you how."

She reached for the cigar, and puffed at it repeatedly, breathing in and out in short even spurts.

"You don't want the smoke to go to your lungs, but to your head," she explained.

"That's the way a medium calls the spirits.

From now on, you're going to call the spirits from this spot.

And don't talk about it until you can conduct a spiritualist's meeting all by yourself."

"But I don't want to call the spirits," I laughingly protested. "All I want is to sit in one of the meetings and watch."

She regarded me with a threatening determination. "You are a medium, and no medium goes to a meeting to watch."

"What is the reason for a meeting?" I asked, changing the subject.

"To ask questions of the spirits," she promptly responded. "Some spirits give great advice. Others are malevolent."

She chuckled with a touch of malice. "Which spirit shows up depends on the medium's state of being."

"Are mediums, then, at the mercy of the spirits?" I asked.

She was silent for a long time, looking at me without betraying any feelings in her face.

Then in a defiant tone she said, "They are not if they are strong."

She continued staring at me fiercely, then she closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were devoid of all expression.

"Help me to my room," she murmured.

Holding on to my head, she straightened up. Her hand slid down my shoulder, then to my arm, the stiff fingers curling around my wrist like carbonized roots.

Silently, we shuffled down the dark corridor where wooden benches and chairs covered with goat hide stood rigidly against the wall.

She stepped inside her bedroom. Before closing the door she reminded me again that mediums do not talk about their world.

"I knew the instant I saw you in the plaza that you were a medium, and that you would be coming to see me," she affirmed.

A smile, the meaning of which I did not understand, crossed her face. "You have come to bring me something from my past."

"What?"

"I don't quite know myself. Memories, perhaps," she said vaguely. "Or perhaps you are bringing my old luck back."

She brushed my cheek with the back of her hand, and softly closed the door.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by [Florinda Donner-Grau](#)

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Lulled by the soft breeze and the laughter of children playing in the street, I dozed all afternoon in the hammock that hung between two soursoop trees in the yard.

I was even oblivious to the scent of powder detergent mingled with the pungent odor of creosol with which [Candelaria](#) washed the floors twice each day; regardless of whether they were dirty.

I waited until it was nearly six o'clock.

Then, as [Mercedes Peralta](#) had requested, I went and knocked on her bedroom door. There was no answer. Quietly, I stepped inside.

Usually at that time, she was through with the people who came to her to be treated for one malady or another. She never saw more than two a day.

On her bad days, which were quite frequent, she saw no one. On those occasions, I took her for rides in my jeep and for long walks in the surrounding hills.

"Is that you, [Musiuva](#)?" dona [Mercedes](#) asked, stretching in her low-hanging hammock, fastened to metal rings built into the wall.

I greeted her and sat on the double bed by the window.

She never slept in it. She maintained that from a bed, regardless of its size, one could have a fatal fall.

Waiting for her to get up, I looked around the oddly furnished room that never failed to enchant me.

Things had been arranged there with a look of purposeful incongruity.

The two night tables at the head and foot of the bed, cluttered with candles and figurines of saints, served as altars.

A low wooden wardrobe painted blue and pink blocked the door that opened to the street.

I wondered what was inside, for dona [Mercedes](#)' clothes- she never wore anything but black- hung everywhere, from hooks on the walls and behind the door, at the head and foot of the iron bedstead, and even from the ropes holding the hammock.

A crystal chandelier, which did not work, dangled precariously from the cane ceiling. It was gray with dust, and spiders had spun their webs around its prisms.

An almanac, the kind one tears a page from each day, hung behind the door.

Combing her fingers through her white mop of hair, [Mercedes](#)

[Peralta](#) heaved a deep sigh, then swung her legs out of the hammock and hunted about with her feet for her cloth sandals.

She sat still for a moment, then moved to the high narrow window facing the street and opened its wooden panels.

She blinked repeatedly until her eyes adjusted to the late-afternoon light beaming into the room.

Intently, she gazed at the sky, as if she were expecting some message from the sunset.

"Are we going for a walk?" I asked.

Slowly, she turned around. "A walk?" she repeated, arching her brows in surprise. "How can we go for a walk when I have a person waiting for me."

I opened my mouth ready to inform her there was no one outside, but the mocking expression in her tired eyes compelled me to silence. She took my hand, and we walked out of her room.

With his chin buried in his chest, a frail-looking old man dozed on the wooden bench outside the room where [Mercedes Peralta](#) treated people who came for help.

Sensing our presence, he straightened up. "I don't feel too well," he said in a toneless voice, reaching for his straw hat and the walking stick lying beside him.

"[Octavio Cantu](#)," [Mercedes Peralta](#) said, addressing herself to me, but shaking his hand.

She led him up the two steps into the room.

I followed close behind.

He turned around with an inquiring expression in his eyes as he gazed at me.

"She's been helping me," she said. "But if you don't want her with us, she'll go outside."

He stood there for a moment nervously shifting his feet.

His mouth twisted into a lopsided smile. "If she has been helping you," he murmured with a touch of helplessness, "I suppose it's all right."

With a swift movement of her head, [Mercedes Peralta](#) motioned me to my stool by the altar, then helped the old man into the chair directly in front of the high rectangular table.

She seated herself to his right, facing him.

"Where could it be?" she mumbled repeatedly, searching among the assortment of jars, candles and cigars, dried roots, and scraps of material scattered on the table.

She sighed with relief upon finding her nautical compass, which she placed in front of [Octavio Cantu](#).

Attentively, she studied the round-shaped metal box.

"Look at this!" she cried out, beckoning me to move closer.

It was the same compass I had seen her examine so intently the first day I walked into that room. The needle, barely visible through the opaque, badly scratched glass, moved vigorously to and fro, as if animated by some invisible force emanating from [Octavio Cantu](#).

[Mercedes Peralta](#) used the compass as a diagnostic device only if she believed the person to be suffering from a spiritual ailment rather than a natural disease. So far, I had been unable to determine what criteria she used to differentiate between the two kinds of maladies. For her, a spiritual ailment could manifest itself in the form of a bout of bad luck as

well as a common cold, which, depending on the circumstances, might also be diagnosed as a natural ailment.

Expecting to find some mechanical contraption that activated the needle, I examined the compass at every opportunity. Since there was none, I accepted her explanation as a **bonafide** truth: Whenever a person is centered, that is, when body, spirit, and soul are in harmony, the needle does not move at all.

To prove her point, she placed the compass in front of herself, **Candelaria**, and me. To my great astonishment, the needle moved only when the compass was in front of me.

Octavio Cantu craned his neck to peer at the instrument. "Am I sick?" he asked softly, gazing up at dona **Mercedes**.

"It's your spirit," she murmured. "Your spirit is in great turmoil."

She returned the compass to the glass cabinet, then positioned herself behind the old man and rested both hands on his head.

She remained that way for a long time; then with quick, sure movements, she ran her fingers down his shoulders and arms.

Swiftly, she stepped in front of him, her hands brushing lightly down his chest, his legs, all the way to his feet.

Reciting a prayer that was part church litany, part incantation- she maintained that every good healer knew that Catholicism and spiritualism complemented each other- she alternately massaged his back and chest for nearly a half hour.

To give momentary relief to her tired hands, she periodically shook them vigorously behind her back. She called it casting off the accumulation of negative energy.

To mark the end of the first part of her treatment, she stamped her right foot three times on the ground.

Octavio Cantu shuddered uncontrollably.

She held his head from behind, pressing her palms to his temples until he began to draw slow, difficult breaths.

Mumbling a prayer, she moved to the altar, lit a candle and then a hand-rolled cigar, which she began to smoke with even, rapid puffs.

"I should be used to it by now," the old man said, breaking the smoky silence.

Startled by his voice, she began to cough until tears rolled down her cheeks. I wondered whether she had accidentally inhaled the smoke.

Octavio Cantu, oblivious to her coughing, continued to talk. "I've told you many, many times that whether I'm sober or drunk, I only dream one dream.

I'm standing in my shack. It's empty. I feel the wind and see shadows moving everywhere. But there are no more dogs to bark at the emptiness and at the shadows.

I awake with a terrible pressure: It feels like someone were sitting on my chest; and as I open my eyes, I see the yellow pupils of a dog. They open wider and wider, until they swallow me..." His voice trailed off.

Gasping for breath, he looked around the room. He no longer seemed to know where he was.

Mercedes Peralta dropped the cigar stub on the floor. Grabbing his chair from behind, she swiftly turned him around, so that he was now facing the altar.

With slow, mesmerizing movements, she massaged him around his

eyes.

I must have dozed off, for I found myself alone in the room.

I quickly looked around. The candle on the altar was almost burned down.

Right above me in the corner close to the ceiling sat a moth the size of a small bird. It had enormous black circles on its wings; they stared at me like curious eyes.

A sudden rustle made me turn around.

Mercedes Peralta was sitting in her chair by the altar. I muffled a scream. I could have sworn she had not been there a moment before.

"I **didn't** know you were there," I said. "Look at that big moth above my head." I searched for the insect, but it was gone.

There was something about the way she looked at me that made me shudder.

"I got too tired and fell asleep," I explained. "I **didn't** even find out what was wrong with **Octavio Cantu**."

"He comes to see me from time to time," she said. "He needs me as a spiritualist and a healer. I lighten the burden that weighs on his soul."

She turned to the altar, and lit three candles.

In the flickering light her eyes were the color of the moth's wings.

"You'd better go to sleep," she suggested. "Remember, we're going to go for a walk at dawn."

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Certain that I had overslept again, I dressed quickly and headed down the dark corridor. Mindful of the creaking hinges, I carefully opened the door to **Mercedes Peralta**'s room and tiptoed toward the hammock.

"Are you awake?" I whispered, pushing aside the gauzy material of the mosquito netting. "Do you still want to go for a walk?"

Her eyes opened instantly, but she was not really awake yet. She continued to stare quietly ahead.

"I do," she finally said hoarsely, brushing the netting aside completely. She cleared her throat, spat in the bucket on the floor, and then moved over a little to make room for me in the hammock.

"I'm glad you remembered our walk," she mumbled as she crossed herself.

Closing her eyes, she folded her hands and prayed to the Virgin and to a number of saints in heaven. She thanked them individually for their guidance in helping her with the people she treated and then asked for their forgiveness.

"Why their forgiveness?" I inquired as soon as she finished her long prayer.

"Look at the lines on my palms," she said, placing her upturned hands in my lap.

With my index finger I traced the clearly delineated **V** and **M** lines that seemed to have been branded; the **V** on her left palm, and the **M** on her right.

"**V** stands for **vida**, life. **M** stands for **muerte**, death," she explained, enunciating the words with deliberate precision. "I was born with the power to heal and harm."

She lifted her hands from my lap, and brushed the air as though she intended to erase the words she had spoken.

She stared around the room, then deliberately maneuvered her thin, fleshless legs out of the hammock and slipped into a pair of cutout shoes through which her toes protruded.

Her eyes twinkled with amusement as she straightened the black blouse and skirt, which she had slept in.

Holding on to my arm, she led me outside. "Let me show you something before we go for our walk," she said, heading toward the working room.

She turned directly to the massive altar, which was made entirely out of melted wax. It had been started with a single candle, she said, by her great-great-grandmother, who had also been a healer.

Lovingly, she ran her hand over the glossy, almost transparent surface.

"Search for the black wax amid the multi-colored streaks," she urged me. "That's the evidence that witches light a black candle when they use their power to harm."

Countless strands of black wax ran into the colored bands.

"The ones closer to the top are mine," she said. Her eyes shone with an odd fierceness as she added, "A true healer is also a witch."

A glimmer of a smile lingered on her lips for a moment; then she went on to say that not only was she well known throughout the area, but that people came for her treatments from as far as **Caracas**, **Maracaibo**, **Merida**, and **Cumana**.

People knew about her abroad as well: Trinidad, **Cuba**, Colombia, Brazil, and **Haiti**. There were pictures somewhere in the house attesting that among those persons had been ministers of state, ambassadors, and even a bishop.

She regarded me enigmatically, then shrugged her shoulders.

"My luck and my strength were peerless at one time," she said. "I ran out of both, and now I can only heal."

Her grin widened, and her eyes took on a teasing gleam. "And how is your work progressing?" she asked with the innocent curiosity of a child.

Before I had a chance to take in the sudden change of topic, she added, "Regardless of how many healers and patients you interview, you will never learn that way. A real healer must be first a medium and a spiritualist, and then a witch."

A dazzling smile lit up her face. "Don't be too upset when one of these days I burn your writing pads," she said casually. "You're wasting your time with all that nonsense."

I became utterly alarmed. I did not take kindly to the prospect of seeing my work go up in flames.

"Do you know what's of real interest?" she asked, and then answered her own question. "The issues that go beyond the superficial aspects of healing.

"Things that can't be explained, but may be experienced.

"There have been plenty of people who have studied healers. They believe that by watching and asking questions they may understand what

mediums, witches, and healers do.

"Since there is no point in arguing with them, it's a lot easier to leave them alone to do whatever they want.

"It cannot be the same in your case," she went on. "I cannot let you go to waste.

"So, instead of acting like you are studying healers, you're going to practice calling the spirit of my ancestor every night in the patio of this house.

"You can't take notes on that because the spirits count time in a different way.

"You'll see. To deal with the spirits is like entering inside the earth."

The memory of the woman I had seen in that patio perturbed me terribly. I wanted to abandon right then all my quest and forget **Florinda's** plans and run away.

Suddenly dona **Mercedes** laughed, a clear burst that dispelled my fears.

"**Musiua**, you should see your face," she said. "You're about to faint. Among other things, you're a coward."

Despite her **wry** mocking tone, there was sympathy and affection in her smile. "I shouldn't push you. So I'm going to give you something you'll like- something that has more value than your study plans; A glimpse into the life of some personages of my choice.

"I will make them weave tales for you. Tales about fate. Tales about luck. Tales about love."

She brought her face close to mine and in a soft whisper added, "Tales about strength and tales about weakness. That will be my gift to you to keep you appeased."

She took my arm and led me outside. "Let's go for our walk."

Our steps rang lonely through the silent street bordered by high concrete sidewalks.

In a faint murmur, obviously wary of waking the people sleeping inside the houses we passed, **Mercedes Peralta** remarked that during her days as a young healer, her house- the biggest one on the street- had stood isolated at what was then considered the outskirts of town.

"But now," she said- the sweeping gesture of her arm encompassing everything around us- "it seems I live in the center of town."

We turned onto the main street, and walked all the way to the plaza where we rested on a bench facing the statue of Bolivar on a horse.

The town hall stood at one side of the plaza, the church with its bell tower at the other. Many of the original buildings had been pulled down and replaced by boxlike structures.

Yet, the old houses that still stood, with their wrought-iron grills, their red-tile roofs gray with age, and their wide eaves that permitted the rain water to splash clear of the brightly painted walls, gave the center of town its distinct colonial atmosphere.

"This town has not been the same since the day the clock in the tower of the city hall was fixed," she mused.

She explained that a long time ago, as if resenting the advent of progress, the clock had stopped at twelve o'clock.

The local pharmacist had seen to it that it was fixed, and immediately afterward, as though conjured up by an act of magic, **lampposts** were put on the streets, and sprinklers were installed in the plaza so that the grass

would stay green all year-round. And before anyone knew what was happening, industrial centers mushroomed everywhere.

She paused for an instant to catch her breath, then pointed to the shack-covered hills surrounding the city. "And so did the squatters' shanty towns," she added.

She rose and we walked to the end of the main street to where the hills began.

Huts made of corrugated metal sheets, crates, and cardboard hung precariously on the steep slopes.

The owners of the shacks close to the city streets had boldly tapped electricity from the lampposts. The insulated wires were crudely camouflaged with colored ribbons.

We turned onto a side street, then into an alley, and finally we followed a narrow path winding up the only hill that had not yet been claimed by squatters.

The air, still damp from the night dew, smelled of wild rosemary. We climbed almost to the top of the hill, where a solitary saman tree grew. We sat down on the damp ground carpeted with tiny yellow daisies.

"Can you hear the sea?" Mercedes Peralta asked.

The faint breeze, rustling through the tree's intricately woven crown, scattered a shower of powdery golden blossoms. They alighted on her hair and shoulders like butterflies.

Her face was suffused with an immeasurable calm. Her mouth opened slightly, revealing her few teeth, yellow with tobacco and age.

"Can you hear the sea?" she repeated, turning her dreamy, slightly misted eyes toward me.

I told her that the sea was too far away beyond the mountains.

"I know that the sea is far away," she said softly. "But at this early hour, when the town still sleeps, I always hear the sound of the waves carried by the wind.

"Closing her eyes, she leaned against the tree trunk, as if to sleep.

The morning stillness was shattered by the sound of a truck winding its way through a narrow street below. I wondered whether it was the Portuguese baker delivering his freshly baked rolls, or the police picking up last night's drunks.

"See who it is," she urged me.

I walked a few steps down the path, and watched an old man get out from a green truck parked at the bottom of the hill. His coat hung loosely on his stooped shoulders, and a straw hat covered his head.

Aware of being watched, he looked up, and waved his walking stick by way of greeting.

I waved in return.

"It's the old man you treated last night," I told her.

"How fortunate!" she murmured. "Call him. Tell him to come up here. Tell him I want to see him. My gift to you begins now."

I walked down to where his truck was parked and asked the old man to walk back up the hill with me. He followed me without a word.

"No dogs today," he said to Mercedes Peralta by way of greeting, and sat beside her.

"Let me tell you a secret, Musiua," she said, beckoning me to sit across from her.

"I am a medium, a witch, and a healer. Of the three, I like the second

because witches have a particular way of understanding the mysteries of fate.

"Why is it that some people get rich, successful, and happy, while others find only hardship and pain?

"Whatever decides those things is not what you call fate: It's something more mysterious than that. And only witches know about it."

Her features strained for an instant with an expression I could not fathom as she turned to Octavio Cantu.

"Some people say that we're born with our fate. Others claim that we make our fate with our actions.

"Witches say that it's neither and that something else catches us like the dog catcher catches a dog. The secret is to be there if we want to be caught, or not to be there if we don't want to be caught."

Her glance strayed to the eastern sky, where the sun was rising over the distant mountains. After a few moments she faced the old man once more. Her eyes seemed to have absorbed the sun's radiance, for they shone as if smeared with fire.

"Octavio Cantu is coming to the house for his seasonal treatments," she said. "Perhaps little by little he'll weave a tale for you. A tale about how chance joins lives together and how that something that only witches know about fastens them into one bundle."

Octavio Cantu nodded his head in agreement. A tentative smile parted his lips. The scant beard on his chin was as white as the hair sticking out from under his straw hat.

Octavio Cantu came to dona Mercedes' house eight times. Apparently she had been treating him periodically since he was a young man.

Besides being old and run down, he was an alcoholic. Dona Mercedes emphasized, however, that all his maladies were of the spirit. He needed incantations, not medicines.

At first, he hardly talked to me, but then he began to open up, feeling more confident perhaps. We spent long hours talking about his life.

At the beginning of each of our sessions, he invariably seemed to succumb to despair, loneliness, suspicion. He demanded to know why I was interested in his life.

But he always checked himself and regained his aplomb, and for the rest of the session- whether an hour or an entire afternoon- he would talk about himself as if he were some other person.

Octavio pushed the flat piece of cardboard aside, and edged in through the small doorlike opening of the shack.

There was no light inside, and the pungent smoke of the dwindling fire in the stone hearth made his eyes tear. He shut them tight and groped his way in the darkness. He tripped over some tins and banged his shin on a wooden crate.

"Damn stinking place," he swore under his breath.

He sat for a moment on the packed dirt floor, and rubbed his leg.

In the farthest corner of the wretched shack, he saw the old man asleep on a discarded, worn-out backseat of a car. Slowly, avoiding the crates, ropes, rags, and boxes scattered on the ground, he walked bent over to where the old man was lying.

Octavio lit a match. In the dim light the sleeping man looked dead. The rising and falling of his chest was so slight he hardly seemed to

breathe. High cheekbones protruded from his black, emaciated face. His torn, dirty khaki pants were rolled up his calves. His long-sleeved khaki shirt was buttoned tightly around his wrinkled neck.

"Victor **Julio!**" **Octavio** shouted, shaking him vigorously. "Wake up, old man!"

Victor **Julio's** trembling, wrinkled eyelids opened for a moment. Only the discolored white of his eyes showed before he shut them again.

"Wake up!" **Octavio** cried out with exasperation. He reached for the narrow-brimmed straw hat on the ground, and pushed it down hard on the old man's unkempt white hair.

"Who the hell are you?" Victor **Julio** grumbled. "What do you want?"

"I'm **Octavio Cantu**. I've been appointed by the mayor as your helper," he explained with an air of importance.

"Helper?" Unsteadily the old man sat up. "I need no helper." He slipped into his worn-out **laceless** shoes and staggered around the dark room until he found the gasoline lantern. He lit it. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and, blinking repeatedly, regarded the young man carefully.

Octavio Cantu was of medium height, with strong muscles, visible through his unbuttoned, faded blue jacket. His pants, which seemed too large for him, bagged over his new shiny boots. Victor **Julio** chuckled, wondering if **Octavio Cantu** had stolen them.

"So you're the new man," he said in a rasping voice, trying to determine the color of **Octavio's** eyes, shaded by a red baseball cap. They were shifty eyes, the color of moist earth.

Victor **Julio** decided there was something decidedly suspicious about the young man. "I've never seen you around here," he said. "Where do you come from?"

"Paraguana," **Octavio** answered curtly. "I've been here for a while. I've seen you several times at the plaza."

"Paraguana," the old man repeated dreamily. "I've seen the sand dunes of **Paraguana**."

He shook his head and in a harsh voice demanded, "What are you doing in this **godforsaken** place? Don't you know that there is no future in this town? Haven't you noticed that the young people have migrated to the cities?"

"It's all going to change," **Octavio** declared, eager to steer the conversation away from himself.

"This town is going to grow. Foreigners are buying up the cacao groves and the sugarcane fields. They are going to build factories. People are going to flock to this town. People are going to get rich."

Victor **Julio** doubled up with mocking laughter. "Factories **aren't** for those like us. If you stick around long enough, you'll end up like me."

He put his hand on **Octavio's** arm. "I know why you're so far away from **Paraguana**. You're running away from something, **aren't** you?" he asked, staring hard into the young man's restless eyes.

"What if I am?" **Octavio** shifted uncomfortably.

Octavio realized that he **didn't** have to tell him anything. No one knew about him in this town.

Yet, something in the old man's eyes unnerved him. "I had some trouble back home," he muttered evasively.

Victor **Julio** shuffled over toward the opening of the shack, reached

for his burlap sack hanging on a rusty nail, and took out a bottle of cheap rum. His hands, crisscrossed by protruding veins, shook uncontrollably as he unscrewed the lid of the bottle. He gulped repeatedly, heedless of the amber liquid trailing down his scraggly beard.

"There is a lot of work to be done," **Octavio** said. "We better get going."

"I was young like you when I was appointed by another mayor as a helper to an old man," Victor **Julio** reminisced.

"I too was strong and eager to work. And look at me now. The rum **doesn't** even burn my throat any longer."

Squatting on the ground, Victor **Julio** searched for his walking stick. "This cane belonged to the old man. He gave it to me before he died."

He held up the dark, highly polished stick to **Octavio**. "It's made of hardwood from the Amazon jungle. It will never break."

Octavio glanced briefly at the cane, and then asked impatiently, "Is the stuff we need here? Or do we still have to get it?"

The old man grinned. "The meat has been soaking since yesterday. It should be ready by now. It's outside behind the shack in a steel drum."

"Are you going to show me how to fix the meat?" **Octavio** asked.

Victor **Julio** laughed. All his front teeth were missing. The remaining yellow molars looked like two pillars in his cavernous mouth.

"There is really nothing to show," he said in between giggles.

"I just go to the pharmacist every time I want to prepare the meat. He's the one who mixes the beef tenderizer.

"Actually," he explained, "it's more like a marinade." His mouth spread into a wide grin.

"I always get the meat from the slaughterhouse, compliments of the mayor."

He took another gulp from the bottle. "Rum helps me to prepare myself." He rubbed his chin dry.

"The dogs are going to catch up with me one of these days," he mumbled under his breath and handed the half-empty bottle to **Octavio**. "You better have some too."

"No thanks," **Octavio** refused politely. "I can't drink on an empty stomach."

Victor **Julio** opened his mouth ready to say something. Instead, he picked up his walking stick and his burlap sack, and motioned **Octavio** to follow him outside.

Absorbed, Victor **Julio** stood for a moment and watched the sky. It was neither dark nor light but that strange oppressive gray that comes before dawn. In the distance he heard the barking of a dog.

"There's the meat," he said, pointing with his chin to the steel drum standing on a tree stump.

He handed **Octavio** a bundle of ropes. "It'll be easier to carry the drum if you tie it on your back."

Expertly, **Octavio** looped the ropes around the steel drum, lifted it on his back, then crossed the ropes over his chest, and tied them securely below his navel. "Is this all we need?" he asked, avoiding the old man's gaze.

"I've some extra rope and a can of kerosene in my sack," Victor **Julio** explained and took another gulp of rum. Absentmindedly, he stuffed the bottle in his pocket.

In single file they followed the dry gully that cut across the cane break.

All was silent except for the fading buzz of the crickets and the gentle breeze rustling through the **bladelike** leaves of the cane.

Victor **Julio** had trouble breathing. His chest hurt. He felt so tired he wanted to lie down on the hard ground.

He turned often to gaze at his shack in the distance. A foreboding feeling crossed his mind. The end was near.

He had known for a long time that he was too old and feeble to do all the work he was supposed to do. It would be only a matter of time before they got a new man.

"Victor **Julio**, come on," **Octavio** called impatiently. "It's getting late." The town was still asleep.

Only a few old women on their way to church were about. With their heads covered by dark veils, they hurried past the two men without returning their greetings.

On the narrow concrete sidewalks, seeking the protection of the silent houses, scrawny, sickly looking dogs lay curled up in front of closed doors.

At Victor **Julio**'s command, **Octavio** lowered the steel drum on the ground, and opened the tight lid.

Using the long wooden pliers he had retrieved from his burlap sack, the old man picked chunks of meat from the drum.

And as he and **Octavio** slowly made their way through town, he fed every stray dog they came across. Hungrily, wagging their tails, the animals devoured the fatal meal.

"The dogs will feed on you in hell," a fat woman shouted before disappearing through the large wooden door of the old colonial church at the other side of the plaza.

"No rabies this year," Victor **Julio** shouted back, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. "I think we got them all well fed for the hereafter."

"I counted seventeen," **Octavio** complained, stretching his sore back. "That's a lot of dead dogs to pull."

"The biggest one we won't have to carry," Victor **Julio** said, a sinister smile twisting his face. "There is one dog that won't die in the street."

"What do you mean?" **Octavio** asked, turning his red baseball cap around on his head, a puzzled look on his face.

Victor **Julio**'s eyes narrowed, his pupils sparkled with an evil glint. His thin old body shivered with anticipation.

"I'm all keyed up. Now, I'm going to kill the **Lebanese** storekeeper's black German shepherd."

"You can't do that," **Octavio** protested. "It's not a stray dog. It's not sick. It's well fed. The mayor said only stray sickly dogs."

Victor **Julio** swore loudly, then looked at his helper with a wicked expression.

He was certain that this was the last time he would have access to the poison. If not **Octavio**, then someone else would be in charge of disposing of the dogs at the end of the next dry season.

He could understand why the young man **didn't** want to cause any trouble in town, but that was not any of his concern. He had wanted to kill the **Lebanese**'s dog ever since it had bitten him. This was his last chance.

"That dog is trained to attack," Victor **Julio** said. "Every time it gets loose it bites someone. It bit me some months ago."

He pulled up his pant leg. "Look at the scar!" he muttered angrily, rubbing the purple, knotty spot on his calf. "The **Lebanese didn't** even bother to take me to a doctor. For all I knew that dog could have had rabies."

"But it **didn't** and you can't kill it," **Octavio** insisted. "The dog **isn't** in the street. It's got an owner." He looked imploringly at the old man. "You're only asking for trouble."

"Who cares," Victor **Julio** snapped belligerently. "I hate that animal and I won't have another chance to kill it."

Victor **Julio** flung his burlap sack over his shoulder. "Come on, let's go."

Unwillingly, **Octavio** followed the old man through a narrow side street toward the outskirts of town. They stopped in front of a large, green stucco house.

"The dog must be in the back," Victor **Julio** said. "Let's have a look." They walked along the brick wall encircling the backyard. There was no sign of the dog.

"We better leave," **Octavio** whispered. "I'm sure the dog sleeps inside the house."

"It'll come out," Victor **Julio** said, trailing his walking stick along the wall.

Loud barking splintered the morning stillness. Excitedly, the old man jumped up and down on his frail legs, brandishing his walking stick in the air above his head. "Give me the rest of the meat!" he demanded.

Octavio unfastened the ropes from his chest, and reluctantly lowered the steel drum to the ground. The old man picked out the last pieces of meat with the wooden pliers, and flung them over the wall.

"Just listen to that beast gulping down that poisoned meat," Victor **Julio** said gleefully. "That vicious brute is as hungry as the rest of them."

"Let's get out of here fast," **Octavio** hissed, lifting the steel drum on his back.

"There's no hurry." Victor **Julio** laughed. A sensation of elation invaded his body as he looked for something on which to stand.

"Let's go," **Octavio** insisted. "We're going to get caught."

"We won't," Victor **Julio** assured him calmly, climbing on the shaky wooden crate he had propped against the wall.

He stood on his toes and looked at the raging dog. Barking furiously, the animal spat foam and blood in an effort to wrench loose whatever had stuck in its throat.

Its legs grew rigid. It toppled over. Powerful spasms wheeled its body around.

Victor **Julio** shivered. "It's even hard to die," he murmured, stepping down from the crate. He **didn't** feel any satisfaction in having killed the **Lebanese**'s German shepherd.

In all the years of poisoning dogs, he had always avoided seeing them die. He had never enjoyed killing the town's stray **mongrels**, but it was the only job that had been available to him.

A vague fear filled Victor **Julio**'s heart. He looked down the empty road.

He curled his left thumb backward and placed the walking stick

between it and his wrist. Holding his arm outstretched, he started to move the stick back and forth so rapidly the cane seemed to be suspended in midair.

"What kind of trick is that?" **Octavio** asked, watching him enthralled.

"It's no trick. It's an art. This is what I do best," Victor **Julio** explained sadly.

"In the mornings and afternoons I entertain the small children in the plaza with my dancing stick. Some of the children are friendly to me."

He handed the cane to **Octavio**. "Try it. See if you can do it."

Victor **Julio** laughed at **Octavio**'s clumsy attempt to hold the stick properly.

"It takes years of practice," the old man said. "You **ve** got to develop your thumb in order to stretch it backward until it touches the wrist. And you have got to move your arm much faster so the stick won't have time to fall on the ground."

Octavio handed him back the cane. "We better get those dogs!" he exclaimed, surprised by the suddenness of the morning glow and the flame-colored blotches appearing on the eastern sky.

"Victor **Julio**, wait for me," a child called after them.

Barefoot, her black tangled hair tied on top of her head, a six-year-old girl caught up with the two men.

"Look what my aunt brought me to play with," she said, holding up a German shepherd puppy for the old man to see. "I named her Butterfly. She looks like one, **doesn't** she?"

Victor **Julio** sat on the curb. The little girl sat next to him and placed the cute, chubby puppy on his lap. Distractedly, he ran his fingers along the black and pale yellow fur.

"Show Butterfly how you make your walking stick dance," the child pleaded.

Victor **Julio** put the dog on the ground, and retrieved the bottle of rum from his pocket. Without drawing a breath, he emptied its contents, then dropped the bottle into his burlap sack.

There was a desolate expression in his eyes as he gazed into the child's smiling face. Soon she would grow up, he thought. She would no longer sit with him under the trees in the plaza and help him fill the trash cans with leaves, and believe they would turn to gold during the night.

He wondered if she, too, would shout at him, taunt him, like most of the older children did. He closed his eyes tightly.

"Let's see if the stick feels like dancing," he mumbled. Rubbing his creaking knees, he got up.

Mesmerized, both **Octavio** and the child watched the stick. It seemed to be dancing by itself, animated not only by the swift graceful movement of Victor **Julio**'s arms but also by the rhythmic tapping of his foot and his hoarse, yet melodious, voice, as he sang a nursery rhyme.

Octavio put the drum down, and sat on it to admire the old man's skill.

Victor **Julio** stopped his song in mid-sentence. His stick fell on the ground. With a look of surprise and horror, he saw the puppy lapping up the juice of the poisoned meat, trickling from the drum.

The girl picked up the cane, caressed the finely carved head, and handed it to Victor **Julio**. "I **ve** never seen you drop it," she remarked concerned. "Did the stick get tired?"

Victor **Julio** placed his trembling hand on her head, pulling her ponytail gently. "I **m** going to take Butterfly for a walk," he said. "Go back to bed before your mother finds you out here. I **ll** see you later at the plaza. We **ll** pick leaves together."

He lifted the chubby puppy in his arms, and motioned **Octavio** to follow him up the street.

The stray dogs were no longer curled up in front of closed doors, but lay rigid with their legs extended, scattered around the dusty streets, their glassy eyes staring blankly into space.

One by one, **Octavio** tied them with the ropes Victor **Julio** had brought in his burlap sack.

Butterfly, her whole body shaking convulsively, sent a stream of blood down the old man's pants. He shook his head with despair. "What am I going to tell the kid?" he mumbled, fastening the poisoned puppy with the others.

They made two trips, and dragged the dead dogs to the outskirts of town, past the **Lebanese**'s house, past the empty fields, down into a dried-up ravine.

Victor **Julio** covered them with a layer of dry branches, then doused the heap with the can of kerosene he had brought with him and set them afire. The dogs burned slowly, filling the air with the smell of scorched flesh and fur.

Panting, their throats raw with smoke and dust, the two men climbed out of the ravine. They **didn't** walk far before they collapsed under the shade of a blooming red acacia tree.

Victor **Julio** stretched out on the hard ground still cool from the night. His hands trembled as he held the walking stick securely over his stomach. He closed his eyes, and tried to still his breathing, hoping it would dispel the pain constricting his chest. He wished he could sleep, lose himself in dreams.

"I **ve** got to get going," **Octavio** said after a short while. "I **ve** got some other jobs to do."

"Stay with me," the old man begged. "I have to tell the kid about her dog."

He sat up and gazed imploringly at **Octavio**. "You can help me. Children so soon become afraid of me. She's one of the few who is friendly."

The wretched emptiness in Victor **Julio**'s voice frightened **Octavio**. He leaned against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. He **couldn't** bear to see the fear and the loss reflected in the old man's face.

"Come with me to the plaza. Let everyone know you **re** the new man," Victor **Julio** pleaded.

"I won't stay in this town," **Octavio** said gruffly. "I don't like this business of killing dogs."

"It's not a matter of liking or disliking it," Victor **Julio** remarked. "It's a matter of fate."

Victor **Julio** smiled wistfully and let his gaze wander in the town's direction. "Who knows, you might have to stay here forever," he mumbled, closing his eyes again.

The silence was broken by the sound of angry voices. Down the road came a group of boys led by the oldest son of the **Lebanese**. They stopped a few paces away from the two men.

"You killed my dog," the **Lebanese** boy hissed, then spat on the ground inches away from Victor **Julio**'s feet.

Propping himself on his cane, the old man rose. "What makes you think it was me?" he asked, trying to gain time.

Victor **Julio**'s hands shook uncontrollably as he searched for the bottle of rum in his sack. He stared at the empty bottle uncomprehendingly. He **didn't** remember having drunk the last drop.

"You killed the dog," the boys repeated in a chant. "You killed the dog." Cursing and jabbing him, they tried to grab his stick and his burlap sack.

Victor **Julio** backed away. Brandishing his cane, he swung it blindly at the jeering boys. "Leave me alone!" he screamed through trembling lips.

Momentarily startled by his rage, the boys stood still.

Suddenly, as if they had only just noticed that Victor **Julio** was not alone, they turned to **Octavio**.

"And who are you?" one of the boys yelled, looking from one man to the other, perhaps measuring the consequences of having to deal with both. "Are you with the old man? Are you his helper?"

Octavio didn't answer but swung the rope over his head, lashing it out in front of him like a whip.

Laughing and screaming, the boys dodged the well-aimed snaps. But when several of them were stung by the rope, not only on their calves and thighs but also on their shoulders and arms, they backed away.

They ran after Victor **Julio**, who, in the meantime, had fled toward the ravine, where the dogs were still burning.

Victor **Julio** turned his head. Terror dilated his pupils as he saw the boys approaching so close behind him.

They no longer seemed human: They reminded him of a pack of barking dogs. He tried to run faster, but the searing pain in his chest slowed him down.

The boys picked up pebbles and threw them at him, just teasing him. But when the **Lebanese** boy reached for a good-sized stone, the rest of the boys, eager to outdo each other, selected even larger rocks.

One of them hit Victor **Julio** on the head.

He staggered. His vision blurred. The ground under his feet gave way, and he tumbled down the precipice.

The wind carried the old man's cry out of the ravine.

Panting, their faces streaked with dust and sweat, the boys stood looking at each other. Then, as though someone had given a signal, they scurried in all directions.

Octavio ran down the steep slope, and knelt by Victor **Julio**'s inert body. He shook him vigorously.

The old man opened his eyes. His breath came in spurts. His voice was only a faint muffled sound.

"I knew that the end was near, but I thought it was only the end of my job. It never occurred to me it was going to be this way."

His pupils flickered with an oddly bright gleam as he stared into his helper's eyes. Slowly, the light went out.

Octavio shook him frantically. "Jesus! He's dead!" he muttered, then made the sign of the cross.

He raised his sweaty face toward the sky. A pale moon was clearly visible despite the blinding brightness of the sun.

He wanted to pray but could not think of a single prayer. Only images came to his mind: a legion of dogs chasing the old man over the fields.

Octavio felt his hands grow cold and his body begin to tremble. He could run away again to another town, he thought. But then they might suspect him of having killed Victor **Julio**. He had better stay for a while, he decided, until things cleared up.

For a long time **Octavio** just kept staring at the dead man.

Then, on an impulse, he picked up Victor **Julio**'s cane lying nearby. He caressed it and rubbed the finely carved head against his left cheek. He felt that it had always belonged to him. He wondered if he would ever be able to make the stick dance.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Octavio Cantu had had his last treatment of the season. He put on his hat and rose from the chair.

I noticed how the years had caved in his chest, and wasted the muscles of his arms. His faded coat and pants were several sizes too big. Bulging sharply on the right-side pocket was a large bottle of rum.

"It always happens when she finishes my treatments, I put her to sleep," he whispered to me, fixing his sunken and discolored eyes on **Mercedes Peralta**. "I've talked to you too much today. Anyway, I can't figure out why you're interested in me."

A wide smile creased his face as he held his walking stick between his thumb and wrist. He moved his arm back and forth so skillfully the cane appeared to be suspended in midair. Without saying another word he walked out of the room.

"Dona **Mercedes**," I called softly, turning to her. "Are you awake?"

Mercedes Peralta nodded. "I'm awake. I'm always awake even when I'm asleep," she said softly. "That's the way I try to stay a jump ahead of myself."

I told her that since I had begun talking to **Octavio Cantu** I had been plagued by deep, nagging questions. Could **Octavio Cantu** have avoided stepping into Victor **Julio**'s shoes? And why did he repeat Victor **Julio**'s life so completely?

"Those are unanswerable questions," dona **Mercedes** replied. "But let's go to the kitchen and ask **Candelaria**. She's got more sense than the two of us together. I'm too old to have sense, and you're too educated."

With a beaming smile on her face, she took my arm and we walked to the kitchen.

Candelaria, engrossed in scrubbing the copper-plated bottoms of her precious stainless-steel pots and pans, did not hear or see us approach. She let out a piercing, startled scream when dona **Mercedes** nudged her arm.

Candelaria was tall, with sloping shoulders and wide hips. I **couldn't** tell her age. She looked as much thirty as she looked fifty. Her brown face was covered with tiny freckles, so evenly spaced they seemed to have been painted on. She dyed her dark curly hair a carrot red and wore

dresses made from bold-colored printed cottons.

"Well? What are you doing in my kitchen?" she asked with feigned annoyance.

"The **Musiua** is obsessed with **Octavio Cantu**," dona **Mercedes** explained.

"My God!" **Candelaria** exclaimed. Her face expressed genuine shock as she looked up at me. "Why him?" she asked.

Baffled by her accusing tone, I voiced the questions I had just asked dona **Mercedes**.

Candelaria began to laugh. "For a minute I was worried," she said to dona **Mercedes**. "**Musius** are weird.

"I remember that **musiu** from Finland who used to drink a glass of urine after his dinner to keep his weight down.

"And the woman who came all the way from Norway to fish in the Caribbean sea. To my knowledge, she never caught anything. But she had the boat owners fighting among themselves to take her out to sea."

Laughing uproariously, the two women sat down.

Candelaria went on, saying, "One never knows what goes on in the minds of **musius**." They are capable of anything."

She laughed in spurts, each louder than the preceding one. Then she went back to scrubbing her pots.

"It looks like **Candelaria** thinks very little of your questions," dona **Mercedes** said.

"I personally think that **Octavio Cantu** couldn't avoid stepping into Victor **Julio**'s shoes.

"He had very little strength: That's why he was caught by that mysterious something I talked to you about; that something more mysterious than fate. Witches call it a witch's shadow."

"**Octavio Cantu** was very young and strong," **Candelaria** said all of a sudden, "but he sat too long under Victor **Julio**'s shadow."

"What is she talking about?" I asked dona **Mercedes**.

"When people are fading away, especially at the moment they die, they create with that mysterious something a link with other persons, a sort of continuity," dona **Mercedes** explained.

"That's why children turn out just like their parents. Or those who take care of old people follow into the steps of their wards."

Candelaria spoke again. "**Octavio Cantu** sat too long in Victor **Julio**'s shadow. And the shadow sapped him. Victor **Julio** was weak, but upon dying the way he did, his shadow became very strong."

"Would you call the shadow the soul?" I asked **Candelaria**.

"No, the shadow is something all human beings have, something stronger than their soul," she replied seemingly annoyed.

"There you are, **Musiua**," dona **Mercedes** said. "**Octavio Cantu** sat too long on a link- a point where fate links lives together.

"He **didn't** have the strength to walk away from it. And, like **Candelaria** says, Victor **Julio**'s shadow sapped him.

"Because all of us have a shadow, a strong or a weak one, we can give that shadow to someone we love, to someone we hate, or to someone who is simply available.

"If we don't give it to anyone, it floats around for a while after we die before it vanishes away."

I must have stared at her uncomprehendingly. She laughed and said,

"I've told you that I like witches. I like the way they explain events, even though it's hard to understand them.

"**Octavio** needs me to ease his burden. I do that through my incantations. He feels that unless I intervene he will repeat Victor **Julio**'s life detail by detail."

"It's advisable," **Candelaria** blurted out, "not to sit too long under anybody's shadow unless you want to follow in his or her footsteps."

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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I was anticipating the loud sounds that usually reverberated through the house every Thursday morning as **Candelaria** rearranged the heavy furniture in the living room.

Wondering whether I had actually slept through the commotion, I walked down the silent corridor to the living room.

Shafts of sunlight filtered through the cracks in the wooden panels that covered the two windows facing the street. The dining table with its six chairs, the dark sofa, the stuffed armchairs, the glass coffee table, and the framed prints of pastoral landscapes and bullfighting scenes on the walls were exactly as **Candelaria** had arranged them the previous Thursday.

I walked out into the yard, where I found **Candelaria** half-hidden behind a hibiscus bush. Her frizzy, red-dyed hair had been brushed out of her face and was held in place by bejeweled combs. Twinkling gold loops dangled from her **earlobes**. Her lips and nails were a glossy red and matched the colors of her brightly printed cotton dress. Her large eyes under lids that never opened all the way betrayed a dreaminess that was at odds with her sharp angular features and her crisp, almost brusque manner.

"What made you get up so early, **Musiua**?" **Candelaria** asked. Rising, she tidied her wide skirt and the low-cut bodice of her dress that revealed a generous amount of her ample bosom.

"I **didn't** hear you move the furniture this morning," I said. "Are you going out?"

Without answering she hurried into the kitchen, her loose sandals slapping on her heels as she ran. "I'm behind with everything today," she declared, stopping momentarily to get her foot back into the sandal that had slipped off.

"I'm sure you'll catch up," I said. "I'll help you." I lit the wood in the cooking pit, and set the table with the mismatched pieces of china.

"It's just seven-thirty," I remarked. "You're only half an hour late."

As opposed to dona **Mercedes**, who was totally indifferent to schedules, **Candelaria** divided her day into precisely timed tasks.

Although no one ever sat down for a meal at the same time, **Candelaria** fixed breakfast at exactly seven. By eight o'clock she was mopping the floors and dusting the furniture. She was tall enough that she had to stretch only her arms to reach the spider webs in the corners and the dust on the lintels.

And by eleven o'clock the daily pot of soup was simmering on the stove.

As soon as that was accomplished, she tended to her flowers. Watering can in hand, she first walked up and down the patio, then the yard, sprinkling her plants with loving care.

At two o'clock sharp she did the laundry, even if she only had one towel to wash. After the ironing was done, she read illustrated romances.

In the evenings, she cut out magazine pictures and pasted them in photo albums.

"Elio's godfather was here last night," she whispered. "Dona Mercedes and I talked with him till dawn."

She reached for the mortared corn cooked the evening before, and began to knead the white dough for the **comcakes** we ate for breakfast.

"He must be over eighty years old. And he still **hasn't** gotten over Elio's death. **Lucas Nunez** blames himself for the boy's death."

"Who is **Elio**?" I asked.

"Dona Mercedes' son," **Candelaria** murmured, shaping the dough into round patties. "He was only eighteen when he died tragically. It was a long time ago."

She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear, then added, "You'd better not mention to her that I told you she had a son."

She placed the **corncakes** on the grill spanning the cooking pit, then faced me, a devilish grin on her lips. "You don't believe me, do you?" she asked, but stopped me from responding by holding up one hand.

"I have to concentrate now on the coffee. You know how fussy dona Mercedes gets if it **isn't** strong or sweet enough."

I regarded **Candelaria** suspiciously. She was in the habit of telling me the most outlandish stories about the healer, such as the time when dona Mercedes was apprehended by a group of Nazis during the Second World War and held captive in a submarine.

"She's a liar," dona Mercedes had once confided. "And even if she's telling the truth she exaggerates it so much that it might as well be a lie."

Candelaria, thoroughly unconcerned about my suspicions, wiped her face on the apron she had tied around her neck, then with a swift, abrupt movement, she turned around and hurried out of the kitchen. "Watch over the **corncakes**," she cried out from the corridor. "I'm behind with everything today."

Around midday, **Mercedes Peralta** finally woke up after sleeping through **Candelaria**'s Thursday commotion, which was noisier than usual because of the hurry.

Undecidedly, dona Mercedes stood at the door of her room, squinting her eyes to adjust to the brightness. She rested against the door frame for a moment before venturing out into the corridor.

I rushed to her side, and taking her arm, I led her to the kitchen. Her eyes were red. She had a frown and a sad look around her mouth.

I wondered if she, too, had spent the night awake. There was always the possibility that **Candelaria** had indeed been telling the truth.

Seemingly preoccupied, she studied the plateful of **corncakes**, but instead of taking one, she broke off two bananas from the bunch hanging on one of the rafters. She peeled them, cut them into slivers, then daintily ate the bananas, one sliver at a time.

"**Candelaria** wants you to meet her parents," she said, delicately

wiping the corners of her mouth. "They live in the hills, close to the dam."

Before I had a chance to say that I would be delighted, **Candelaria** came sauntering into the kitchen. "You'll love my mother," she affirmed. "She's small and skinny like you, and she also eats the whole day long."

I voiced the idea that, somehow, I had never thought of **Candelaria** as having a mother.

With a rapt smile the two women listened attentively as I tried to make them understand what I meant by that. I assured them that categorizing certain people as the motherless type had nothing to do with age or looks but with some elusive, remote quality that I **couldn't** quite explain.

What seemed to delight **Mercedes Peralta** the most about my elucidation was that it failed to make any sense. She sipped her coffee pensively, then looked at me askance.

"Do you think I had a mother myself?" she asked. She closed her eyes, and puckering up her mouth, she moved her lips as if she were sucking from a breast. "Or do you believe I was hatched from an egg?"

She glanced up at **Candelaria** and in a serious tone pronounced, "The **musiua** is quite right. What she wants to say is that witches have very little attachment to parents or children. Yet, they love them with all their might but only when they are facing them, never when they turn their backs."

I wondered if **Candelaria** was afraid I would mention **Elio**, for she stepped behind dona Mercedes, gesticulating wildly for me to remain silent.

Dona Mercedes seemed to be determined to read our thoughts: She first looked at me, then at **Candelaria**, with fixed unblinking eyes.

Sighing, Dona Mercedes wrapped her hands around her mug and sipped the rest of her coffee. "Elio was only a few days old when his mother, my sister, died," she said, looking at me.

"He was my delight. I loved him as though he were my own child." She smiled faintly, and after a short pause, she continued talking about **Elio**.

She said that no one would have called him handsome. He had a wide sensuous mouth, a flat nose with sprawling nostrils, and wild kinky hair. But what made **Elio** irresistible to young and old alike were his big, black, and lustrous eyes, which shone with happiness and sheer well-being.

At great length dona Mercedes talked about **Elio**'s eccentricities. Although he was to become a healer like herself, he rarely spent any time thinking about healing. He was too busy falling in and out of love.

During the day, he chatted the hours away with the young women and girls who came to see her.

In the evenings, guitar in hand, he went to serenade his conquests. He hardly ever returned before dawn except when he was unsuccessful in his amatory ventures. Then, he was back early and entertained her with his witty, but never vulgar, renditions of his failures and successes.

With morbid curiosity I awaited for her to talk about his tragic death. I felt disappointed when she glanced up at **Candelaria**. "Go and get me my jacket," she murmured. "It gets windy in those hills where your parents live."

She rose and, leaning against my arm, shuffled out into the yard.

"Today, **Candelaria** will surprise you," she confided. "There are all kinds of delightful quirks about her. If you were to know only half of

them, you would probably faint with shock."

Dona **Mercedes** chuckled softly like a child trying hard not to give away a secret.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Chapter 9

Laughter, excited voices, and the blaring sound of jukebox music spilled from the small restaurants and bars that lined the street leading out of **Curmina**.

Beyond the gas station, before the street joined the road, large trees on either side interlinked their branches to form arches, creating a dream-like stillness.

On the road we passed solitary shacks made out of cane plastered over with mud. They all had a narrow doorway, a few windows, and a thatched roof. Some of the huts were whitewashed, others just mud colored.

Flowers, mostly geraniums growing in discarded cooking pots and tin cans, hung from deep eaves.

Majestic trees aglow with golden and blood-red blossoms shaded meticulously swept yards, where women were doing their wash in plastic tubs, or were spreading clothes to dry on bushes. Some greeted us with a slow smile; others with a nearly imperceptible nod of their heads.

Twice we stopped at a roadside stall where children sold fruit and vegetables picked from their gardens.

Candelaria, sitting in the backseat of my jeep, gave me directions. We passed a cluster of huts in the outskirts of a small town, and within moments a blanket of fog enveloped us; a fog so thick I could barely see beyond the hood of the jeep.

"**Oh** Lord Jesus Christ," **Candelaria** began to pray. "Come down and help us get through this devilish fog. Please, Holy Mary, Mother of God, come here to protect us. Blessed Saint Anthony, Merciful Saint **Theresa**, Divine Holy Ghost, gather around to help us."

"You'd better stop it, **Candelaria**," dona **Mercedes** cut in. "What if the saints are indeed listening to you and answer your prayers? How are we going to get them all into the car?"

Candelaria laughed, then burst into song. Over and over she repeated the first few lines of an aria from an Italian opera.

"Do you like it?" she asked me, catching my glance in the **rearview** mirror. "My father taught it to me. My father is Italian. He likes opera and taught me arias by **Verdi**, **Puccini**, and others."

I glanced at dona **Mercedes** for confirmation, but she had fallen asleep.

"It's true," **Candelaria** insisted, then proceeded to sing a few lines from arias of different operas.

"Do you know them, too?" she asked after I had correctly guessed the opera to which some of them belonged. "Is your father Italian, too?"

"No." I laughed. "He's German. I don't really know much about operas," I confessed. "The only thing he taught me about music was that

Beethoven was nearly a demigod. Every Sunday, for as long as I lived at home, my father played all of **Beethoven's** symphonies."

The fog lifted as abruptly as it had descended about us, unveiling chain after chain of bluish mountains. They seemed to extend forever across an emptiness of air and light.

Following **Candelaria's** directions, I turned into a narrow dirt lane angling sharply from the road: It was barely wide enough for the jeep.

"Here it is," she cried out excitedly, pointing at the two-story house at the end of the lane. The whitewashed walls were yellow with age, and the once red tiles were gray and mossy.

I parked, and we got out of the jeep.

An old man clad in a frayed **T**-shirt was leaning out of an upstairs window. He waved at us and then disappeared, his loud excited voice ringing through the silence of the house. "**Roraima!** The witches are here!"

Just as we reached the front door, a small, wrinkled woman stepped out to greet us. Smiling, she embraced **Candelaria**, then dona **Mercedes**.

"This is my mother," **Candelaria** proudly said. "Her name is **Roraima**."

After a slight hesitation, **Roraima** also embraced me.

She was barely five feet and very lean. She wore a long black dress. She had thick black hair and the bright eyes of a bird. Her motions, too, were birdlike, dainty and quick as she ushered us inside the dark vestibule where a small light burned under a picture of Saint Joseph.

Beaming with contentment, she told us to follow her along the wide **L**-shaped gallery bordering the inside patio where a lemon and guava tree shaded the open living-dining room and the spacious kitchen.

Mercedes Peralta whispered something in **Roraima's** ear, and then continued down the corridor that led to the back of the house.

For a moment I stood undecided, then followed **Candelaria** and her mother up the stone stairs to the second floor, past a row of bedrooms; all of which opened onto the wide balcony running the length of the patio.

"How many children do you have?" I asked as we passed the fifth door.

"I have only **Candelaria**." The leathery wrinkles in **Roraima's** face deepened as she smiled. "But the grandchildren from **Caracas** come to spend their holidays here."

Aghast, I turned to **Candelaria** and stared into her dark, guarded eyes in which a glimmer of amusement was just discernible.

"I **didn't** know you had any children," I said, wondering if this was the surprise dona **Mercedes** had hinted at that morning. Somehow it was a letdown.

"How can I have any children?" **Candelaria** retorted indignantly. "I'm a maiden!"

I burst into laughter. Her statement not only implied that she was unmarried but that she was also a virgin. The haughty expression on her face left no doubt that she was very proud of the fact.

Candelaria leaned over the railing, then she turned and looked up. "I've never told you that I have a brother. Actually he's only a half brother. He's much older than I. He was born in Italy. Like my father, he came to Venezuela to make his fortune. He has a construction company.

He's rich now."

Roraima nodded her head emphatically. "Her half brother has eight children. They love to spend the summers here with us," she added.

In a sudden change of mood, **Candelaria** laughed and embraced her mother. "Imagine!" she exclaimed. "The **musiua** can't conceive that I have a mother." With an impish smile she added, "And what's even worse- she **doesn't** believe that I have an Italian father!"

At that very instant, one of the bedroom doors opened, and the old man I had seen at the window stepped out onto the balcony.

He was stocky with sharp angular features that strongly resembled **Candelaria's**. He had dressed in a hurry. His shirt was buttoned up askew, the leather belt holding up his pants had not been fitted into the loops around the waist, and his shoe laces were untied.

He embraced **Candelaria**.

"**Guido Miconi**," he introduced himself to me, then apologized for not welcoming us at the door. "As a child, **Candelaria** was as pretty as **Roraima**," he said, holding his daughter in a warm embrace. "Only when she grew up did she start to resemble me."

Clearly sharing a private joke, all three burst into laughter.

Roraima, giving a satisfied nod, regarded her husband and her daughter with unabashed admiration. She took my arm and led me downstairs. "Let's join dona **Mercedes**," she suggested.

The yard, bordered by a stake fence, was enormous. At the farthest end stood an open hut with a thatched roof.

Sitting in a hammock fastened to the crossbeam of the hut was **Mercedes Peralta**. She was sampling **Roraima's** homemade cheese. She congratulated **Roraima** on her success.

Guido Miconi stood irresolute in front of dona **Mercedes**. He seemed unsure whether to shake her hand or to put his arm around her. She smiled at him and he embraced her.

We all sat around the hammock, except for **Roraima** who sat in it beside **Mercedes Peralta**.

Roraima asked her questions about me, which dona **Mercedes** promptly answered as if I were not there.

For a while I listened to their conversation, but soon the heat, the stillness of the air, and **Guido Miconi's** and the women's low voices interspersed now and then by faint giggles made me so drowsy I stretched out on the ground.

I must have dozed off, for dona **Mercedes** had a hard time making me understand that I was to check with **Candelaria** about lunch. I had not heard **Candelaria** and her father leave.

I went inside the house. A deep soothing voice murmuring an incantation came from one of the bedrooms.

Afraid that **Candelaria** was entertaining her father with one of my tapes of a healing session, I rushed upstairs. On a previous occasion she had played a tape and promptly erased it by pushing the wrong button.

I stopped short at the half-opened door. Speechless, I watched **Candelaria** massage her father's back and shoulders while she softly mumbled an incantation.

There was something about her stance- the concentrated, yet fluid beauty of her moving hands- that reminded me of **Mercedes Peralta**. I realized then that **Candelaria** was also a healer.

As soon as she finished massaging her father, she turned to face me; a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. "Did dona **Mercedes** ever tell you about me?" Her voice had a curious softness that I had never heard before. "She says that I was born a witch."

There were so many questions running through my mind, I was at a loss where to begin.

Candelaria, aware of my bewilderment, shrugged her shoulders in a sort of helpless gesture.

"Let's fix lunch," **Guido Miconi** offered, heading for the stairs.

Candelaria and I followed behind him. Suddenly, he turned around and faced me.

"**Mercedes Peralta** is right," he said, then bent his head and stared fixedly at the lacy shadows of the guava tree on the brick patio.

For a long time he just stood there shaking his head now and then, unsure what to say or do next.

He looked up, smiled faintly, and then began to walk about the patio, his hands lightly touching flowers and leaves, his shiny eyes seeming not quite to take me in when they focused on me.

"It's a strange story," he said to me in an excited voice that made his Italian accent more pronounced. "**Candelaria** says that dona **Mercedes** wants me to tell it to you. You know that you're welcome here. I hope you come often, so we can talk."

I was at a loss. I looked at **Candelaria**, hoping for some kind of explanation.

"I think I know what dona **Mercedes** wants to do with you," **Candelaria** said.

Taking my arm, she led me to the kitchen. "She likes you a lot, but she can't give you her shadow because she's got only one and she's giving it to me."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm a witch," she replied, "and I'm following in dona **Mercedes'** footsteps? Only by following in the spiritual footsteps of a healer can you be a healer yourself. That's what's called a junction, a link. Dona **Mercedes** has already told you that witches call it a shadow.

"Shadows are true for everything," she continued, "and there is only one heir to anyone who has real knowledge.

"Victor **Julio** had real knowledge about killing dogs and made an unwitting link for **Octavio Cantu**. I've said to you that **Octavio** sat too long in Victor **Julio's** shadow and that dona **Mercedes** is giving me her shadow.

"By letting certain people tell you their stories, she is trying to put you, for an instant, under the shadow of all those people so that you'll feel how the wheel of chance turns, and how a witch helps that wheel move."

Unsuccessfully, I tried to tell her that her statements were throwing me into deeper confusion. She stared at me with bright, trusting eyes.

"When a witch intervenes, we say it's the witch's shadow that turns the wheel of chance," she said thoughtfully;

Then after pausing for a moment, she added, "My father's story would fit, but I **shouldn't** be present when he tells his story to you.

"I inhibit him. I always have." She looked back at her father and laughed. Her laughter was like a crystalline explosion: It reverberated

through the whole house.

Sleepless, **Guido Miconi** tossed in the bed, and wondered if the night, made longer by **Roraima**'s peaceful sleep, would ever end. An anxious expression crossed his face as he gazed at her naked body, dark against the white sheet, and at her face, hidden behind a tangled mass of black hair.

Gently, he pushed the hair aside. She smiled. Her eyes opened slightly, shiny between the thick, stubby lashes, but she did not wake up.

Taking care not to disturb her, **Guido Miconi** rose and looked out the window. It was almost dawn.

In a nearby yard a dog began to bark at a singing drunkard staggering down the street. The man's steps and song died away in the distance. The dog went back to sleep.

Guido Miconi turned away from the window and squatted to reach under the bed for the small suitcase he kept hidden there. With the key he wore on a chain around his neck, along with the medal of the Virgin, he opened the lock and fumbled for the wide leather pouch tucked in between his folded clothes.

An odd feeling, almost a premonition, made him hesitate for a moment. He did not tie the pouch around his waist. He reached inside, retrieved a heavy gold bracelet, placed it on the pillow beside **Roraima**, and put the pouch back into the suitcase.

He shut his eyes tightly. His mind went back to the day he immigrated to Venezuela- twenty years ago- tempted by the opportunities for work and the good pay.

He had been only twenty-six years old. Certain that his wife and their two children would soon join him, he had remained in **Caracas** for the first few years. To save money, he had lived in cheap rooming houses conveniently close to the construction sites where he was working. Each month he sent part of his savings home.

After several years, he finally realized that his wife did not want to join him. He moved out of **Caracas** and accepted work in the interior. Letters from home reached him only sporadically, and then they stopped altogether. He no longer sent money. Instead, as so many of his **co-workers** did, he began to invest his salary in jewels. He was going to return to Italy a rich man.

"A rich man," **Guido Miconi** murmured, securing the suitcase with a leather strap. He wondered why the words no longer evoked the familiar excitement.

He glanced at **Roraima** on the bed. He was already missing her.

His mind went back almost a decade to that day he first saw **Roraima** in the courtyard of his cheap rooming house, where he was heating his spaghetti on a Primus cooker. She was hollow-eyed and wore a dress that was too large for her thin, slight frame: He thought her to be one of the children in the neighborhood who were always making fun of the foreigners, in particular, the Italian construction workers.

But **Roraima** had not come to mock the Italians. She had been hired to work at the boarding house. And at night for a few coins, she shared the men's beds.

To the annoyance of his **co-workers**, she attached herself to **Guido** so devotedly that she refused to sleep with anyone else, no matter how much money they offered.

One day, however, she disappeared. No one knew where she had come from: No one knew where she had gone.

Five years later he saw her again. For some inexplicable whim, instead of driving out with the crew to the barracks next to the site where a factory and a pharmaceutical laboratory were being built, he took a bus all the way into town. There, sitting in the bus depot, as if waiting for him, was **Roraima**.

Before he had quite recovered from his surprise, she called to a little girl playing nearby.

"This is **Candelaria**," she pronounced, grinning up at him disarmingly. "She's four years old and she's your daughter."

There was something so irrepressibly childish in her voice, in her expression, he **couldn't** help but laugh. As frail and slight as he remembered her, **Roraima** looked like the sister rather than the mother of the child standing beside her.

Candelaria looked at him in silence. The veiled expression of her dark eyes made him think of someone very old. She was tall for her age. Her face was serious as only a child's could be.

She shifted her gaze to the children she had been playing with. When she looked up at him again there was an impish gleam in her eyes. "Let's go home," she said, taking his hand and pulling him forward.

Unable to resist the firm pressure of her tiny palm, he went with her down the main street to the outskirts of town.

They stopped in front of a small house fenced in by a row of corn stalks waving in the breeze. The cement blocks were **unplastered**, and the corrugated zinc sheets of the roof were held in place with large stones.

"**Candelaria** finally brought you here," **Roraima** stated, reaching for the small suitcase in his hand. "And to think that I almost stopped believing that she was born a witch."

Roraima invited him inside to a small hall that opened into a wide room, empty except for three chairs arranged against the wall.

One step down was a bedroom partitioned off by a curtain. On one side beneath a window stood a double bed on which **Roraima** dropped his suitcase. On the other side hung a hammock in which the child went to lie down.

He followed **Roraima** along a short corridor into the kitchen and sat down at the wooden table in the middle of the room.

Guido Miconi took **Roraima**'s hands in his and, as though clarifying matters to a child, he told her that what had brought him to town **wasn't Candelaria** but the dam that was going to be built in the hills.

"No, that's only on the surface. You came because **Candelaria** brought you here," **Roraima** stammered. "Now you'll stay here with us. Won't you?"

Seeing that he remained silent, she added, "**Candelaria** was born a witch." With an encompassing wave of her hand, **Roraima** took in the room, the house, the yard. "All this belongs to her. Her godmother is a famous healer and gave her all this." Her voice dropped, and she muttered the words, "But that's not what she wanted. She wanted you."

"Me!" he repeated, shaking his head sad and baffled. He had never lied to **Roraima** about his family in Italy.

"I'm sure her godmother is a good healer. But being born a witch!

That's pure nonsense. You know that one day I will return to the family that I left behind."

A strange disturbing smile flittered across **Roraima's** face as she reached for the pitcher and for the turned-down glass on the table.

She filled it, then held the glass out to him and added, "**Miconi**, this tamarind water has been bewitched by your daughter **Candelaria**. If you drink it, you'll stay with us forever."

For a second he hesitated, then burst into laughter. "Witchcraft is nothing but superstition."

He emptied his glass in one long gulp. "That was the best refreshment I have ever had," he remarked, holding out the glass for more.

His daughter's faint coughing broke into his reveries.

He tiptoed to the other side of the partitioned-off room and anxiously bent over **Candelaria** sleeping in a hammock that hung from two rings cemented into the wall.

A sad smile parted his lips as he peered into her little face, in which so often he had tried to discover a likeness to himself. He saw none.

But oddly enough, there were times the girl made him think of his grandfather. It was not so much a resemblance but rather a mood, a certain gesture made by the child, which never failed to startle him.

She also had that same easy way with animals that the old man had had. She healed every donkey, cow, goat, dog, and cat in the neighborhood. She actually coaxed birds and butterflies to perch on her outstretched arms.

His grandfather had had that same gift: A saint, people had called him in the small town in **Calabria**.

Whether or not there was anything saintly about **Candelaria**, he was no longer sure.

One afternoon he had found the child lying on her stomach in the yard, her chin resting on her folded arms, talking to a sickly looking cat curled up a few inches in front of her. The feline seemed to be answering her, not with meowing sounds, but with short grunts that resembled an old man's laughter.

The instant they felt his presence, both **Candelaria** and the cat leapt up in the air, as if some invisible thread had pulled them. They landed right in front of him, a spooky smile on their faces.

He had stood bewildered, as for a fleeting instant, their features appeared to be superimposed on each other's: He had been unable to decide whose face belonged to whom.

Ever since that day he had kept wondering about what **Roraima** always said, that **Candelaria** was not a saint but a witch.

Softly, so as not to wake her, **Guido Miconi** caressed the child's cheek, and then tiptoed to the small vestibule lit dimly by the dying light of an oil lamp. He reached for his jacket, hat, and shoes laid out the evening before and finished dressing.

He held the lamp up to the mirror and studied his image. At forty-six, his gaunt, weatherworn face was still filled with that indestructible energy that had carried him through years of hard work. His hair, although gray streaked, was still thick; and his light brown eyes shone brightly beneath his bushy brows.

Cautiously, without stepping on the dog whining and twitching its legs in sleep, he let himself out the door.

He leaned against the wall and waited until his eyes adjusted to the shadows.

Sighing, he watched the early workers heading toward work like phantoms in the emptiness of the predawn darkness.

Instead of going to the southern end of town where a truck waited to take the laborers to the construction site of the dam in the hills, **Miconi** headed toward the plaza where the bus for **Caracas** was parked.

The faint light inside the bus blurred the shapes of the few passengers dozing in their seats. He moved to the very back.

As he lifted his suitcase to the rack above him, he saw a shadow through the grimy window of the bus. Black and immense, the shadow stood out against the white wall of the church.

He **didn't** know what made him think of a witch; and although he **wasn't** religious, he quietly began to pray.

The shadow dissolved into a faint cloud of smoke.

The dimming of the lights in the plaza must have played a trick on his eyes, he thought, and chuckled.

Roraima and **Candelaria** would have explained it differently.

They would have said that he had seen one of those nocturnal entities that wander about at night; beings that never leave any trace, but use mysterious signals to announce their presence and disappearance.

The ticket collector's voice cut into his musings. **Miconi** paid his fare, asked about the best way to go to the port of **La Guaira**, and then closed his eyes.

Rattling and swaying, the bus crossed the valley, then slowly ascended the dusty winding road.

Miconi sat up and looked back for one last time. The retreating rooftops, and the white church with its bell tower kept swimming through his tear-filled eyes.

How he loved the sound of those bells. Now he would never hear them again.

It had been a month since **Guido Miconi** left **Roraima** and **Candelaria**.

After resting for a moment under the elusive shade of the blooming almond trees in the plaza, he resumed his walk up the steep, narrow street that ended in a flight of crooked steps carved into the hill.

He climbed halfway up, then turned to gaze at the port below him: **La Guaira**, a city crowded in between the mountains and the sea, with its pink, blue, and buff-colored houses, its twin church towers, and its old customhouse overlooking the harbor like some ancient fort.

His daily excursions to the secluded spot had become a necessity. It was the only place where he felt safe and at peace.

Sometimes he had spent hours up there watching the large ships dropping anchor. He had tried to guess by their flags or the color of their **smokestacks** to which country they belonged.

His weekly visits to the shipping offices in town had been as essential to his well-being as gazing at the ships.

He was still undecided whether he should return to Italy directly or by way of New York.

Or, as **Mr. Hylkema** at the shipping office had suggested, perhaps he should see something of the world first by boarding one of those German

freighters that sailed to **Rio, Buenos Aires**, across to Africa, and then into the Mediterranean sea.

But regardless of how enticing the possibilities, **Guido Miconi** had been unable to bring himself to book his passage back to Italy. He **couldn't** understand why; and yet, in the depths of him he knew.

Guido Miconi climbed to the top of the steps and turned into a narrow twisting path that led to a clump of palm trees.

He sat on the ground, his back against a trunk, and fanned himself with his hat.

The stillness was absolute. The palm fronds hung motionless. Even the birds seemed to be floating effortlessly, like falling leaves pinned to the cloudless sky.

He heard a faint laughter echoing in the silence. Startled, he looked around.

The tinkling sound reminded him of his daughter's laughter. And suddenly, her face materialized before his eyes; a fleeting image, unsubstantial, floating in some tenuous light; so pale, it seemed her face was surrounded by a halo.

With quick abrupt movements, as though he were trying to erase the vision, **Guido Miconi** fanned himself with his hat.

Perhaps it was true that **Candelaria** was born a witch, he mused. Could the child indeed be the cause for his indecision to leave? he asked himself. Was she the reason for his inability to bring to mind the faces of his wife and children in Italy; regardless of how hard he tried?

Guido Miconi rose and scanned the horizon.

For an instant he thought he was dreaming as he saw a large ship emerge like some mirage through the shimmering heat. The vessel came closer, angling toward the harbor.

In spite of the distance, he clearly recognized its green, white, and red smokestack. "An Italian ship!" he exclaimed, throwing his hat up in the air.

He was certain that he had finally broken the spell of Venezuela; and of **Roraima** and **Candelaria**- superstitious creatures who read omens in the flight of birds, the movements of shadows, the direction of the wind.

He laughed happily. This ship approaching the harbor, like some miracle, was his liberation.

In his excitement he stumbled several times as he hurried down the crooked steps.

He ran past the old colonial houses. He had no time to stop and listen to the sound of water splashing in the fountains, and the songs of caged birds spilling out of open windows and doors.

He was going to the shipping offices: He was going to book his passage home this very day.

A child's voice calling his full name brought **Guido Miconi** up short. Overcome by a sudden dizziness he closed his eyes and leaned against a wall. Someone gripped his arm. He opened his eyes, but all he saw were black spots whirling in front of him.

Again he heard a child's voice call his name.

Slowly, his dizziness subsided. With his eyes still unfocused he glanced into the worried face of **Mr. Hylkema**, the Dutchman at the shipping office.

"I don't know how I got here, but I want to speak with you," **Guido**

Miconi stammered.

"From the hill I've just seen an Italian ship approach the harbor. I want to book my passage home this very instant."

Mr. Hylkema shook his head in disbelief. "Are you sure you want to go?" he asked.

"I want to book my passage home," **Miconi** insisted childishly. "Right now!"

Upon catching **Mr. Hylkema's** eyes on him eloquent with meaning, **Guido Miconi** added, "I have finally broken the spell!"

"Of course you have." **Mr. Hylkema** patted him reassuringly on the shoulder, and then steered him toward the cashier's counter.

Looking up, **Guido Miconi** watched the tall, gaunt Dutchman move behind the counter.

As usual, **Mr. Hylkema** was dressed in a white linen suit and black cloth sandals. A fringe of gray hair growing on one side of his head had been carefully combed and distributed over his naked skull. His face had been aged by the relentless tropical sun and, no doubt, by rum.

Mr. Hylkema brought out a heavy ledger and placed it noisily on the counter. He pulled up a chair, sat down, and began to write.

"There are some of us who are meant to stay here," **Mr. Hylkema** said, then lifted his pen and pointed to **Miconi**. "And you, my friend, are never going to return to Italy."

Guido Miconi, not quite knowing what to make of his words, bit his lip.

Mr. Hylkema burst into a loud, toneless laughter, which sprang from the depths of his belly, and moved up with a rumbling painful sound.

But when he spoke again, **Mr. Hylkema's** voice had a curious softness. "I was just joking. I'll take you to the ship myself."

Mr. Hylkema went with him to his hotel, and helped him gather his belongings.

After making sure he had a cabin all to himself, as he had requested and paid for, the Dutchman left him with the ship's purser.

Still dazed, **Guido Miconi** glanced around, wondering why there was no one on the deck of the Italian ship anchored at pier 9.

He reached for a chair beside a table on the deck, straddled it, and rested his forehead against the wooden back.

He **wasn't** insane. He was in the Italian ship, he repeated to himself, hoping to dispel the realization that there was no one around.

As soon as he had rested a moment, he thought, he would walk down to another deck, and confirm for himself that the crew and the rest of the passengers were somewhere in the ship. The thought restored his confidence.

Guido Miconi rose from his chair, and leaning over the railing looked down at the pier. He saw **Mr. Hylkema** waving; looking up at him.

"**Miconi!**" the Dutchman shouted. "The ship is pulling anchor. Are you sure you want to go?"

Guido Miconi felt a cold sweat. An immeasurable fear took possession of him. He longed for his peaceful life, for **Roraima** and **Candelaria**; his family.

"I don't want to go," he shouted back.

"You have no time to get your luggage. The gangplank has been lifted. You must jump now. You'll land in the water. If you don't jump now,

you'll never make it!"

Guido Miconi vacillated for an instant. In his suitcase were the jewels he had hoarded over the years, working with almost inhuman strength. Was all that going to be lost? He decided he still had enough strength to start all over again and jumped over the railing.

Everything blurred. He braced himself for the impact with the water. He was not worried: He was a good swimmer. But the impact never came.

He heard **Mr. Hylkema's** voice saying loudly, "I think this man has fainted. The bus cannot leave until we take him out. Someone get his suitcase."

Guido Miconi opened his eyes. He saw a black shadow against the white wall of the church. He **didn't** know what made him think of a witch. He felt that he was being lifted and carried away. And then he had a devastating realization.

"I've never left. I've never left. It's been a dream," **Guido Miconi** kept repeating. He thought of his jewels in his suitcase. He was sure that whoever grabbed his suitcase would steal it, but the jewels no longer mattered to him, he had already lost them in the ship.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau](#) - The Witch's Dream: Chapter 10

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Chapter 10

Mercedes Peralta accompanied me on my last visit to **Guido Miconi's** house. When we were about to return to town at the end of the day, **Roraima** took me by the hand, and led me through a patch of canebrake up a narrow trail to a small clearing enclosed by yucca plants whose flowers, straight and white, made me think of rows of candles on an altar.

"Do you like it?" **Roraima** asked, pointing to a seed bed roofed with a framework of thin, dry branches that were held at the corners by slender, forked poles.

"It looks like a doll's vegetable patch!" I exclaimed, examining the ground covered with feathery carrot shoots, tiny heart-shaped lettuce leaves, and curly, lacy parsley sprigs.

Beaming with delight, **Roraima** walked up and down the neatly ploughed rows in the adjacent field. Pieces of dry leaves and bits of twigs clung to her long skirt.

Each time she pointed out the spot where she would plant a lettuce, a radish, a cauliflower, she turned toward me, her mouth arched in a faint, ethereal smile, her sharp eyes glinting between lids half-closed against the already low afternoon sun.

"I know that whatever I have is due to a witch's intervention," she suddenly exclaimed. "The only good point that I have is that I know that."

Before I had a chance to take in what she had said, she approached me with her arms wide open in an expansive gesture of affection.

"I hope you don't forget us," she said and led me to my jeep.

Mercedes Peralta, seated in the front seat, her head reclining on the backrest, was sound asleep.

Leaning out from one of the upstairs windows was **Guido Miconi**,

waving farewell in a gesture that was more a beckoning than a good-bye.

Shortly before we reached **Curmina**, **Mercedes Peralta** stirred. She yawned loudly, then absentmindedly looked out the window.

"Do you know what really happened to **Guido Miconi**?" she asked.

"No," I said. "All I know is that both **Miconi** and **Roraima** call it a witch's intervention."

Dona **Mercedes** giggled. "It certainly was a witch's intervention," she said. "**Candelaria** already told you that when witches intervene it's said that they do it with their shadows."

"**Candelaria** made a link, a junction for her father: She made him live a dream. Since she is a witch, she moved the wheel of chance."

"Victor **Julio** also made a link, and he also moved the wheel of chance, but since Victor **Julio wasn't** a witch, the dream of **Octavio Cantu**- although it is both as real and unreal as **Miconi's** dream- is longer and more painful."

"How did **Candelaria** intervene?"

"Certain children," dona **Mercedes** explained, "have the strength to wish something with great passion for a long period of time."

She settled back in her seat and closed her eyes. "**Candelaria** was such a child. She was born that way."

"She wished her father to stay, and she wished it without a single doubt. That dedication, that determination, is what witches call a witch's shadow. It was that shadow that **wouldn't** let **Miconi** go."

We drove the rest of the way in silence. I wanted to digest her words. Before we went into her house, I asked her one final question.

"How did **Miconi** have such a detailed dream?"

"**Miconi** never wanted to leave, not really," dona **Mercedes** replied. "So that offered an opening to **Candelaria's** unwavering wish. The details of the dream itself, well, that part had nothing to do with the witch's intervention: That was **Miconi's** imagination."

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[Florinda Donner-Grau](#) - The Witch's Dream: Chapter 11

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Chapter 11

I sat up as something brushed my cheek. Slowly, I raised my eyes toward the ceiling, searching for a gigantic moth. Ever since I had seen that bird-sized moth in the healing room, I had been obsessed with it.

Nightly, the moth appeared in my dreams transforming itself into **Mercedes Peralta**. When I told her that I somehow believed my dream, she laughed it off as a figment of my imagination.

I settled back onto my lumpy pillow.

As I was drifting back into sleep, I heard the unmistakable shuffle of **Mercedes Peralta** passing my door. I got up, put on my clothes, and tiptoed down the dark corridor.

A soft laughter came from her working room. The amber glow of candlelight seeped through the opening of the carelessly drawn curtain. Overcome by curiosity I looked inside.

Sitting at the table were **Mercedes Peralta** and a man, his face shaded by a hat.

"Won't you join us?" dona **Mercedes** called. "I was just telling our friend here that it **wouldn't** be long before you came looking for me."

"**Leon Chirino!**" I exclaimed as he turned toward me and pushed up the brim of his hat by way of greeting.

During my unsuccessful seance participation he had been introduced to me as the man in charge of organizing the spiritual meetings.

He was in his seventies, perhaps even in his eighties, yet his dark face had few wrinkles. He had big black eyes and sparkling white teeth, which ought to have been yellow from smoking cigars. There were white **Stubbles** on his chin, yet his white, short-cropped hair was immaculately combed. His dark suit, wrinkled and baggy, looked as if he had slept in it.

"He's been working like a madman," dona **Mercedes** said as if reading my thoughts.

Although I had not been invited again to a seance, **Mercedes Peralta** had encouraged me to visit **Leon Chirino** at least once a week.

Sometimes she accompanied me; sometimes I went alone.

He was a carpenter by profession, yet his knowledge about the various shamanistic traditions practiced in Venezuela was astounding. He was interested in my research and spent hours going over my notes, tracing sorcerers' procedures to their Indian and African roots.

He knew about all the Venezuelan spiritualists, witches, and healers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He spoke of them with such unaffected familiarity that he gave me the impression he had known them personally.

Mercedes Peralta's voice intruded on my reveries. "Would you like to come with us to fulfill a promise?" she asked me.

Disconcerted by her question, I gazed from one to the other. Their faces revealed nothing.

"We'll be leaving right away," she said to me. "We have a long night and a long day ahead of us." She rose and took my arm. "I've got to prepare you for the trip."

It took her no time to get me ready. She hid my hair under a tight, knitted sailor's cap and darkened my face with a black vegetable paste. And she made me swear that I would not speak to anyone or ask questions.

Ignoring my suggestion that we take my jeep, **Mercedes Peralta** scrambled into the backseat of **Leon Chirino's** old Mercury. With its crumpled fenders and battered chassis, the car looked as if it had been salvaged from a junk yard.

Before I had a chance to ask about our destination, she ordered me to hold and take good care of her basket, which was filled to capacity with medicinal plants, candles, and cigars. Sighing loudly, she made the sign of the cross and promptly fell asleep.

I did not dare disturb **Leon Chirino** with conversation: He seemed to need all his concentration to keep his car rolling. The dim headlights barely illuminated the area right in front of us.

Bent slightly forward, he tensely gripped the wheel, as if he could thus help the car over the dark hills. When it balked on the steep upgrades, he spoke softly to it, urging it forward.

Downhill, he let the car go, taking the curves in almost complete darkness, and at such a reckless speed, I feared for our lives. Dust billowed through the **glassless** windows and through the gaps in the

cardboard that concealed the rusted holes in the floor.

Smiling triumphantly, he finally brought the car to an abrupt halt. He turned off the headlights. Dona **Mercedes** stirred in the backseat.

"We've arrived," **Leon Chirino** said softly.

Quietly, we got out of the car. It was a dark, cloudy night. Not a star shone in the sky.

Whatever was out there stretched in front of us like a black void. I staggered clumsily after dona **Mercedes**, who seemed to have no problem seeing in the darkness.

Leon Chirino took me by the arm and guided me. I heard muffled laughter all around me. There seemed to be other people, but I **couldn't** see any of them.

Finally, someone lit a kerosene lantern. In the faint, wavering light I was able to make out the silhouette of four men and dona **Mercedes** crouching in a circle.

Leon Chirino took me a few feet away from the group. I felt totally incapacitated. He helped me to sit down and then propped me against something that looked like a rock protruding from the ground.

He handed me the lantern and instructed me to hold on to it and shine it on whatever I was told to.

Then he gave me two canteens: The largest one was filled with water, the smaller one with rum. I was supposed to hand them to the men whenever they asked for them.

Silently and quite effortlessly, two men began to dig the loose dirt with long shovels. They deposited the dirt in a neat pile next to the hole.

At least a half hour elapsed before they stopped and asked for the canteen with rum. While they drank and rested, **Leon Chirino** and another man began to dig.

Taking turns, the men worked, drank either rum or water, and rested. Within an hour they had dug a hole deep enough for a man to disappear in it.

The instant one of the men hit something hard with his shovel they stopped working. **Leon Chirino** asked me to shine the light inside the hole but not to look at it.

"This is it," said one of the men. "Now we can all dig around it." He and his partner joined the others in the hole.

I was dying with curiosity but did not dare break my promise. I wished I could at least talk to dona **Mercedes**, sitting not too far from me. Immobile, she seemed to be in a deep trance.

The men worked feverishly in the hole. At least half an hour elapsed before I heard **Leon Chirino's** voice telling dona **Mercedes** that they were ready to open it.

"**Musiuá**, light a cigar from my basket and hand it to me," she ordered. "And also bring me my basket."

I lit a cigar, and as I rose to bring it to her, **Leon Chirino** whispered from the bottom of the hole. "Crouch, **Musiuá!** Crouch."

I stooped and handed dona **Mercedes** the cigar and the basket.

"Don't look into the hole for anything in the world!" she whispered in my ear.

I moved back to where I had been sitting; fighting the nearly invincible desire to shine the lantern into the hole. I knew with absolute certainty that they were digging out a trunk filled with gold coins. I could

hear the dull sound of the shovels hitting what seemed to be a large and heavy object.

Fascinated, I watched dona **Mercedes** retrieve a black candle and a jar with black powder from her basket. She lit the black candle, propped it on the ground next to the hole, and then ordered me to turn off the lantern.

The black candle gave out an eerie light. Dona **Mercedes** sat on her calves next to the candle.

Obeying some unvoiced command, the men stuck their heads out of the hole one by one right in front of her.

Each time a head appeared, she poured some of the black powder into her cupped hands and then rubbed each head as if it were a ball. As soon as she was done with the heads, she smeared the black powder on the men's hands.

My curiosity reached its peak when I heard the cracking sound of a lid being opened.

"We've got it," **Leon Chirino** said, popping his head out of the hole.

Dona **Mercedes** handed him the jar with the black powder, another one filled with a white powder, and then she blew out the black candle.

Once again we were engulfed by total darkness. The groaning and heaving sounds of the men rising from the hole only accentuated the unnatural silence. I huddled against dona **Mercedes**, but she pushed me away.

"It's done," **Leon Chirino** whispered in a strained voice.

Dona **Mercedes** relit the black candle. I could barely make out the shapes of the three men carrying a large bundle. They deposited it behind the mound of dirt.

I was watching them so intently that I almost fell forward into the pit when I heard dona **Mercedes**' voice telling **Leon Chirino**, who was still inside the hole, to fasten the nails quickly and climb out.

Leon Chirino emerged right away, and dona **Mercedes** massaged his hands and face, while the other three men picked up their shovels and filled the hole.

As soon as they were done, dona **Mercedes** placed the lit candle in the center of the filled-up hole. **Leon Chirino** threw the last shovel of dirt over it and put out the flame.

Someone relit the kerosene lamp, and immediately the men went to work: They arranged the ground so perfectly that no one could have guessed that a hole had been dug.

I watched them for a while, but I lost interest, all my curiosity was focused on the now visible bundle wrapped in a tarpaulin.

"No one will ever know," one of the men said and chuckled softly. "Now, let's get out of here. It'll be daylight soon."

We all walked over to the bundle. I led the way with the light.

In my eagerness to find out what it was, I tripped over it. The tarpaulin slid a bit, revealing a woman's foot clad in a black shoe.

Unable to restrain myself, I pulled the tarpaulin and shone the light on the exposed bundle. It was the corpse of a woman.

My fright and revulsion were so intense I did not even scream- as I wanted and meant to. All I could manage was a faint croak, and then everything went black.

I came to, lying on dona **Mercedes**' lap in the backseat of **Leon**

Chirino's car. Pressed firmly against my nose was a handkerchief soaked with a mixture of ammonia and rose water. It was dona **Mercedes**' favorite remedy. She used to call it a spiritual injection.

"I always knew you were a coward," she commented and began to massage my temples.

Leon Chirino turned around. "You're very daring, **Musiua**," he said. "But you still don't have the strength to back it up. You will though. Some day, you will."

I was not in the mood for comments. My fright had been too great for comfort. I accused them of malice for not warning me about their doings.

Dona **Mercedes** said that everything they did was premeditated and that part of that premeditation was my total ignorance. It gave them a sort of protection against the desecration of a tomb. The flaw was my greedy interest to find out what was under the tarpaulin.

"I told you that we were going to fulfill a promise," dona **Mercedes** said to me. "We have done the first part. We have unearthed a corpse, now we have to bury it again." She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

I scrambled into the front seat.

Humming softly, **Leon Chirino** turned the car onto a dirt road that led to the coast.

It was already morning when we reached an abandoned coconut grove.

Cued perhaps by the smell of the sea breeze, **Mercedes Peralta** awoke. She yawned loudly, then sat up. Leaning out the window, she seemed to breathe in the sound of the distant waves.

"This is a good place to park," **Leon Chirino** stated, stopping at the foot of the straightest and tallest palm tree I had ever seen. Its heavy silvery fronds appeared to be sweeping the clouds from the sky.

"**Lorenzo Paz**'s house isn't far from here," **Leon Chirino** went on, helping dona **Mercedes** out of the car. "The walk will do us good." Smiling, he handed me her basket to carry.

We turned away from the sea and set out along a well-trodden path that cut across a thick grove of tall bamboo bordering a stream. It was cool and dark inside the grove, and the air had taken on the green transparency of leaves. **Leon Chirino** walked way ahead of us, his straw hat down over his ears, so that the wind would not carry it away.

We caught up with him by a short narrow bridge. Leaning over the rustic balustrade made out of freshly cut poles, we rested for a moment and gazed at a group of women washing their clothes, pounding them on flat river stones. A shirt slipped out of someone's hands, and a young girl jumped into the water to catch it. Her thin dress swelled out like a balloon, then molded itself to her breasts, stomach, and the gentle curve of her hips.

The straight dirt road on the other side of the bridge led to a small village, which we did not approach. Instead, we turned onto a side road along a neglected maize field. Hardened corn husks hung forlornly on withered stalks: They rustled like crumpled newspapers in the faint breeze.

We came to a small house: Its walls had been recently painted, and the tile roof had been partially redone. Banana trees, their fronds almost transparent in the sunlight, stood on either side of the front door like so many guards.

The door was ajar. Without knocking or calling out, we walked straight in.

A group of men squatting on the brick floor with their backs against the wall lifted their rum-filled glasses in greeting, then continued their conversation in low, unhurried voices.

Dust bars of sunlight beamed in through a narrow window, adding to the stale heat and intensifying the pungent odor of kerosene and creosol. In the far corner, propped on two crates, stood an open coffin.

One of the men rose and, holding my elbow gently, led me to the coffin.

The man was slight but strongly built. His white hair and wrinkled face indicated age, yet there was something youthful about the graceful slant of his cheek-bones and the mischievous expression in his tawny brown eyes.

"Have a look at her," he whispered, bending toward the dead woman lying in the rough, unpainted coffin. "See how beautiful she still is."

I stifled a scream. It was the same woman we had unearthed last night.

I moved closer and examined her carefully. Despite the gray-greenish tint to her skin that not even the heavy makeup could disguise, there was something alive about her. She seemed to be smiling at her own death.

On her finely chiseled nose rested a pair of wire-rimmed, **glassless** spectacles. Her garish, red-painted lips were slightly parted, revealing her strong white teeth. A red robe trimmed with white had been wrapped around her long body.

To her left lay a staff, to her right, a red-and-black wooden devil's mask fitted with two menacing, twisted ram's horns.

"She was very beautiful and very, very dear to me," the man said, straightening a fold in the robe.

"It's incredible how beautiful she still is," I agreed with him. Afraid he might stop talking, I held back my questions.

As he continued fussing with the woman's red robe, he gave me a detailed report on how he and his friends had unearthed her from her grave in the cemetery near **Curmina** and brought her to his house.

Suddenly, he looked up, and realizing that I was a stranger, he examined me with unrestrained curiosity.

"**Oh**, dear me! What kind of a host am I?" he exclaimed. "Here I'm talking and talking, when I haven't offered you anything to drink or to eat."

He took my hand in his. "I'm **Lorenzo Paz**," he introduced himself.

Before I had a chance to say that I could not possibly swallow a thing, he ushered me through a narrow doorway that led to the kitchen.

Mercedes Peralta, standing by a kerosene stove that was perched on top of a waist-high stone hearth, was stirring a concoction made from the medicinal plants she had brought with her.

"You'd better bury her soon, **Lorenzo**," dona **Mercedes** said. "It's far too hot to keep her above ground any longer."

"She'll be fine," the man assured her. "I'm certain her husband paid for the best embalment job available in **Curmina**."

"And to be on the safe side, I sprinkled the coffin with quicklime and wrapped strips of cloth soaked in kerosene and creosol around her body." He looked at the healer beseechingly. "I've got to be sure her spirit

has followed us here."

Nodding, dona **Mercedes** continued stirring her concoction.

Lorenzo Paz half filled two enamel mugs with rum. He handed one to me, the other to dona **Mercedes**. "We'll bury her as soon as it cools down," he promised and then went back to the other room.

"Who was the dead woman we unearthed last night?" I asked dona **Mercedes** and then sat down on a bundle of dried palm fronds stacked against the wall.

"For someone who spends most of her time studying people, you're not very observant," she remarked, laughing softly. "I pointed her out to you some time ago. She was the pharmacist's wife."

"The Swedish woman?" I asked aghast. "But why...?" The rest of my words were drowned out by the roaring laughter of the men in the other room.

"I think they've just found out you were the one holding the light last night," dona **Mercedes** said and went into the other room to laugh with the men.

Unaccustomed to drinking liquor, I fell into a drowsy state not far from actual sleep. The men's voices, their laughter, and moments later, the rhythmic pounding of a hammer reached me as if they were coming from far away.

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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Late in the afternoon after the men had left for the cemetery with the coffin, dona **Mercedes** and I went to the village.

"I wonder where all the people are?" I asked. Except for a young girl standing in a doorway with a naked baby astride her hip and a few dogs lying in the shade of the houses, the place was deserted.

"At the cemetery," dona **Mercedes** said, leading me toward the church across the plaza. "It's the day of the dead. People are weeding the graves of their deceased relatives and saying prayers for them."

It was cool and shadowy inside the church. The last threads of sunlight spilling through the tinted-glass windows in the nave illuminated the statues of saints in the niches along the walls.

A life-size crucifix, with its ripped, twisted flesh and its drooping, bleeding head in vivid color, dominated the altar. To the right of the crucifix stood the statue of the blissful-faced Virgin of **Coromoto** draped in a blue, star-embroidered, velvet cape. To the left was the cross-eyed figurine of Saint John, with his narrow-brimmed hat at a rakish angle and a red flannel cape, torn and dusty, flung casually over his shoulders.

Dona **Mercedes** blew out the flame of seven candles that were burning on the altar, put them in her basket, and lit seven new ones. She closed her eyes and, folding her hands, recited a long prayer.

The sun was only a glimmer behind the hills when we walked out of the church. The crimson and orange clouds trailing across the sky toward the sea gilded the late afternoon in a golden twilight. By the time we arrived at the cemetery it was dark.

The entire village seemed to have come out to commune with their dead. Men and women praying in soft voices were crouched beside graves ringed with lit candles.

We walked along the low wall encircling the cemetery to a secluded spot where **Lorenzo Paz** and his friends were resting.

They had already lowered the coffin into the ground and covered it with dirt. Their faces, sculpted into abstract masks by the surrounding candlelight, could have been the ghostly forms of the dead beneath us.

As soon as they spotted **Mercedes Peralta**, they began to pound the makeshift cross firmly into the ground at the head of the grave. Then, the men disappeared, swiftly and soundlessly, as if they had been swallowed up by the darkness.

"Now we have to lure **Birgit Briceno's** spirit here," dona **Mercedes** said, retrieving the seven candles she had taken from the church's altar and the same number of cigars from her basket.

She stuck the candles in the soft ground on top of the grave. As soon as she had them all lit, she put a cigar in her mouth.

"Watch carefully," she mumbled, handing me the rest of the cigars. "The instant I finish smoking this one, you must have the next cigar ready for me, already lit."

Taking deep drags she blew the smoke into the four cardinal directions. She huddled over the grave, and smoking uninterruptedly, she recited an incantation in a low raspy voice.

The tobacco smoke no longer seemed to come out of her mouth but directly from the ground. Like a fine mist, it grew around us, enveloping us like a cloud. Fascinated, I just sat there, handing her cigar after cigar, listening to her melodious, but incomprehensible, chanting.

I edged closer to her as she began to move her left arm over the grave. I thought she was shaking a rattle, but I could see nothing in her hand. I could only hear the clattering sound of seeds or, perhaps, small pebbles moving rapidly in her hand.

Tiny sparks, like fireflies, escaped from in between her closed fingers. She began to whistle a strange tune that soon became indistinguishable from the rattling noise.

Out of the cloud of smoke emerged a tall bearded figure wearing a long robe and a Phrygian cap.

I held my hand over my mouth to muffle my giggles. I believed that either I was still under the influence of the rum I had had earlier or the **pallbearers** were playing some kind of trick, all part of the day's festivities for the dead.

Totally absorbed, I watched the figure move out of the circle of smoke toward the wall surrounding the cemetery. The vision lingered there, a wistful smile on its face. I heard soft laughter, so quiet, so unearthly, it might have been part of **Mercedes Peralta's** chanting.

Her voice became louder. The sound seemed to come from the four corners of the grave, each side repeating the words like an echo. The smoke dispersed: It rose toward the palm trees and vanished into the night.

For a long time, dona **Mercedes** remained huddled over the grave, mumbling softly, her face barely visible in the light of the burned-down candles.

She turned toward me, the trace of a smile on her lips. "I lured **Birgit**

Briceno's spirit here but not to her grave," she said. Holding onto my arm, she stood up.

I wanted to ask her about the strange vision, but something in the empty expression of her eyes compelled me to silence.

Lorenzo Paz, leaning against an enormous boulder, was waiting for us outside the cemetery. Without saying a word he rose and followed us down the narrow path leading to the beach.

A half-moon shone brightly on the bleached-out driftwood scattered about the wide stretch of sand.

Dona **Mercedes** ordered me to wait by an uprooted tree trunk. She and **Lorenzo Paz** walked down to the shoreline. He took off his clothes, then waded into the water and vanished amid the rolling phosphorescent whitecaps edged in silver shadows.

He was gone for quite some time until a wave, shimmering with moonlight, washed him up on the beach.

Mercedes Peralta retrieved a jar from her basket and poured its contents over his prostrated form in the sand. Kneeling beside him, she rested her hands on his head and murmured an incantation. Gently, she massaged him, her fingers barely touching his body, until a faint halo appeared around him. Swiftly, she rolled him from side to side, her hand describing oddly circular movements in the air, as if she were gathering shadows and wrapping them around him.

Moments later she came up to where I was sitting. "**Birgit Briceno's** spirit was clinging to him like a second skin," she said, sitting beside me on the tree trunk.

Shortly, **Lorenzo Paz**, fully dressed, walked toward us. Dona **Mercedes**, with a movement of her chin, motioned him to sit in front of her on the sand.

Pursing her lips, she made loud smacking noises, and her rapid, drawn-in breaths became muffled growls in her throat as she recited a long prayer.

"It will be a long time before **Birgit Briceno's** ghost will forget," she said. "Dying continues long after the body is in the ground. The dead lose their memories ever so slowly."

She turned toward me and ordered me to sit in the sand beside **Lorenzo Paz**. His clothes smelled of candle smoke and rose water.

"**Lorenzo**," dona **Mercedes** addressed him, "I'd like you to tell the **musiua** the story of how you bewitched **Birgit Briceno**."

He regarded her with a puzzled air, then turned around and faced the sea: His head slightly cocked, he seemed to be listening to a secret message from the waves. "Why would she like to hear nonsensical stories about old people?" he asked her without looking at me. "The **musiua** has her own stories. I'm sure of that."

"Let's say that I ask you to tell her," dona **Mercedes** said. "She's examining the many ways through which the wheel of chance can be made to turn by human means. In your case, an object turned the wheel for you, **Lorenzo**."

"The wheel of chance!" he said, a wistful tone in his voice. "I remember it all as if it happened only yesterday." Seemingly bemused, he prodded a pebble with the tip of his shoe and stretched out flat on the sand.

From his rocking chair behind the counter of the dim, smoke-filled

bar, **Lorenzo** watched the group of men leaning over the billiard table in the corner.

He shifted his gaze to the old mantel clock on the shelf, marking the time under a glass bell. It was almost dawn.

He was about to rise and remind the men of the late hours, when he heard the unmistakable sound of **Petra**'s shuffling feet from back of the house.

Promptly, he sat down again. A wicked grin spread slowly over his face.

He would let his aunt deal with the men. No one in town escaped her admonitions: They listened to her words regardless of how vile and outrageous they were.

"Those damn clinking billiard balls won't let a soul sleep," she complained in a croaky voice as she stepped into the room. "Don't you have wives waiting for you? Don't you have work to go to in the morning, like any good Christian?"

She gave the men no time to recover from their surprise but continued in the same indignant manner. "I know what's the matter with you. You're already regretting that you brought those pagan Christmas trees into your homes and that you permitted your children to act in a Christmas play."

She crossed herself and faced one of the men. "You are the mayor," she said. "How can you allow such things! Have you all turned Protestant?"

"God forbid, **Petra**," the mayor said, making the sign of the cross. "Don't make a mountain out of a molehill. What's the harm in a tree and a play? The children like it."

Grumbling something unintelligible, she turned to go, then stopped short.

"Shame on don **Serapio**! He's more foreign than a true foreigner. And shame on that real foreign wife of his.

"Thanks to them most children in town will not get their presents from the Three Wise Men on the sixth of January, as every good Christian should."

She reached for a pack of cigarettes on the counter. "Now they will get them on Christmas day," she went on, "from some fellow called **Santaclos**. It's a disgrace!"

Leaning against the door, she stared at the mayor menacingly, oblivious that the ever present cigarette in her mouth had fallen onto the floor. She reached for the half-empty bottle of rum next to the billiard table and left the room muttering to herself.

Lorenzo, grinning behind the counter, clearly remembered the day when a truck loaded with singularly fragrant trees arrived in town. Don **Serapio**, the pharmacist, had called them Christmas trees. He had ordered them from **Caracas**, together with the appropriate decorations and records of European Christmas songs.

Not to be outdone by each other, don **Serapio**'s friends quickly followed his example and paid a great deal of money for the brittle trees so that they could be prominently displayed in their living rooms.

To the great chagrin of the older relatives living in those homes, the trees were placed next to, and in some instances even in place of, the traditional nativity scenes.

With their windows wide open, so every passerby could see in and hear such unknown tunes as "Silent Night" and "O **Tannenbaum**," the women decorated the scraggly branches with glass balls, garlands, gold and silver tinsel, and cotton snow.

The rattling of the beaded curtain shattered **Lorenzo**'s reveries.

He waved to the men as they left the bar, then put the bottles back on the shelves. His glance was caught by a mask crammed behind the cheap religious statuary of virgins, saints, and mute-suffering **Christ**s. The figurines had been given to him over the years by his poorer customers to pay for their drinks.

He pulled out the mask. It was a devil's mask with huge ram horns. A man from **Caracas** had left it behind. He, too, had been unable to pay for the glasses of rum he had consumed.

Upon hearing **Petra** clanking her pots and pans in the kitchen, he put the mask back on the shelf. Instead of locking up the bar, he took his rocking chair outside on the sidewalk. The wide branches of the ancient **samans** on the plaza stood outlined against the pale dawn sky.

Leisurely, he rocked himself back and forth. Through half-closed lids he watched the old men who never slept beyond dawn. They sat in front of their doors, talking, recollecting every minute detail of their bygone days in ever increasing vividness.

A melody floated through the stillness. Across the street, **Birgit Briceno**, the pharmacist's wife, was looking out from her window directly at **Lorenzo**, her face resting on her folded arms. Her radio was on. He wondered if she had also not slept or if she had simply risen early.

Her face was a perfect oval. And the corners of her small, sensual, beautiful mouth were set in a gesture of defiance and boldness. Her yellow hair was braided around her head, and her cold blue eyes seemed to sparkle as she smiled at him.

He nodded at her in silent greeting. He was always dumbstruck in her presence, for she had been for him, since the day he first saw her, the picture of beauty.

She's the reason I've reached the age of forty and never married, he mused. To him, all women were desirable and irresistible, but **Birgit Briceno** was more than irresistible, she was indeed unattainable.

"Why don't you come and watch the Christmas play tonight, **Lorenzo**? Tonight is Christmas Eve," **Birgit Briceno** shouted from across the street.

The old men, dozing in front of their doors, suddenly perked up and turned their heads toward the bar owner. Grinning expectantly, they waited for his answer.

So far, **Lorenzo** had consistently declined don **Serapio**'s invitations. He **couldn't** abide the pharmacist's air of self-importance, nor his insistence in trying to convince every friend and acquaintance that he was the most influential man in town, and that it fell upon him to give an example of what civilized living was all about.

However, regardless of how insufferable he found the man, **Lorenzo** **couldn't** resist his wife's summons. In a loud voice, he promised **Birgit Briceno** that he would come that evening.

He then took his rocking chair inside and went to sleep in his hammock at the back of the house, pleased and full of confidence in himself.

Dressed in a white linen suit, **Lorenzo** walked around his bedroom, testing his new patent leather shoes. It was a large room crowded with heavy ornate mahogany pieces that had once stood in the parlor, which his father had converted into a bar years ago.

Lorenzo sat on the bed, took off his shoes and socks, and put on his cloth sandals.

"I'm glad you aren't that vain," **Petra** commented, shuffling into the room. "There's nothing worse than having uncomfortable feet. It makes a person downright insecure."

Her little dark eyes shone with approval as she examined his suit. "You'll never entice **Birgit Briceno** by ordinary means, though," she pronounced, catching his glance in the mirror. "That foreigner will respond only to witchcraft."

"Really?" **Lorenzo** mumbled, shrugging his shoulders with studied indifference.

"Isn't that the reason you went to see a witch? To get a love potion for that **musiua**?" she challenged him, crossing her spindly arms across her flat chest.

Realizing that he wasn't about to answer, she added, "Well then, why don't you follow the witch's advice?"

Lorenzo laughed and regarded his aunt thoughtfully. She had an uncanny way of knowing what was on his mind, and her assessments were always accurate.

Petra had moved into the house upon his father's death. He had been ten years old then. Not only had she taken care of him all these years, but she had also managed the bar until he had been capable of doing so himself.

"**Birgit Briceno** will respond only to witchcraft," **Petra** repeated obstinately.

Lorenzo examined himself in the mirror. He was too short and stocky to look dignified. His cheekbones were too pronounced, his mouth too thin, his nose too short to be handsome.

Yet, he loved women unabashedly, and he knew that women loved men who loved them that way. But to have **Birgit Briceno**, he would need more than that. And he wanted her more than anything in the world.

He had never doubted the power of witchcraft. The witch's recommendation on how to seduce the foreign woman, however, was far too outlandish.

"Love potions are for people who don't have the strength to go directly to the spirit of things," she had said to him. "Anything can grant you your wish, your most earnest wish, if you're strong enough to wish your wish directly into the spirit of a thing. You have a devil's mask; ask the mask to seduce **Birgit Briceno**."

He decided it was all too vague. He was too practical: He relied only on something that was concrete.

"You know what?" he said, facing his aunt. "**Birgit Briceno** herself has invited me to her house."

"She probably invited half the town," **Petra** replied cynically. "And the uninvited half will be there, too."

She rose and, before shuffling back to her room, added, "I didn't say you couldn't get **Birgit Briceno**. But mark my words. It won't be through

ordinary means."

He had discarded the witch's advice because he did not want merely to seduce the Swedish woman: He wanted her to love him, even if only for an instant. In his moments of euphoria he thought he would not be satisfied with less than one hour.

The front door and the windows of the **Bricenos'** house were wide open. The tall fir tree in the living room, lit by a myriad of colorful lights, could be seen in all its splendor from the plaza.

Lorenzo walked inside the house.

The place looked like a train station. Rows of chairs faced a raised platform that had been set up in the patio. The stuffed leather armchairs, couch, and Moroccan stools from the living room had been moved out into the gallery next to the willow furniture. Boys and girls dashed about barefoot, their mothers in tow, trying to put last minute touches on their costumes.

"**Lorenzo!**" don **Serapio** called out the instant he caught sight of him from the wide open living room. Although he was tall and thin, don **Serapio** had quite a paunch, and whenever he stood, his legs were slightly spread.

Don **Serapio** adjusted his thick horn-rimmed glasses and patted **Lorenzo** cordially on the shoulder. "We're about to serve coffee," he said, steering him toward his guests, the elite of the town.

Among them were the doctor, the mayor, the barber, the school principal, and the priest. They all had the same expression on their faces: utter perplexity at seeing **Lorenzo** in don **Serapio's** house.

The pharmacist seemed genuinely pleased to have the elusive bar owner among his guests.

Lorenzo greeted everyone, then edged his way to the door, and almost collided with **Birgit Briceno** as she stepped into the room.

"Well!" she exclaimed, her smile taking them all in. "We have the children ready to start the play. But first, come and join your wives for cookies and coffee." Taking her husband's arm she led the way to the dining room.

Lorenzo could not take his eyes off her. She was tall and strongly built, yet he thought there was something vulnerable, almost frail about her long neck and her delicate hands and feet.

As though aware of his scrutiny, she looked at him. She hesitated for a moment, then poured coffee into two minute, gold-rimmed cups and brought them over to where he stood. "There is also rum," she said, wistfully eyeing the bottle at the far end of the table, "to which only the men help themselves."

"I'll take care of that, right away," **Lorenzo** said, finishing his coffee in one gulp. He reached for the bottle, filled his cup with the rum, then casually exchanged her empty cup with his.

Grinning, she reached for a cookie, nibbled at it, and sipped her rum daintily. "There are always surprises in store for me," she said, her eyes suddenly sparkling, her cheeks flushed.

Lorenzo was oblivious to everything except her. He had not realized that don **Serapio** was talking until she made a subtle gesture of annoyance. "I'd better get back to the children," she said.

In a slow pedantic voice, the pharmacist was denouncing the Venezuelan tradition of Christmas revelers, who each night played their

drums and sang improvised Christmas carols. Not only was it annoying, he stressed, to hear the incessant beating of drums, but it was downright disgusting to see young men reeling through the streets from all the rum they had been given as a reward for their songs.

An expression of pure mischief spread slowly over **Lorenzo's** face as he recalled his last visit to the witch. "I don't believe what you're telling me," he had said, "because I don't know who could grant me such a monumental wish."

"Trust me," she had replied. "There is no way to know who grants these wishes. But they do happen. And when you least expect it."

She had insisted that he already possessed the item that would cast a spell on **Birgit Briceno**: a devil's mask. "All I can add is that you must wear the mask in triumph, and it will grant you your wish."

The witch had told him that it was vital for him to choose his time well, for the mask's magic would work only once.

Certain that more than a coincidence was involved in his spotting the mask that morning, **Lorenzo** walked casually out into the yard. He made sure no one saw him, then dashed into a side street and slipped into his house through the back door.

He tiptoed to the bar, lit a candle, and reached for the mask on the shelf. Hesitantly, he ran his fingers over its red-and-black-painted surface.

The carver had put something diabolical into his creation, **Lorenzo** thought. He had the odd feeling that the eye slits, half-hidden behind bushy brows made from sisal fibers, were accusing him for his neglect; and the mouth, with the long fangs of some wild animal at each corner, grinned fiendishly, daring him to dance with the mask on.

He held it over his face. His eyes, nose, and mouth fitted so well into the mask, he almost believed it had been made for him. Only his cheekbones rubbed slightly against the smooth wood inside. He tied the rawhide straps behind his head and covered them with the long sisal fibers, dyed purple, green, and black, hanging down the back.

Lorenzo did not hear **Petra** shuffling into the room. Startled, he leapt into the air when she spoke.

"You'll have to change your clothes," she declared and handed him a pair of pants and a patched shirt. "Take off your sandals, the devil goes barefoot."

She looked around, afraid someone might overhear, then added, "Remember, the devil commands without uttering a word."

Quietly, the same way he had come in, **Lorenzo** slipped out the back door.

He deliberated for an instant, wondering which way to turn when he heard a group of revelers playing their drums down the street. Protected by the shadows, **Lorenzo** kept close to the walls as he approached them.

"The devil!" one of them shouted upon seeing **Lorenzo**, then excitedly ran up and down the street, announcing that the devil had come to town.

Four young men detached themselves from the group and surrounded the devil, their hands moving loosely and gracefully as they began to beat on their drums. One of them sang an impromptu verse, proclaiming that they were at the devil's command for the night.

Lorenzo felt a shiver run up his spine. It filled him with a restlessness he could not control. Slowly, he lifted his muscular arms, and his feet

moved, on their own accord, to the rhythm of the drums.

Windows and doors opened as they cavorted through the streets toward the plaza, followed by an ever increasing crowd.

As if the devil had requested it, the lights in the plaza and in the surrounding houses went out for three or four seconds. The music stopped. Momentarily paralyzed, the crowd watched the devil go into the **Bricenos'** house.

Lorenzo leapt upon the platform in the patio just as rockets, lit by someone outside, shot up in the air. Red, blue, green, and white lights exploded against the sky, then fell dizzily to earth, a shower of faint golden sparks.

Spellbound, the guests stood transfixed, their eyes on the devil and the drummers that had followed close behind him.

As if hearing some silent music, **Lorenzo** danced in the middle of a circle of quiet drummers, his body slightly stooped over, his red-and-black mask gleaming, his horns menacingly pointing to heaven.

Then all at once like thunder came the sound of the drums, turning the prolonged silence into a rumble that extended to every corner of the house.

The devil, seeing **Birgit Briceno** leaning against the dining-room door, jumped down from the platform, grabbed the bottle of rum on the table, and handed it to her.

Laughing, she took the bottle, then proudly tossed her head back and drank.

Confident of his power, the devil danced around her, moving with consummate grace, his back stiff, only a suggestion of movement in his hips.

With hands outstretched, her face rapt, **Birgit Briceno** responded to the drums as if in a trance.

Don **Serapio**, his face contorted behind the thick, horn-rimmed glasses, sat huddled in the depths of an armchair that suddenly looked too wide for him.

The guests, mingling with the crowd that had come in from the plaza, began to dance. Slowly, their hips swayed modestly, their movements deliberately restrained.

Lorenzo, surrounded by an ever increasing number of dancing women, who all wanted to hold him, to touch him, to reassure themselves that he was made of flesh and blood, lost sight of **Birgit Briceno**.

He broke free from the women's eager hands and hid behind a door. Making sure he had not been followed, **Lorenzo** dashed to the back of the house, peeking into every room he passed.

The sound of joyful laughter brought him to an abrupt halt. Leaning against the arch that separated the laundry area from the backyard stood a tall, corpulent figure clad in black boots, a long red robe trimmed with white, and a red Phrygian cap fastened on top of a curly wig.

Lorenzo moved closer to the oddly attired person. "**Birgit Briceno**," he mumbled under his breath, gazing up into her clear, bold eyes framed by wire-rimmed spectacles that had no glass in them.

"**Santaclos!**" she corrected, a wide grin parting her lips, hidden by a shaggy beard and mustache.

She reached for a burlap sack on the ground stuffed with packages and a staff leaning against the wall.

"I was going to wait until tomorrow and surprise the children who took part in the Christmas play with gifts," she explained, "but I can't pass up this opportunity."

Her smile took on a sly, conspiratorial edge. "You are with me, aren't you?" she asked, and her eyes shone with a wicked gleam as she bent down to look into the slits of his mask.

Lorenzo bowed to her, then reached for the burlap sack, flung it over his shoulder, and motioned her to follow him.

He led her out to the backyard onto a side street toward the plaza, where a few old people, several women, and their small children had gathered to watch the party at the Bricenos' house from across the street.

"There goes the devil!" a little girl shrieked. Calling to the other children to follow her, she ran toward the middle of the plaza. They stopped abruptly. Silently, the children stood in front of the two figures, their eyes wide with fear and curiosity.

"That's the devil," the little girl said, pointing to Lorenzo. "And who are you?" she demanded of the tall figure. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm Santaclos and I bring presents," Birgit Briceno said, pulling out a package from her burlap sack. Smiling, she handed it to the child.

"Do you have presents for us, too?" the other children asked, dancing around them.

Laughing, Birgit Briceno placed the packages into their eager little hands. A bewildered little girl held a box tightly against her chest and shouted excitedly, "Santaclos and the devil are going to dance together!"

The children's delighted shrieks attracted a crowd in a matter of moments. Some musicians among them began to play their instruments and beat their drums.

"Let's dance away from your house," Lorenzo whispered into Birgit Briceno's ear. "And when we get to a side street, we'll slip away."

Lorenzo looped a bandanna around her waist and held the ends firmly. Their bodies twisted and trembled in a fiery, rhythmical embrace.

Afraid to lose his grip on the ends of his bandanna, he ignored the other women's explicit invitations to dance with them.

In the eyes of everyone, he was engrossed in his dancing, but the moment he heard another group of musicians coming down the street, he grabbed the startled Birgit Briceno by the hand and pulled her through the multitude.

Before anyone realized what had happened, the devil and Santaclos had vanished.

They ran until they were out of breath. And when they heard the crowd laughing and thumping just around the corner, Lorenzo lifted Birgit Briceno in his arms and walked through the front door into the home of one of his friends and customers.

Lorenzo saw him in the living room amid a small group of people. It did not occur to Lorenzo that he might be intruding upon a family reunion. All he could think of was that he had to convince his friend to lend him his car.

"What a night," Birgit Briceno sighed, a beaming smile parting her lips. "That crowd almost got us." Pulling off the wig, beard, and mustache, she threw them out the window.

She unfastened the cushions from under her robe and flung them on the backseat. "Where are we going?" she asked, searching the darkness outside.

Lorenzo chuckled behind his mask and continued driving toward the small house he owned near the sea.

Giggling, she relaxed in her seat. "I smell the sea breeze," she murmured shortly, breathing in deeply.

"I was born in a Swedish fishing village," she said. "The people I come from have always been buried at sea or by the sea, and the only regret I have in life is that I won't. Serapio already owns a plot in the cemetery in town."

Puzzled by her odd concern, he stopped the car.

"Can the devil's mask grant me my wish to be buried by the sea?" she asked with such a serious, determined expression on her face that he could only nod in agreement.

"A promise like that is sacred," she said. The look in her eyes made it clear that for her their understanding was total.

She leaned back in her seat. She was still, yet a strange, almost mischievous smile played around her mouth. "And I, on my part, promise to love the bearer of the wish-granting mask all this night," she whispered.

He would have settled for an instant of love. Next to an instant, a night was an eternity.

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Chapter 13

For days on end, I had pondered the meaning of the stories I had heard. I thought I understood what was meant by a link, or a witch's shadow, or the wheel of chance; but, I still wanted dona Mercedes or Candelaria to clarify things.

I had accepted from the beginning that I was not there to interpret what I was experiencing in terms of my academic training, however, I could not help seeing things in terms of what I had learned in the nagual's world.

Florinda would have explained it all in terms of intent: a universal, abstract force responsible for molding everything in the world we live in.

Being an abstract force, its molding power is ordinarily outside the reach of man, yet under special circumstances it allows itself to be manipulated. And that is what gives us the false impression that people or things grant us wishes.

Compared to Florinda- and I could not avoid making the comparison- dona Mercedes and Candelaria were more simple pragmatists.

They did not have an overall encompassing understanding of their actions. They understood whatever they did, as mediums, witches, and healers, in terms of separate, concrete events loosely connected with one another.

For instance, dona Mercedes was giving me concrete examples of ways of manipulating something nameless. The act of manipulating it, she

called a witch's shadow. The result of that manipulation she called a link, a continuity, a turn of the wheel of chance.

"It was certainly the mask that granted **Lorenzo's** wish," dona **Mercedes** said with absolute conviction. "I've known other, very similar instances of things granting wishes."

"But tell me, dona **Mercedes**, which is the important factor, the thing itself or the person who has the wish?"

"The thing itself," she replied. "If **Lorenzo hadn't** had that mask, he could've spent his life panting over **Birgit Briceno**; and that would've been all his wish amounted to. A witch would say that the mask, not **Lorenzo**, made the link."

"Would you still call it a witch's shadow, even if there was no witch involved?"

"A witch's shadow is only a name. All of us have a bit of a witch in us. **Lorenzo** is definitely not a spiritualist or a healer, yet he has a certain power to bewitch. Not enough, though, to make a link, to move the wheel of chance; but with the aid of the mask, it was a different story."

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A faint noise startled me. I tried to move, but my left arm, flung behind my head, was stiff from lack of circulation. I had fallen asleep in **Mercedes Peralta's** room after becoming thoroughly exhausted from taking an inventory of her dried medicinal plants.

I turned my head upon hearing a voice call my name. "Dona **Mercedes?**" I whispered. Except for the sound of the knots of the healer's hammock, squeaking as they rubbed over the metal rings, there was no answer. I tiptoed over to the corner. No one was in the hammock. Yet, I had the distinct feeling that she had just been in the room and that somehow her presence still lingered about.

In the grips of inexplicable anxiety, I opened the door, then ran down the dark silent corridor.

I crossed the patio to the kitchen and out into the yard. There in the hammock that hung between two soursop trees lay dona **Mercedes** enveloped in tobacco smoke, like a shadow.

Slowly, her face emerged from the smoky dimness. It was more like an image in a dream. Her eyes glittered with a peculiar hollow depth.

"I was just thinking about you," she said. "About what you're doing here." She pulled up her legs to get out of the hammock.

I told her that I had fallen asleep in her room, and had been frightened by the sound of her empty hammock.

She listened in silence, a worried expression on her face. "**Musiua**," she said sternly, "how many times have I told you never to fall asleep in the room of a witch? We're very vulnerable while asleep."

Unexpectedly, she giggled and covered her mouth, as though she had said too much. She signaled me to come closer and to sit on the ground near the edge of her hammock.

She began to massage my head. Her fingers traveled with an

undulating movement down to my face.

A soothing numbness spread across my features. My skin, muscles, and bones seemed to dissolve under her deft fingers.

Totally relaxed and at peace, I fell into a drowsiness that was not quite sleep. I was half-conscious of her gentle touch, as she continued to massage me. Finally, I lay **faceup** on the nearby cement slab.

Silently, dona **Mercedes** stood over me. "Watch, **Musiua**," she suddenly cried out, looking up at the full moon racing through the clouds. Hiding, rising, emerging, the moon seemed to tear the clouds in its rush. "Watch," she cried out again, throwing a clump of gold medals fastened to a long gold chain into the air high over her head. "When you see the chain again, you'll have to return to **Caracas**."

For an instant the dark clump seemed to be suspended against the full moon emerging from behind a cloud. I did not see it fall. I was too preoccupied wondering what had prompted her to mention that I had to go back to **Caracas**.

I asked her about it: She remarked that it was foolish of me to assume I was going to stay in **Curmina** forever.

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The persistent sharp call of a cicada on the branch above my head was more like a vibration punctuating the stillness of the hot and humid night.

I turned on my stomach on the mat in the patio and waited for the woman who had been appearing to me at the same spot every night.

Dona **Mercedes**, dozing in a nearby hammock, had decided to keep me company that night, breaking with her presence the singularity of those appearances.

She had established from the beginning that as long as no one else was with me or watched me, my contacts with the spirit would remain **superpersonal** events. If, however, someone else was present, the entire matter would become public property, so to speak.

I had acquired by then a certain expertise in smoking cigars. At first, I had expressed to dona **Mercedes** my concern about the irritating effect of the heat on the delicate tissue inside the mouth. She had laughed my fear away, assuring me that the smoke of ritual cigars was actually cool and soothing.

After practicing for a short while, I had to agree with her: The smoke was indeed cool: The tobacco seemed mentholated.

Dona **Mercedes'** decision to accompany me that night was triggered by **Candelaria's** doubts that I was strong enough to hold a full seance by myself. To them, a full seance meant that at one point the medium has absolutely relinquished all voluntary control of her person and the spirit can express itself through the medium's body.

Earlier that day, dona **Mercedes** had explained to me that my presence in her house was no longer tenable: Not because she or **Candelaria** were in any way at odds with me or cross with me, but

because she had nothing of value to give me.

She assured me that both **Candelaria** and herself felt nothing but the deepest affection for me. Had she liked me less, she would have been satisfied with letting me watch her treat the sick and pretend that I was her helper. It was her affection for me that forced her to be truthful.

What I needed was a link, and she had none for me. She could only make one for **Candelaria**. However, since the spirit had chosen me to be an intermediary or, perhaps, even a true medium, she had to honor that choice.

So far, she had helped me do so by indirectly helping me make nightly contacts with the apparition.

"The fact that the spirit of my ancestor has chosen you," she had said, "makes you, **Candelaria**, and me sort of relatives."

Candelaria had told me then that she had had contact with the same spirit since childhood. But, following a medium's tradition of total secrecy, she could not possibly elaborate on that.

Dona **Mercedes** stirred in her hammock and crossed her arms behind her head. "**Musiua**, you better squat and start smoking," she said in a soft, relaxed tone.

I lit a cigar, puffing at it in short even spurts and murmured the incantation she had taught me. The smoke and the sound were definitely the agents that brought the apparition every time.

I heard a soft rustle. Dona **Mercedes** also heard it, for she turned at the same instant I did. A few feet away, squatting between **Candelaria's** giant **terracotta** flower pots, was the woman.

Dona **Mercedes** crouched beside me and took the cigar from my mouth. She puffed at it, mumbling an incantation; a different one from mine. I felt a tremor in my body; an invisible hand gripped me by the throat.

I heard myself making whizzing, gurgling noises. To my amazement, they sounded like words said by someone else with my own vocal cords. I knew instantly- although I did not understand them- that they were words of yet another incantation. The apparition hovered over my head, and then it disappeared.

Next, I found myself with dona **Mercedes** and **Candelaria** inside the house. I was soaked in perspiration and felt physically exhausted. And so were the two women.

However, my exhaustion was not a debilitating one. I felt extraordinarily light and exhilarated.

"How did I get here?" I asked.

Candelaria consulted dona **Mercedes** with a questioning look and then said, "You had a full seance."

"This changes everything," dona **Mercedes** said in a faint voice. "The spirit of my ancestor has made a link for you. So, you must stay here until the spirit lets you go."

"But why did the spirit choose me?" I asked. "I'm a foreigner."

"There are no foreigners for the spirits," **Candelaria** answered. "The spirits only search for mediums."

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Chapter 16

Mercedes Peralta sat hunched over the altar, mumbling an incantation.

Faint with hunger and fatigue, I kept glancing at my watch. It was nearly six o'clock in the evening.

I fervently wished that the large woman sitting by the table would be dona **Mercedes'** last patient for the day.

There had been no explanation for her seeing more than two sick persons a day, but for the last four Saturdays dona **Mercedes** had seen as many as twelve in one day.

They were mostly women from the nearby hamlets who took advantage of their weekly trip to the market and stopped by to see the healer.

There were always those who sought help for such specific ailments as headaches, colds, and female disorders.

The great majority, however, came to be relieved of their emotional problems. Unrequited love, marital difficulties, strife with in-laws, growing children, and problems at work and in the community were the most frequently discussed topics. Graying hair, loss of hair, the appearance of wrinkles, and bouts of bad luck were among the more frivolous complaints.

Dona **Mercedes** treated each person, whatever his or her problem, with the same genuine interest and efficiency.

She would first diagnose the ailment with the aid of her nautical compass or by interpreting the pattern of the cigar's ashes on the plate.

If the person's imbalance was caused by psychological turmoil- she called it spiritual- she would recite a prayer-incantation and give a massage.

If the person was suffering from a physical ailment, she would prescribe medicinal plants and a follow-up.

Her artful use of language and her great sensitivity to each person's minute change in mood prompted the most reluctant man or woman to open up and talk candidly about his or her intimate concerns.

Mercedes Peralta's voice startled me. "You really messed up this time," she addressed the large woman sitting in front of the table.

Dona **Peralta** shook her head in disbelief, and once again examined the cigar's ashes, which she had collected on a metal plate on the altar.

"You're a fool," she declared, holding the plate under the woman's face, expecting the woman to recognize in the soft, gray-greenish powder the nature of her ailment. "You really are in trouble this time."

Rushing with apprehension, the woman looked from side to side, as if she were trying to find a way to escape. She puckered up her lips like a child.

Dona **Mercedes** rose, moved to where I sat on a stool in my usual corner, and in a formal tone pronounced, "I would like you to write down the treatment my client is to follow."

As usual, I listed first the prescribed herbs, flower essences, and dietary restrictions. Then, I wrote out a detailed account of when and under what circumstances the patient was to take the herbal infusion and the purifying baths.

With dona **Mercedes'** permission, I never failed to make a carbon copy for myself. And finally at her urging, I read out loud several times what I had written.

I was certain that it was not only to reassure dona **Mercedes** herself that I had listed everything correctly but mainly to benefit the patient in case she was illiterate.

With the instructions clutched in her hand, the woman rose and faced the altar. She put some bills under the statue of the Virgin, then solemnly promised that she would follow dona **Mercedes'** instructions.

Dona **Mercedes** stepped over to the altar, lit a candle, and kneeled to pray to the saints that her judgments would be correct.

I mentioned that I knew doctors who prayed a great deal.

"What good doctors and healers have in common is abiding respect for their patients," she declared. "They trust the great force that is out there to guide them. They can summon that power through prayer, meditation, incantations, tobacco smoke, medicines, and equipment."

She reached for the carbon copies of all the instructions I had written out that day, then counted the pages. "Did I really see that many persons today?" she asked, seemingly uninterested in hearing my answer.

A faint smile parted her lips as she closed her eyes and leaned back in her uncomfortable-looking chair. "Go and bring me all your notebooks on all my clients but not the ones on the persons who are telling you their stories. I want to see how many people I've treated since you got here."

She got up and walked with me to the door. "Bring everything to the patio. I want **Candelaria** to help me," she added.

It took me almost an hour to gather all my materials. With the exception of my diary, I carried everything to the patio, where dona **Mercedes** and **Candelaria** were already waiting for me.

"Is that it?" dona **Mercedes** asked, eyeing the bundles of paper I had placed on the ground right in front of her.

She did not wait for my answer but ordered **Candelaria** to stack the papers and index cards by the steel drum at the far end of the patio. As soon as she had done so, **Candelaria** came to sit beside me on the mat. We both faced dona **Mercedes**, who was once again lying in her hammock.

"I've already told you that you are here under the auspices of the spirit of my ancestor," dona **Mercedes** said to me. "Since last night you are a medium chosen by that spirit. And mediums don't keep papers about healing. The very idea is hideous."

She rose from her hammock and walked to where my bundles of notes were. Only then did it dawn on me what she intended to do. She broke the string bindings with a knife and dropped handfuls of paper into the steel drum. Mesmerized, I watched the smoke rise from the drum. I had not noticed before that there was a fire inside it.

Eager to save some of my work, I jumped up. **Candelaria's** words stopped me from running to the drum.

"If you do that, you must leave right away." She smiled and patted the mat beside her.

In that instant I understood everything. There was nothing I could have done.

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After an entire day's work, dona **Mercedes** fell soundly asleep in her chair.

I watched her for a while, wishing I could relax that easily, then I quietly put back the various bottles, jars, and boxes in the glass cabinet.

As I tiptoed past her on my way out, she suddenly opened her eyes. She turned her head slowly and listened, her nostrils flaring as she sniffed the air.

"I almost forgot," she said. "Bring him in, right away."

"There **isn't** anybody," I replied with absolute certainty.

She raised her hands in a helpless gesture. "Just do what I tell you," she said softly.

Certain that she was going to be wrong this time, I stepped outside.

It was nearly dark. No one was there. With a triumphant smile on my face I was about to walk back into the room when I heard a faint cough.

As if he had been conjured up by dona **Mercedes'** assertion, a neatly dressed man emerged from the shadows in the corridor. His legs were disproportionately long. His shoulders, in contrast, seemed small and looked frail under his dark coat.

He vacillated for an instant, then lifted a cluster of green coconuts in a slight salute. In his other hand, he held a custom-made machete.

"Is **Mercedes Peralta** in?" he asked in a deep, raspy voice, interspersed by a harsh cough.

"She's waiting for you," I said, holding the curtain aside for him.

He had short, stiff, curly hair, and the space between his brows was creased in a deep frown. His dark, angular face exuded an unyielding hardness, matched by the fierce, relentless expression in his eyes. Only at the corners of his well-shaped mouth lingered a certain softness.

He stood irresolute for a moment, then a faint smile spread slowly over his face as he approached dona **Mercedes**.

He dropped the coconuts on the ground, and adjusting his pants at the knees, squatted by her chair. He selected the biggest coconut on the cluster, and with three expert cuts of his short machete, removed the top.

"They are just the way you like them," he said. "Still soft and very sweet."

Dona **Mercedes** brought the fruit to her lips, and in between her noisy slurps, remarked how good the milk was. "Give me some of the inside," she demanded, handing the fruit back to him.

With one sure blow, he halved the coconut and then loosened the soft, gelatinous pulp with the tip of his machete.

"Prepare the other half for the **musiua**," dona **Mercedes** said.

He stared at me long and hard, then without a word he scraped the remaining half of the coconut with the same meticulous care and handed it to me. I thanked him.

"And what brings you here today?" dona **Mercedes** asked, breaking the awkward silence. "Do you need my help?"

"Yes," he said, pulling a cigarette case from his pocket. He lit a cigarette with a lighter. After taking one long drag, he returned the case

to his pocket.

"The spirit is all right," he said. "It's this damned cough that's getting worse. It **doesn't** let me sleep. I also have this headache. It **doesn't** let me work."

She invited him to sit down, not opposite her where her patients usually sat, but on the chair by the altar.

She lit three candles in front of the Virgin, then casually inquired about the coconut plantation he owned somewhere along the coast.

He turned around slowly and gazed into her eyes. She coaxed him with a movement of her head. "This **musiua** helps me with my patients," she said to him. "You can talk as if she **weren't** present."

His eyes caught mine for a moment. "My name is **Benito Santos**," he said and swiftly looked back at dona **Mercedes**. "Does she have a name?"

"She says her name is **Florinda**," dona **Mercedes** answered before I had time to say anything. "But I call her **Musiua**."

She watched him intently, then positioned herself behind him. With slow easy movements, she rubbed an unguent on his chest and shoulders for nearly a half hour.

"**Benito Santos**," she said, turning toward me, "is a powerful man. He comes to see me from time to time; always for a headache or a cold or a cough.

"I cure him in five sessions. I use a specially made unguent and an eloquent prayer offered to the spirit of the sea."

She continued massaging him for a long time. "Is the headache gone?" she asked, resting her hands on **Benito Santos**' shoulders.

He did not seem to have heard her question. He stared with unseeing eyes at the flickering candles. He began to talk about the sea and how ominous it was at dawn when the sun rises from the dim lusterless water.

In a monotonous, almost **trancelike** murmur, he spoke about his daily noon excursions into the sea. He had never learned to swim, only to float.

"Pelicans circle around me," he said. "Sometimes they fly very low and look directly into my eyes. I **m** certain they want to know if my strength is waning."

With his head bowed, he remained silent for a long time, then his voice faded to an even lower, hard-to-understand murmur. "At dusk, when the sun is behind the far away hills and the light no longer touches the water, I hear the voice of the sea.

"It tells me that someday it will die, but while it lives, it is relentless. I know then that I love the sea."

Mercedes Peralta pressed her palms over his temples, her fingers spanning his head.

"**Benito Santos**," she said, "is a man who has overcome guilt. He's old and he's tired. But even now he is relentless like the sea."

Benito Santos came to see dona **Mercedes** for five consecutive days. After finishing each of his daily treatments, she always asked him to tell me his story. He never answered her and totally ignored me.

Finally, at the end of his last appointment, he abruptly turned and faced me. "Is that your jeep out there in the street?" he asked. Without giving me time to answer, he added, "Drive me back to the coconut plantation, please."

We drove in silence. Just prior to reaching the coast, I assured him that he did not have to honor dona **Mercedes**' request.

He shook his head emphatically. "Whatever she asks is sacred to me," he said dryly. "I just don't know what to say or how to say it."

I paid countless visits to **Benito Santos** under the pretext of getting coconuts for dona **Mercedes**. We talked a great deal. But he never warmed up to me.

He always stared at me defiantly until I turned my eyes away. He made it perfectly clear that he was talking to me only because **Mercedes Peralta** had requested it. He certainly was, as she had described him, hard and relentless.

Clutching his machete firmly in his hand, **Benito Santos** stood motionless in the hot noon sun. It scorched his back, stiff from cutting cane for a week.

He pushed back the brim of his hat to cool his forehead. His eyes followed the group of weary men walking across the empty, harvested sugarcane fields on their way into town.

For the last day and night everyone had worked without rest. Like him, the men would have no jobs to go to on Monday. It had been the last sugarcane crop before the tractors were to flatten and parcel off the land.

The owner of those fields had held out the longest. But finally, like all the other planters in the area, he had been forced to sell his property to a land-developing company in **Caracas**.

The valley was to be converted into an industrial center. Germans and Americans were going to build pharmaceutical laboratories. Italians were not only going to construct a shoe factory, but bring their own workers from Italy as well.

"Damn foreigners," **Benito Santos** swore, spitting on the ground. He **didn't** know how to read or write, and he had no skills. He was a sugarcane cropper. All he knew was how to wield a machete.

Dragging the long blade on the ground, he approached the hacienda's courtyard, then turned to the small bungalow, where the foreman had his office. A group of men, some standing, some squatting under the shade of the building's wide overlapping roof, eyed him suspiciously as he stepped into the office.

"What do you want?" the short, potbellied foreman sitting behind a gray metal desk asked. "You got paid, **didn't** you?" he added impatiently, wiping the sweat off his neck with a neatly folded white handkerchief.

Benito Santos nodded. He was a taciturn man, almost gruff. It was hard for him to speak, to ask a favor.

"I heard that the sugarcane has been transported to a mill in the next town," he stammered, his eyes fixed on the foreman's massive neck bulging over the collar of his starched shirt. "I've been around mills before. I **m** wondering if you could hire me to work there."

Leaning back in his chair, the foreman regarded **Benito Santos** through drooping lids. "You live around here, don't you? How would you be getting to the next town? It's more than fifteen miles from here."

"By bus," **Benito Santos** mumbled, looking furtively into the man's eyes.

"Bus!" The foreman laughed scornfully, stroking his thin, neatly trimmed mustache. "You know well that the bus only leaves when it's full. You'd never get there before noon."

"I'll make it," **Benito Santos** said desperately. "If you give me the job, I'll make it somehow. Please."

"Listen," the foreman snapped. "I hired anyone capable of cutting down sugarcane regardless of age or experience because we had a deadline to meet. It was made perfectly clear to every man hired that this was a six-day job."

"At the mill we already have more people than we need." The foreman began to shuffle through the papers on his desk. "Don't waste any more of my time. I'm a busy man."

Benito Santos stepped into the courtyard, making sure not to trample on the tufts of grass growing between the stones. The mill, at the far end of the yard, already looked abandoned even though it had been in use only a few days ago. He knew he would never see its like in the valley again.

The loud honking of a truck jolted him. Quickly, he stepped aside, lifting his hand for a ride into town. He was enveloped in a cloud of dust.

"You got to walk, **Benito Santos**," someone shouted from the moving vehicle.

Long after the dust had settled he could still hear the shouts and laughter of the workers on the truck.

His fingers curled tightly around the handle of his machete. Slowly, they relaxed again.

He pulled his hat well over his forehead to shade his eyes from the bright sun glazing the blue of the sky.

Benito Santos didn't follow the main road into town but cut across the empty fields until he reached a narrow trail. It led toward the southern end of town, where the Saturday open-air market was situated.

He walked slower than usual, aware of the hole in one of his shoes and the flapping sole of the other, which stirred the dust on the ground before him.

From time to time, he rested under the dark cool shade of the mango trees growing on either side of the path: Dispiritedly, he watched the fleeting green outline of lizards darting in and out of the bushes.

It was way past noon when he reached the market. The place was still bustling with people. Vendors, their voices already hoarse, advertised their merchandise with the same enthusiasm they had displayed earlier that morning. And the customers, mostly women, haggled shamelessly over the prices.

Benito Santos walked past the Portuguese farmers' stands, where the now limp vegetables lay in disarray; past the meat and dry-fish stalls, where flies swarmed around and mangy dogs waited with endless patience for a piece of meat to fall on the ground.

He grinned at the hired children who were standing behind the fresh-fruit stalls, packing rotten fruit in paper bags instead of letting the customers choose from the merchandise on display.

He fingered the money in his pocket: six days' wages. He deliberated whether he should buy food for his wife, **Altagracia**, and their small son now or later.

"Later," he said out loud. There was always the chance that he would get a better deal if he haggled with the merchants just before they were ready to pack up.

"Get your food while you have the money, **Benito Santos**," an old

woman who knew him well shouted. "The beans and the rice won't get any cheaper."

"Only women wait for the afternoon bargains," a merchant taunted him, making obscene gestures with a plantain.

Benito Santos stared at the grinning faces of the **Lebanese** peddlers, standing behind their gaudy stalls, advertising cheap dresses, costume jewelry, and perfumes.

Rage made the veins in his temples swell and stiffened the muscles on his neck. The humiliating incident in the foreman's office was vivid in his mind. The scornful laughter of the workers on the truck still rang in his ears.

The machete was as light as a knife in his hand. With tremendous effort he turned around and walked away.

A cold sweat bathed his body. His mouth was dry. He felt a tingling in his stomach that was not hunger.

He would have his rum now, he decided. He **couldn't** wait until he got home. He needed the rum to dispel his anger, to dispel his gloom, his despondency.

Purposefully, he headed toward the main entrance of the market, where trucks and **packtrains** of donkeys waited to be reloaded with the produce that **wasn't** sold.

He crossed the street, then stepped inside the small dark store at the corner and bought three pint bottles of the cheapest rum.

He sat down under the shade of a tree, facing the trucks and the donkeys. He **didn't** want to miss the moment the merchants began to pack up.

Sighing contentedly, he leaned against the tree trunk. He took off his hat and wiped the sweat and the dust from his haggard face with his sleeve.

Carefully, he opened one of the bottles and downed the first pint in one long gulp. Gradually, the rum dulled the tension in his stomach; it eased the pain in his stiff back and sore legs. He smiled. A vague feeling of well-being drifted through his head.

Yes, he mused, it was better to sit there, enjoying his rum, than to go home and listen to **Altagracia's** incessant nagging. He was slow to anger, but today he had had as much as he could take.

Through drooping lids, **Benito Santos** watched the people gathered in a circle near the market's entrance. It was the same crowd that came every Saturday afternoon from the nearby hamlets to bet on the cockfights.

Drowsily, he let his gaze wander to the two men squatting beneath a tree directly across from him. He **wasn't** much interested in cockfights, yet his attention was caught by the two roosters the men held in their hands.

They bounced them up and down to strengthen their legs. With an oddly gentle gesture, the men ruffled the birds' feathers and then shoved them against each other to rouse their spirits.

"That's a fine-looking bird," **Benito Santos** said to the man holding the dark rooster with the golden-tipped feathers.

"He certainly is," the man agreed readily. "He'll be in the last fight this afternoon. The best birds are saved for the last fight," the man added proudly, brushing the rooster's feathers. "You ought to bet on him. He'll

be the winner today."

"You're sure?" **Benito Santos** asked casually, taking out another bottle of rum from his paper bag.

He took a long gulp, then meandered through the crowd of excited men squatting around a sand pit. They made room without looking at him, their eyes fixed on the center of the arena where two birds were locked in deadly combat.

"Your bets! Gentlemen, your bets!" a man shouted, his voice silencing the noisy crowd for a moment. "Your bets for the last fight! For the real fight!"

Eagerly the men exchanged their dirty bills for the colored markers indicating the amount of their bets.

"Are you sure your rooster is going to win today?" **Benito Santos** asked the owner of the bird with the golden-tipped feathers.

"He sure is!" the man exclaimed, planting rapturous kisses on the bird's scarred crest.

"Afraid to bet, **Benito Santos**?" asked one of the workers who had been cutting cane with him during the week. "You'd better buy some food for your old woman if you don't want trouble tonight," he added mockingly.

Benito Santos chose a marker and without hesitation bet the rest of his wages on the cock with the golden-tipped feathers.

He was certain he would double his money. He would be able to buy not only rice and beans but meat and more rum. There might even be enough money to buy his son his first pair of shoes.

Benito Santos, as excited as the rest of the spectators, shouted his approval as the owners raised their birds high over their heads. They sucked the sharp, deadly spurs on the roosters' legs as evidence that there was no poison on them. The men mumbled sweet nothings to their birds, and then, at the command of the referee, they placed them in the center of the sand pit.

The combatants viewed each other angrily but refused to fight. The crowd shouted, and a wicker cage was lowered over the roosters. Excitedly the men goaded the birds to attack. The roosters trembled with rage, and their plumage spread out beneath their shaved, bloodshot necks.

The cage was lifted. The cocks jumped at each other, skillfully avoiding pecks and blows of wings. But soon they were engaged in a deadly wing-beating, head-thrusting, leg-kicking explosion of fury.

The white cock's feathers were red with blood, either from its own wounds or from the deep gash on its opponent's neck.

Silently, **Benito Santos** prayed for the bird he had bet on to win.

At a signal from the referee, the open-beaked, hard-breathing roosters were lifted from the pit. With mounting anxiety **Benito Santos** watched the owner of the golden-feathered bird blow on its wounds. Soothingly, he talked to the rooster, caressing and fussing over it.

At the referee's command, the birds were once again placed in the center of the circle.

The white-feathered bird instantly took a well-aimed jump and sunk its spurs into its opponent's neck. Its triumphant crow shattered the silence of the audience as the golden-tipped rooster toppled over dead.

Benito Santos smiled bitterly, then laughed behind a grimace that

struggled to hold back his tears. "At least I've got my rum," he mumbled, then gulped down the rest of his second bottle.

With trembling fingers he wiped his chin dry. He walked away from the crowd, heading toward the hills: the empty cane fields stretching endlessly before him shimmered in the bright afternoon sunlight. The yellow dust of the road raised by his shoes settled like fine, golden powder on his arms and hands.

Slowly, he went up a steep hill. Wherever there was a tree, he crossed the road and rested in its shade.

He opened his last bottle of rum and took one long gulp. He **didn't** want to see his wife. He **couldn't** bear to look into her accusing eyes.

He scanned the hills around him and let his gaze rest on the green slopes on the other side of the road where a high ranking general in the government had his farm.

Benito Santos took another swallow. The rum filled him with a vague hope.

Perhaps they might give him a job at the general's place. He could cut the green, irrigated alfalfa grown specifically for the horses. Hell! He had a skill! he thought. He was a sugarcane cropper. Cutting cane or alfalfa was all the same.

He might even be able to ask for an advance. Not much. Just enough to buy some rice and beans.

He almost ran down the hill, then up the newly paved road leading to the general's farm. He was so excited by the possibility of getting a job that he **didn't** even see the two soldiers by the wide open gate.

"Where do you think you're going?" one of them stopped him, pointing his rifle to a sign on the road. "Can't you read? No trespassing beyond this point. This is a private road."

Benito Santos was so winded his throat hurt with each breath. He looked from one soldier to the other, then addressed the second soldier, who was leaning against a large boulder next to the sign. He looked older and friendlier. "I'm in desperate need of a job," he murmured.

Silently, the soldier shook his head; his eyes fixed on **Benito Santos'** stiff black hair sticking through his torn straw hat. **Benito Santos'** worn, rolled-up khaki pants and shirt clung damply to his tall, gaunt frame.

"There are no jobs in this place," he said in a sympathetic tone. "There **isn't** anyone around here to hire you, anyway."

"There must be someone there with the horses," **Benito Santos** insisted. "Maybe I could help. Just for a couple of hours every day."

The guards looked at each other, then shrugged and grinned mischievously. "Ask for the German in charge of the horses," the younger-looking man said. "He might help you."

For a moment **Benito Santos** wondered what the soldiers could be laughing about. But he felt too grateful to let it worry him.

Afraid they might change their minds and call him back, he hurried along the straight paved road cut into the hill.

He stopped short in front of the general's house. Undecided, he stood looking at the two-story building. It was all white with a long balcony supported by massive columns.

Instead of calling out, he tiptoed toward one of the downstairs windows. It was open, and the air gently fluttered the gauzy curtain.

He wanted to have a quick look and see what it was like inside. He

had heard that the luxurious furnishings had been brought over from Europe.

"What are you doing here?" a loud, heavily accented voice asked from behind him.

Startled, **Benito Santos** almost dropped his bottle of rum as he turned around. Wide-eyed, he regarded a wiry, middle-aged man with blond, closely cropped hair.

He must be the German the soldiers had told him to see, he thought, looking into the man's restless eyes. They were the color of the sky and shone hard under fiercely jutting brows.

"Do you have a job for me?" **Benito Santos** asked. "Any kind of job."

The man moved closer to **Benito Santos** and stared at him menacingly. "How dare you come here, you drunkard?" he spat out, his voice cold with contempt. "Get out of here before I set the dogs on you."

Benito Santos' gaze became unsteady, his eyelids twitched. He felt like a beggar. He hated to ask for a favor. He had always worked the best he could. His tongue felt heavy.

"Just for a couple of hours." He held out his hand so the man could see the cracks and calluses. "I'm a hard worker. I'm a cane cutter. I could cut some grass for the horses."

"Get out!" the German yelled. "You're drunk."

Benito Santos walked slowly, dragging the tip of his machete on the ground. The road before him seemed longer than ever, as though it stretched itself deliberately to delay his arrival home.

He wished he had someone to talk to. The monotonous drone of the insects made him feel even more desolate.

He crossed the dry gully to his shack. He remained outside for a moment, deeply breathing in the late-afternoon air, letting the gentle breeze cool his flushed face.

He had to stoop to enter his shack. It had no windows, only an opening in the front and one in the back, which he closed at night with a piece of cardboard propped up with a stick.

The heat was stifling inside. The sound of the hammock's ropes rubbing against the wood and **Altagracia's** uneven breathing irritated him. He knew she was seething with wrath.

He turned to look at his son sleeping on the ground. He wore a discolored rag, which barely covered his small chest. He **couldn't** remember whether the boy was two or three years old.

Altagracia rose from her hammock, her eyes fixed on the bag in his hand. She planted herself in front of him and demanded in a harsh, shrill voice, "Where is the food, **Benito**?"

"The market was already packed up by the time I got there," **Benito Santos** mumbled, moving over to the **cot** in one corner of the shack, the paper bag held tightly in his hand. "I'm sure there are still some beans and rice left here."

"There is nothing here as you well know," **Altagracia** said, trying to grab the paper bag. "You sure had time to get drunk." Her face with its yellowish, sagging skin was flushed. Her sunken, usually lifeless eyes shone with anger and despair.

He clearly felt the accelerated pounding of his heart. He **didn't** have to give her an explanation. He **didn't** owe anyone an explanation.

"Shut up, woman," he yelled. He lifted the bottle and drank the rest of

the rum without drawing a breath.

"I worked the whole night cutting cane. I'm tired." He threw the empty bottle through the opening of the shack. "I want some peace and quiet now. I want no woman shouting at me. Take the boy and get the hell out of here."

Altagracia grabbed **Benito Santos** by the arm before he had a chance to lower himself on the **cot**.

"Give me the money; I'll buy the food myself. The boy needs to eat." She ripped open his pocket. "No money?" she repeated, in a daze, looking uncomprehendingly at him.

"**Didn't** you get paid today? You **couldn't** have spent six days' wages on rum." Shouting obscenities, she pulled his hair and pounded her clenched fists against his aching back and chest.

He felt drunk, not with rum, but with rage and hopelessness. He saw the gleam of fear in her eyes as he raised his machete.

Her scream filled the air, then there was silence. He looked at her still form on the ground, at her tangled mass of hair soaked in blood.

He felt something tugging at his pants. His small son held onto his leg with such strength he was certain the child would never let him free.

Possessed by an irrational fear, **Benito Santos** tried to shake him loose, but the boy would not let go. The boy's eyes were those of his mother; dark and deep, filled with that same accusing light.

Benito Santos' temples began to throb under the boy's unblinking stare. With blind fury, he raised the machete once more.

Never in his life had he felt such an agonizing desolation. Never before had he been so clear-headed either.

For a moment it was as if he had had another life, a more meaningful life- a life with a greater purpose- and was now looking into the nightmare that his existence had become.

Then, more aware than he had ever been, he soaked some rags in the nearly empty can of kerosene and set his shack on fire.

He ran as far as he could and then stopped. Motionless, he stood gazing at the empty fields at the foot of the hills, at the faraway mountains in the distance.

In the morning those mountains were the color of hope. Beyond them was the sea. He had never seen the sea. He had only heard that it was immense.

Benito Santos waited until the mountains, the hills, and the trees were no more than shadows; shadows like the memories of his childhood.

He felt he was again walking with his mother through the narrow streets of his village amid the crowd of the faithful behind some procession at nightfall with candles winking through the darkness.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen." His voice drifted away with the wind and the thousands of small sounds shrouding the hills.

He shivered with fear, and took off again in a wild run. He ran until he could no longer breathe.

He felt himself sinking into the soft ground. The earth was swallowing him: It was soothing him with blackness; and **Benito Santos** knew that this was the last day of his useless life. He had at last died.

He opened his eyes, seemingly to the sound of a woman's wailing, but

it was the night breeze, rustling through the leaves around him.

How he had wished to remain forever in darkness; but he knew that nothing would ever be that easy for him.

He rose, picked up his machete, and headed toward the road that led to the mountains.

A clear light came down from the sky. It spread around him: It even gave him a shadow. The clear light made the air thinner, easier to breathe.

He had no place to go. Nothing to look forward to. He felt no profound emotion. There was only a vague sensation, a vague hope that he might get to see the sea.

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Chapter 18

"It's time for you to go," [Candelaria](#) said. "You **shouldn't** be working on Sundays." She pulled the plug of my tape recorder.

At that very instant, dona [Mercedes](#) stepped into the kitchen. She frowned, noticing that I was still in my robe. "Why **aren't** you ready?" she asked me.

"I know why," [Candelaria](#) said. Her voice held a curious softness, and a glimmer of amusement shone in her eyes. "She **doesn't** want to collect [Benito Santos](#)' coconuts. She's afraid of him."

Before I had a chance to deny her accusation, she was gone from the room.

"Is that true, [Musiuia](#)?" dona [Mercedes](#) asked, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "I haven't noticed that you held any ill-feelings toward him."

I assured her that I did not. However, I **couldn't** help feeling that what [Benito Santos](#) had done to his wife and his child was abominable.

"His story has nothing to do with morality or justice," she interrupted me. "It's the story of a violent, desperate man."

I protested because I deeply resented that he had looked after only himself. I talked almost hysterically about the despair and the hopelessness of women and children.

"Stop it, [Musiuia](#)." With her finger she poked me on my chest next to my collarbone. It felt as if she were pushing me with an iron tip.

"Don't give in to your false sense of order. Don't be a [musiuia](#) that comes from a foreign country to find flaws: That kind of person would feel offended by [Benito Santos](#) and miss what I am trying to show you."

"I want to place you under the shadow of the people I've selected to tell you their stories."

"The story of [Benito Santos](#)' last day of his useless life sums up all his existence. I asked him to tell it to you with all the details he could remember; and I have also sent you to see for yourself his coconut grove by the sea so you would verify that the wheel of chance did turn."

It was hard for me to explain my feelings to dona [Mercedes](#) without moralizing. I did not want to, but I could not help myself.

She gave me an all-knowing smile.

"The value of his story," she said all of a sudden, "is that without any

preparation, he made a link himself: He made the wheel of chance move.

"Witches say that sometimes one single act makes that link."

Dona [Mercedes](#) pushed herself up from the chair she had been sitting on, and holding firmly to my arm walked me out of the kitchen toward her room.

At her door, she stopped and looked at me. "[Benito Santos](#) killed his wife and child. That act moved the wheel of chance; but what made him end up where he is now- by the sea- was his desire to see the sea."

"As he must have told you, it was a vague desire, yet it was the only thing he had after committing an act of such violence and finality. So, the desire took hold of him and drove him."

"That is why he has to remain faithful to that desire that saved him. He has to love the sea. He comes to me so that I can help him maintain his unwavering course."

"It can be done, you know. We can make our own link with one single act. It **doesn't** have to be as violent and desperate as [Benito Santos](#)' act, but it has to be as final. If that act is followed by a desire of tremendous strength, sometimes, like [Benito Santos](#), we can be placed outside of morality."

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Chapter 19

It was late in the afternoon when dona [Mercedes](#) and I left the house and walked up the street to [Leon Chirino](#)'s house.

Leisurely, we went past the old colonial houses near the plaza and peeked inside the open windows.

The rooms were dark, yet we could make out the shadows of old women counting rosary beads as they said their silent afternoon prayers.

We rested on a bench in the plaza, surrounded by old men sitting on crude wooden chairs propped against tree trunks.

We waited with them for the sun to disappear behind the hills, and for the evening breeze to cool the air.

[Leon Chirino](#) lived on the other side of town at the foot of a shack-covered hill.

His house, made of [unplastered](#) cement blocks, had an extensive yard and was encircled by a high wall.

The small wooden gate in the wall was unlocked, as was the front door.

Without bothering to knock or to call out we went through a large living room and headed straight for the back patio, which had been converted into a workshop.

Under the bright glare of a single bulb, [Leon Chirino](#) was sanding a piece of wood.

He spread his hands in a gesture of invitation and pleasure, and invited us to sit on the bench across from his working table.

"I guess it's time to get ready," he said, brushing the sawdust off his kinky white hair, and the wood shavings from his clothes.

Expectantly, I looked at dona [Mercedes](#), but she merely nodded.

A secret light shone in her eyes as she turned to **Leon Chirino**.

Without a word she rose and shuffled down the corridor bordering the patio toward the back of the house.

I was about to follow, when **Leon Chirino** stopped me short. "You'd better come with me," he said, switching off the light.

He spat through his teeth, accurately aiming at one of the dried-up flower pots in the corner.

"Where is dona **Mercedes** going?" I asked.

He shrugged impatiently, and guided me in the opposite direction to a narrow alcove that separated the living room from the kitchen.

Against one wall of the small enclosure stood an earthenware water filter; against the other, a refrigerator.

"Would you like one of these?" He held up a bottle of **Pepsi** he had removed from the icebox.

Not waiting for my reply, he opened the bottle and casually added, "Dona **Mercedes** is making sure there are enough cigars."

"Is there going to be a seance?" I asked, taking the bottle from his hand.

Leon Chirino turned on the light in the living room, then moved to the high window facing the street. He reached for a wooden panel, and before placing it in the window sill, he looked back over his shoulder; his eyes shining, one hand stroking his chin. His smile, slightly crooked, was devilish.

"There certainly is going to be one," he said.

Sipping the **Pepsi**, I went to sit on the couch by the window.

The lack of furniture made the room appear larger than it actually was.

Other than the couch, there was only a tall cabinet crammed with books, snapshots, bottles, jars, cups, and glasses; and several wooden chairs lined up against the walls.

Mumbling something unintelligible, **Leon Chirino** turned off the light, then lit the candles that stood on the carved ledges beneath the various pictures of saints, Indian chieftains, and black slave leaders adorning the ochre-painted walls.

"I want you to sit here," he ordered, placing two chairs in the middle of the room.

"On which one?"

"Whichever you prefer."

Grinning broadly, he unfastened my wristwatch, put it in his pocket, then went to the cabinet and took out a small jar.

The jar was half-filled with mercury: In his dark hands it looked like the giant pupil of a live monster.

"I understand that you're a full-fledged medium," he said, placing the jar in my lap. "The mercury will keep the spirit from gravitating toward you.

"We don't want the spirit near you. It's too dangerous for you."

He winked and hung a silver chain necklace with a medal of the Virgin around my neck. "This medal is guaranteed to be a protection," he assured me.

Closing his eyes, he joined his hands in prayer.

As soon as he had finished, he warned me that there was no way of knowing whose spirit would visit us during the seance.

"Don't let go of the jar and don't remove the necklace," he admonished, pulling up the rest of the chairs to form a circle in the middle of the room.

He blew out all the candles except the one burning beneath the picture of **El Negro Miguel**- a famous slave leader who had headed the first slave uprising in Venezuela.

Then he said another short prayer, and silently left the room.

The candle had almost burned down when he returned.

Urging me to keep my eyes fixed on the jar in my lap, he sat beside me.

Overcome by curiosity, I looked up several times when I heard people come into the room, and sit on the chairs.

In the uncertain light I failed to recognize a single face.

Mercedes Peralta was the last one to come in.

She removed the candle from the ledge and distributed the hand-rolled cigars.

"Don't talk to anyone before or after the seance," she whispered in my ear as she held the flickering flame to my cigar. "No one else besides **Leon Chirino** knows you are a medium. Mediums are vulnerable."

She sat down opposite me.

I closed my eyes, and puffed skillfully as I had done countless times in dona **Mercedes'** patio.

I became so engrossed in that act that I lost track of time.

A soft moan arose from the smoky darkness.

I opened my eyes and saw a woman materialize in the middle of the circle of chairs, a hazy figure.

Slowly, a reddish light spread all over her until she seemed to be aglow.

The manner in which she carried herself, the way she was dressed- black skirt and blouse- the familiar way she tilted her head to one side, made me think it was **Mercedes Peralta**.

However, the longer I observed her, the less sure I was.

Wondering whether I was going through one of the inexplicable visions I had had in the patio, I clutched the mercury jar in my hands and rose from my chair.

I stood transfixed as the woman became transparent.

I found nothing frightening about her transparency: I simply accepted that it was possible to see through her.

Without any warning the woman collapsed in a dark heap on the ground: The light inside her seemed to have been turned off.

I was totally reassured that she was not an apparition when she took out a handkerchief, and blew her nose.

Exhausted, I sank into my chair.

Leon Chirino, sitting on my left, nudged me with his elbow, gesturing me to keep my attention on the center of the room.

There, inside the circle of chairs where the transparent woman had been, stood an old, foreign-looking woman.

She stared at me, her blue eyes wide open, frightened, bewildered.

Her head jerked back, then forward, and before I could make any sense of the vision, it faded- not suddenly; but slowly, it floated about.

It was so quiet in the room that for an instant I thought everyone had gone.

On the sly, I glanced around me.
All I saw was the glow of cigars.
They **couldn't** possibly be smoking the same cigars dona **Mercedes** had distributed, I thought: I had finished mine a long time ago.
As I leaned forward to attract **Leon Chirino's** attention, someone placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Dona **Mercedes!**" I exclaimed, recognizing her touch.
With my head bent I waited for her to say something.
When she **didn't**, I looked up, but she was not there.
I was alone in the room: Everyone else had left.
Frightened, I stood up, and ran toward the door, only to be stopped by **Leon Chirino**.

"**Frida Herzog's** spirit roams around here," he said. "She died on the steps of this hill."
He moved toward the window and opened the wooden panels.
Like a ghostly apparition the smoke swirled out of the room, dissolving into the night air.

Leon Chirino faced me and once again repeated that **Frida Herzog** had died on the steps of that hill.

He walked around the room carefully inspecting the shadowy corners, perhaps to make sure that no one was there.

"Was **Frida Herzog** the old woman I saw?" I asked, "Did you see her, too?"

He nodded, then mumbled once again that her spirit was still roaming around.

He brushed his forehead repeatedly, as if he were trying to rid himself of a thought or, perhaps, the image of the frightened old woman.

The stillness in the room became unsettling.

"I'd better catch up with dona **Mercedes**," I said softly and opened the door.

"Wait!" **Leon Chirino** stepped forward and grabbed my arm.

He lifted the silver necklace over my head and took the jar containing the mercury from my hand.

"During a seance, chronological time is suspended," he murmured in a slow, tired voice. "Spiritual time is a time of equilibrium that is neither reality nor a dream. Yet, it is a time that exists in space."

He emphasized that I had been plummeted into an event that had happened a long time ago.

"The past has no time sequence," he continued. "Today can be joined up with yesterday; with events of many years ago."

He fastened my watch around my wrist, and said, "The best thing is not to talk about these matters.

"What happens is vague and elusive, and not meant to be put into words."

Anxious to catch up with dona **Mercedes**, I agreed with him halfheartedly.

Leon Chirino, however, determined to keep me in his house, repeated again and again that **Frida Herzog** had died on the hills right behind his house.

"I saw dona **Mercedes** turn transparent," I interrupted him. "Did you see that, too?"

He stared at me, as though he had not expected me to ask about her,

but the next moment he was laughing.

"She wanted to dazzle you," he said brimming with pride. "She's a perfect medium."

Half-smiling, he closed his tired eyes. He seemed to be savoring some treasured vision.

Then gently he pushed me outside, and without a sound, closed the door behind me.

For a moment I stood bewildered outside **Leon Chirino's** door.

I knew I had lost track of time during the seance, but somehow I **couldn't** believe that the whole night had gone by, and that I had failed to hear the rain: Yet, it was dawn and there were puddles on the sidewalk.

A parrot screeched somewhere in the distance. I looked up.

Across the street, standing like a shadow by the eucalyptus tree that marked the cement steps leading up the shack-covered hill, was **Mercedes Peralta**. I ran toward her.

Anticipating my questions, she touched my lips with her finger, then bent low and picked up a small, freshly broken branch lying on the ground.

It was still wet with the night's rain. She shook it: The scent of eucalyptus, imprisoned in hundreds of drops, showered on my head.

"We better get going," she said, but instead of heading home, she led me up the hill.

The air smelled of mildewed cardboard. There was no one around. The shacks appeared to be abandoned.

Halfway up, we turned onto one of the paths that spread like branches from the wide steps; and stopped in front of a yellow-painted house roofed with sheets of corrugated tin.

The unlocked front door opened directly into what seemed to be a bedroom.

A narrow, neatly made-up bed stood in the middle of the room.

Hairy ferns growing in animal-shaped flower pots rested on stools.

Bamboo cages with canaries in them hung from the ceiling.

Pants, jackets, and crisply ironed shirts dangled from wrought-iron hooks fastened on the yellow walls.

A man emerged from behind a brightly patterned curtain that I first mistook for a wall decoration.

"**Efrain Sandoval!**" I exclaimed, wondering what the man from whose store I purchased my **notepads** and pencils was doing in that place.

I was well acquainted with him and his German-born wife, who by speech and manner was more Venezuelan than a born native. Together with their two daughters they lived near the plaza above the stationery-radio-TV shop he owned.

He was in his forties, but his slight build and his delicately featured face made him look much younger. His slanted dark eyes fringed by long, curly lashes shone brightly.

He appeared to be amused by some secret thought.

As always, he was immaculately dressed; but that morning, his whole being reeked of cigar smoke.

"Were you at the seance?" I asked him in an involuntary tone of incredulity.

Gesturing me to be quiet, he invited us to sit on the bed.

"I'll be right back," he promised, vanishing behind the curtain.

Shortly, he reappeared, carrying a bamboo tray heavy with food, plates, and cutlery.

He cleared off one of the stools and placed the tray on it; and with the flamboyant movements of a maitre d', he served us black beans, rice, fried plantains, spicy shredded meat, and coffee.

In nervous anticipation I looked from one to the other, expecting a discussion of the spiritualists' meeting.

"The musiua is about to burst with curiosity," dona Mercedes announced, a devilish glint in her eyes.

"She wants to know why you live up here, when you have such a nice home above your store in town.

"I would like you to tell her why."

"You would?" Efrain Sandoval asked indifferently as he ate the last of the beans on his plate.

He chewed slowly, stalling for time.

He rose, walked over to the window, and opened it.

For a second or two he gazed at the pale dawn sky then turned and stared at me.

"I guess you must have a good reason for wanting to know about me?" he added in a questioning tone.

"She does," dona Mercedes answered. "So don't be put off when she comes to your store to pester you for your story."

Efrain Sandoval smiled sheepishly, tilted his stool, and leaned against the wall.

He let his gaze wander about the room: There was a remote expression in his eyes: He seemed no longer aware of our presence.

"But what's the point of telling her?" he finally asked without looking at dona Mercedes. "It's not an earth-shaking story. It's rather banal."

"That's the very point of it," she said. "The musiua has heard all kinds of stories by now. Yours is of particular interest because you never did anything to make it happen. You were just there, placed by a higher order."

"I still don't see how the story of Frida Herzog is going to help the musiua," Efrain Sandoval insisted.

"Let her worry about that," Mercedes Peralta said dryly.

She rose from the bed and motioned me to do likewise.

Efrain Sandoval looked as though he was going to argue the point.

Instead he nodded. "As you already know, I have a large house in town," he said, turning toward me.

He opened his arms wide. "Yet, I also live here where I can feel the presence of Frida Herzog, who unwittingly gave me everything I have."

He moved toward the window, but before closing it he glanced uncertainly at dona Mercedes, and asked, "Are you going to give me a cleansing today?"

"Of course." She laughed. "Don't mind the musiua. She has seen me doing this before."

Efrain Sandoval seemed to vacillate for a moment, then, apparently afraid that there might not be enough time, he promptly took off his coat and lay face up on the bed.

Mercedes Peralta retrieved a small bottle, a white handkerchief, two candles, and two cigars from her dress pocket. Meticulously, she lined

them up on the floor at the foot of the bed.

She lit one of the candles, then a cigar, and inhaled deeply.

Wrapped in smoke, the murmured words of her incantation tumbled out of her mouth with each exhalation.

A wicked smile flittered across her face as she reached for the white handkerchief and the little bottle, half-filled with a mixture of perfumed water and ammonia.

She poured a generous amount on the handkerchief, and folded it into a perfect square.

"Breathe!" she commanded, and in one swift, well-aimed motion she held the handkerchief under Efrain Sandoval's nose.

Mumbling incoherently, he twisted and turned in an effort to sit up. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and his moving lips tried in vain to form a plea. Dona Mercedes held him in place quite effortlessly by simply increasing the pressure of her hand over his nose. Soon, he gave up struggling. He crossed his arms over his chest and lay still, utterly exhausted.

Dona Mercedes lit a second cigar. Mumbling a soft prayer, she asked the spirit of Hans Herzog to protect Efrain Sandoval.

The last few puffs of smoke she blew into her cupped hands, and then ran her fingers over his face, his folded arms, and all the way down his legs.

Startled upon hearing a strange sound, I looked around me.

The room was filled with smoke, and out of that haze a form appeared, no more than a shadow or a billow of smoke that seemed to be hovering beside the bed.

Efrain Sandoval's deep sleep, punctuated by loud snoring, broke the spell.

Mercedes Peralta rose, put all her paraphernalia, including the cigar stubs, into her pocket, then turned to the window and opened it.

Pointing her chin to the door, she motioned me to follow.

"Will he be all right?" I asked once we were outside: I had never attended such a short session.

"He'll be fine for another year," she assured me. "Every year, Efrain Sandoval attends a spiritualists' meeting to renew himself."

She made a wide sweeping gesture with her arms. "Frida Herzog's spirit roams around here, Efrain believes it has brought him luck, and that's why he has chosen to keep this shack while his family lives in town.

"It isn't true, but his belief doesn't harm anyone. In fact, it brings him relief."

"But who is Frida Herzog?" I asked. "And who is Hans Herzog? You definitely asked his spirit to protect Efrain."

Dona Mercedes put her hand over my lips. "Musiua, have patience," she said, bemused.

"Efrain will tell you in time. All I can say is that the one who moved the wheel of chance for Efrain wasn't Frida Herzog. She had no reason to. It was actually a ghost who did it. The ghost of Hans Herzog."

Dona Mercedes leaned heavily against me as we walked down the hill. "I can hardly wait to get into my hammock," she mumbled. "I'm dead tired."

Afraid that someone might tamper with or perhaps even steal his moped, Efrain pulled it up onto the sidewalk and into the hallway of the

new two-story building owned by his employer, **Frida Herzog**.

The Finnish woman and her children who lived in the bottom apartment watched him resentfully. They considered the hallway their front porch.

He shrugged his shoulders apologetically, and climbed the stairs to **Frida Herzog's** apartment.

He had worked for the **Herzogs** since he was an adolescent: It was **Hans Herzog** who had bought him the moped.

The years he worked for him had flown by so fast, **Efrain** had not even felt them.

He had liked his job as an all-around helper and delivery boy in **Hans Herzog's** poultry business, but what he had enjoyed the most was his employer's gentility and his grand sense of humor.

Efrain never had the feeling that he was working, but rather that he went to the office every day to get a lesson in the art of good living.

Over the years he had become more like an adopted son or a disciple of **Hans Herzog** than an employee.

"I thank you, **Efrain**," he used to tell him, "a man of my nature needs, at a certain age, an unbiased audience; a captive ear."

Hans Herzog had immigrated from Germany before the war, not to make a fortune, but in search of fulfillment.

He married late in life because he considered marriage and parenthood a moral necessity: He called them the controlled strains of paradise.

When **Hans Herzog** had a stroke, it was **Efrain** who tended him day and night.

Hans Herzog could not speak anymore, but he communicated with **Efrain** just the same through the intensity of his eyes.

In his last moments, he made a frantic effort to say something to **Efrain**; he failed. So he shrugged his shoulders and laughed. And died.

Now, **Efrain** worked for the man's widow, but not in the same capacity, and certainly not with the same pleasure.

She had sold the poultry business: It reminded her of her husband, she said; but she kept **Efrain** as an employee because he was the only one who knew how to drive the moped.

Noticing that the door to **Frida Herzog's** apartment was ajar, he pushed it open without knocking and stepped into the tiny hall that led to the living room.

The room, cluttered with beige upholstered furniture, was divided from the dining area by a grand piano.

Glassed-in bookcases stood on either side of an enormous fireplace, which **Frida Herzog** lit once a year on Christmas Eve.

Efrain moved back a few steps so he could see himself completely in the gilded mirror hanging above the mantel piece.

He was in his **midtwenties**, yet his small wiry frame and his boyish, somehow immature, beardless face, made him look sixteen.

With painstaking absorption he combed his curly hair, and adjusted his tie and the cologne-scented handkerchief in his breast pocket.

Being poor was no reason to look untidy, he thought, and he glanced over his shoulder to make sure the back of his coat was smooth and unwrinkled.

Whistling, he crossed the room and stepped out onto the wide

balcony.

Potted rubber trees, orchids, ceiling-high ferns, and bird cages partially hid **Frida Herzog**.

Stout and solidly built, she sat at her desk, a white wrought-iron table with a heavy, opaque glass top.

"I've been waiting for you since nine o'clock," she said by way of greeting.

The angry expression in her blue eyes was magnified by the thick, horn-rimmed glasses posted menacingly on her prominent nose.

"What peace! What coolness one breathes in this veritable heaven!" **Efrain** exclaimed in a tone of exaltation.

He knew that flattering **Frida Herzog** about her jungle always put her in a good mood. "Even at noon your canaries sing like angels."

Imitating the call of the birds, he took off his coat and hung it carefully over the back of a chair.

"Never mind the birds," she said crossly, motioning him to sit across from her. "I pay you a salary, and I expect you to be here on time."

"I was held up by prospective clients," he said importantly.

She regarded him doubtfully, dabbing at the tiny drops of perspiration on her upper lip and forehead with a delicately embroidered handkerchief. "Did you take any orders?"

She gave him no opportunity to answer, but pushed several of the slender white boxes on the table toward him. "Check these," she grumbled.

Undaunted by her bad mood, he cheerfully informed her that the orders were as good as written up and signed.

Then, almost reverently, he opened the white boxes before him and gazed in awe at the bulky, silver-plated ballpoint pens lying luxuriously in the dark blue velvet-lined cases.

He uncapped one pen, unscrewed its top, and carefully inspected a small rectangular piece of metal and rubber resting on a minute ink pad. It was a seal.

To lift it out, he pressed the hollow end of the pen's cap on the perfectly fitting mount projecting from the metal plate.

He stamped the box, screwed the seal back, and capped the pen.

He did the same with the other pens: He made sure this way that the customers' names and addresses were spelled correctly.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I want no fingerprints on the pens?" **Frida Herzog** snapped, grabbing the pen from his hands. She polished it with her handkerchief and slipped it back inside the box.

"Now wrap them!"

He gave her a hostile glance, and did as she ordered.

"Do you also want me to glue the address labels on them?" he asked as soon as he finished wrapping the last one.

"Yes. Do that." She handed him six neatly typed labels from a small, metal filing box. "Make sure to apply the glue evenly."

"What?" **Efrain** retorted irritably: He had not understood a word she said. Her accent, barely noticeable under ordinary circumstances, flared up whenever she was angry or afraid, making it difficult to understand what she was saying.

Frida Herzog spoke slowly, enunciating each word carefully as she repeated, "Apply the glue evenly all the way to the corners of the labels."

She looked at him sternly and added, "I want the labels to stay glued." "If looks could kill, I would be dead," he mumbled, bringing both hands to his head in a mock gesture of agony.

Then he smiled at her entrancingly as he cursed her under his breath.

"What did you say?" **Frida Herzog** asked, her accent so thick that the words came out slurred.

"I said that it won't take me any time at all to do what you want."

He loosened his blue-striped tie and the collar of his stiffly starched shirt, then reached for the gourd-shaped glue container on the table and squeezed a small amount of glue on each label.

Meticulously, he spread it evenly with the rubber-tipped nozzle all the way to the corners and then pasted the labels to the small, perfectly wrapped, marked boxes containing the ballpoint pens.

"That's nicely done, **Efrain**." A hint of approval momentarily played upon **Frida Herzog's** plump, rosy face.

She never got over being surprised at the neat way he adhered the labels exactly in the middle of the boxes. She **couldn't** have done it better herself.

Encouraged by her compliment, he decided to ask about the pen she had promised him

Although he had already given up hope of ever receiving one from her, he nevertheless reminded her at every opportunity.

Each time she had a different excuse for not honoring her promise.

"When are you going to give me a pen?" he repeated, his voice high and urgent.

Frida Herzog stared at him in silence, then shifted forward in her chair and planted her elbows firmly on the table.

"Haven't I told you before of the difficulties I have had in convincing the manufacturer of the pens to give me the dealership for this area? Don't you realize that to be my age," she never said how old she was, "and to be a woman is a great handicap?"

She paused for a moment, then with a touch of pride in her tone, added, "Just because I am doing so well selling pens **doesn't** mean I'm in a position to give them away."

"One pen won't break you," **Efrain** insisted.

"Your pen! Your pen! Is that all you ever think of?" Indignation made her voice quiver.

She thrust her face forward, only inches away from his. Her eyes **didn't** even blink as they held his fixed.

Mesmerized, he just kept staring at her blue eyes in which a glimmer of madness was just discernible.

Perhaps sensing she had gone too far, she shifted her gaze away.

Slowly, her expression softened.

In a coaxing tone she went on to say that she was certain that together they could sell thousands of pens.

They would sell them not only in town and in the surrounding hamlets but all over the country.

"Be patient, **Efrain**," she entreated, leaning even closer toward him. "When business expands, we'll both get rich!"

She slumped back in her chair, and ran her hand affectionately over the small, gray filing box.

"But all I want is a pen, you crazy old idiot," **Efrain** mumbled

despairingly.

Frida Herzog didn't hear him: Dreamily, she gazed at her bird cages, a sad, faraway look in her eyes.

"I work very hard," **Efrain** said in a loud clear voice. "Not only have I been delivering pens for you, but I've gotten nearly all your customers myself."

He ignored her attempt to interrupt him. "And you won't even give me a pen."

"I'm not saying that you haven't done well," she said peevishly. "All I'm trying to do is make you understand that at the beginning of any business venture, sacrifices have to be made."

She paced about the balcony, her voice rising sharply as she continued. "Very soon I'll not only give you a pen and a commission, but make you a partner."

She came to stand in front of him. "I'm a businesswoman. I can envision these pens in every household all over the country. **Efrain**, we'll sell a pen to every literate person in this country."

She moved away from him, and leaned over the railing. "Just look at those hills!" she cried out. "Look at those shacks!"

With a sweep of her arm that made the wide sleeves of her housecoat flutter, she took in the whole panorama before her.

A radiant smile parted her lips as she turned to face him. "Just think of all those shacks in the hills. What opportunities!"

"We'll sell pens to the illiterates as well. Instead of having to make an X every time they need to sign a document, they can instead stamp their name on any paper that needs their signature."

She clapped her hands in childish delight, then sat beside him and reached into her pocket.

"This," she declared holding up her own gold-plated pen, "is the ideal answer for everyone's problem!"

Gingerly, she unscrewed the pen, hooked the tiny seal onto the cap's hollow end, and stamped the back of each of the boxes on the table. Proudly, she read her name and address printed in minute, purple letters.

"There are hundreds of people living in those shacks. I just know they'll all want one of these pens."

She touched his arm. "**Efrain**, as of today I'll pay you a commission on every pen you sell in those hills."

"They can't afford one," he reminded her sarcastically.

"I'll do something I've never done before," she declared bombastically. "I'll let them have the pens on credit." With a sweeping motion, she distractedly scooped the small pen boxes- including her gold pen- into **Efrain's** worn leather satchel. "You'd better go now."

A look of sheer incredulity spread across his face.

He looked up at her, wondering if she had noticed her mistake, then he nonchalantly reached for his satchel. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said.

"You only have six pens to deliver this afternoon," she reminded him. "I'll be expecting you back by five o'clock. These pens have already been paid for. You won't have to wait around for the money."

"It's the middle of the day," **Efrain** protested. "You can't expect me to go in this heat."

"Besides, I've got to eat first. I also need money to cover my traveling expenses."

Noticing her blank expression, he clarified, "I need to get gas for the moped."

She handed him some small change. "Don't forget to ask for a receipt," she said, glaring at him over her glasses.

He shrugged with displeasure. "Stingy idiot. This won't even fill the tank," he said and hissed under his breath.

"What did you call me?" **Frida Herzog** snapped.

He bit back the insult that rose to his lips. "This isn't enough to fill the gas tank," he said, slipping the coins in his pocket.

He took out his comb and, ignoring her disapproving expression, ran it through his unruly black hair.

"Four of the deliveries are within walking distance," she admonished. "There is no need to run the moped around town. I've walked those distances myself and even farther. If I can do it at my age, I would certainly expect a young man like you could do it."

Whistling softly, he adjusted his tie and put on his coat.

With a casual wave of his hand he turned and walked out into the living room.

A loud sigh escaped his lips. His eyes widened, expressing both surprise and admiration.

Sitting in one of the bulky armchairs, her bare legs hanging over the armrest, was **Antonia**, **Frida Herzog's** only daughter.

She didn't cover her legs, but looked at him with tender concern- the way women look at babies- and then she smiled provocatively.

She was a small, pretty woman in her midtwenties; but her worn-out, haggard expression and the air of despair about her made her look much older.

She was gone most of the time. Much to her mother's embarrassment, **Antonia** took off with men every chance she got, only returning periodically to visit. No wonder the old woman was in such a foul mood, **Efrain** thought. He felt a surge of passion for **Antonia** and wished he could stay and talk to her; but knowing that **Frida Herzog** could hear them from the balcony, he merely puckered his lips and blew **Antonia** a soundless kiss before he walked out the front door.

Frida Herzog stood motionless by the balcony railing.

She blinked repeatedly: The burning sun and the vibrant air made her eyes tear.

Heat waves billowed in the nearby foothills, transforming the multicolored shacks into a hazy flickering collage.

Not too long ago those hills had been green.

Almost overnight, squatters had transformed them into shanty towns. Like mushrooms after a heavy rain, the shacks had just popped up one morning, and no one had dared to pull them down.

Her glance strayed to **Efrain's** noisy moped sputtering along in the street below.

She hoped that he would first call on the two secretaries at the pharmaceutical laboratory who had been so enthusiastic about the pens. **Frida Herzog** was certain that once the two girls showed off their dazzling new pens to their co-workers, orders would be coming in promptly.

Chuckling to herself, she turned and gazed across the balcony into the living room where her daughter sat.

Frida Herzog heaved a deep sigh, and disappointedly shook her head from side to side. There was no way to make **Antonia** understand that she didn't want bare legs on the beige, raw silk-covered armchairs.

She had had such high hopes for her beautiful daughter. **Antonia** could have married any number of rich men.

It was beyond **Frida Herzog's** comprehension why the girl had married a penniless, unambitious salesman, who one day just walked out on her. **Frida Herzog couldn't** remember whether it had been during lunch or dinner when he got up from the table and never returned.

With an air of resignation, **Frida Herzog** stepped into the living room, forcing her lips into a pleasant smile.

"Really! **Efrain** is getting more impudent every day," she said, sitting in the armchair opposite **Antonia**. "I'm afraid that if I give him a pen, he'll quit work. That's all he's interested in."

"You know what he's like," **Antonia** said. She didn't look up but continued to buffer her long, well-cared-for nails. "So, all **Efrain** wants is a pen. What's wrong with that?"

"He should buy one!" **Frida Herzog** snapped spitefully.

"Really, Mother," **Antonia** chided. "Those silly trinkets are way too expensive. Obviously, he can't afford one."

"Don't make me laugh," **Frida Herzog** snorted. "I pay him well. If he wouldn't waste his money on clothes, he could--"

Antonia's words stopped her in midsentence. "Those pens are only a fad," she stated, "and **Efrain** knows it, too. In a few months, or perhaps only weeks, people will no longer want them."

Frida Herzog straightened in her chair as if her spine had been pulled up. Her face was red with anger. "Don't you dare tell me that," she yelled. "This pen will go on forever!"

"Calm down. Mother. You can't believe that," **Antonia** said in a conciliatory tone. "Why do you think you're selling pens in this godforsaken place? Don't you realize it's because no one in **Caracas** wants them any longer?"

"That's not true," **Frida Herzog** shouted. "Some day I'll have the dealership for the entire region, maybe even for the whole country. If I were the manufacturer of the pens, I would be trying to expand internationally. That's what I would do. Create an empire."

Antonia laughed, then turned toward the mirror above the mantel piece.

Streaks of premature gray laced her dark blond hair. There were wrinkles on either side of her mouth. Her large blue eyes would have been beautiful had it not been for their hard, embittered expression.

Not age, but exhaustion and despair were beginning to rob her face and body of its youth.

"**Efrain** has skills you haven't yet discovered," **Antonia** said. "No one can equal him in finding ways to make money."

"But to think you can get rich on pens! That's a joke. Why can't you simply use him in what he's best at?"

A contemptuous grin spread over **Frida Herzog's** face. "Use him at what he's best at! You think that I don't know what you have been up to in the last few months. I might be a little deaf, but I'm not stupid."

Seeing **Antonia** was about to rise, she hastily added, "You never had any class: Making out with **Efrain**! You should be ashamed of yourself."

He's a mulatto, or whatever! He's colored."

Her anger spent, **Frida Herzog** leaned back in her armchair and closed her eyes. She wished she could retract her words, yet when she spoke again, her voice was still querulous. "Isn't there anything you want out of life?"

"I want to marry **Efrain**," **Antonia** said softly.

"Over my dead body!" **Frida Herzog** yelled. "I'll disinherit you. I'll throw you out of this house."

She gasped for air. "Let me tell you, I'm going to take his moped away and fire him."

But **Antonia** no longer heard her. She had left the living room, slamming the door behind her.

For a few seconds **Frida Herzog** gazed at that door through which her daughter had disappeared, expecting her to return at any moment.

Her eyes felt heavy with tears that would not fall.

Silently, she headed toward her bedroom down the hall.

She sat in front of the kidney-shaped dressing table.

With trembling fingers, she took off her glasses and examined herself in the mirror. She ought to get a new permanent, she thought, combing her fingers through her wispy gray hair. Her eyes, encircled by dark shadows, were sunken. Her skin, once as smooth and white as fine porcelain, had aged inexorably, eroded by the relentless tropical sun.

Tears flooded her eyes. "Oh God," she said softly. "Don't let me get ill and die in this foreign place."

She heard soft steps outside; no doubt **Antonia** had been listening by the door. She was too tired to worry about it.

She lay on the bed and dozed in a half-pleasant sleep, lulled by the gentle sound of a **Mozart** sonata. The thought that **Antonia** was actually playing the grand piano filled her with intense joy. The girl had always played so well.

It was almost four when **Frida Herzog** awoke. As usual after a nap, she felt refreshed and in good spirits.

She decided to wear the polka-dot silk dress and the matching shoes **Antonia** had given her for Christmas.

The sun, already halfway down the sky, filled the living room with shadows. She looked out across the balcony at the brightly colored shacks on the distant hills. They appeared to be so much closer in the afternoon light.

She went to the kitchen and prepared her afternoon tray: coffee, sugar, cream, and a plateful of poppy-seed pastries.

"**Antonia**," she called affectionately, as she sat down in one of the armchairs. She listened for the familiar clicking of heels on the hard tile floor before pouring the coffee.

She called again, but there was no answer. She must have gone out, **Frida Herzog** decided, unfolding a white linen napkin on her lap.

It was close to five when she checked the time on her gold wristwatch.

Efrain should be back any minute now, she thought.

Perhaps he had been telling the truth and had indeed found her a new client. Although she never voiced it, she had long ago recognized that despite his lack of ambition, he was good at dealing with people.

Too bad she would have to let him go. She would have a hard time

finding a replacement for him, but she **couldn't** possibly consent to having him around when she knew **Antonia's** plans for him.

The thought that her daughter might have wanted only to upset her crossed her mind. She **couldn't** really believe that **Antonia** would marry that boy.

By six o'clock **Frida Herzog** was so restless that she called the two secretaries at the laboratory and the owner of the clothing store near the plaza. The pens had not been delivered.

Dumbstruck, she stared at the telephone, then stepped out on the balcony, and with nervous hands, she turned over every item on her desk.

"He took my pen!" she shrieked.

She headed for the front door and hurried down the stairs out into the street. She neither saw the startled faces of the neighbors gossiping on the sidewalk nor heard their greetings as she dashed around the corner.

Only upon reaching the foot of the hill did she stop to rest. Wishing she had put on more comfortable shoes instead of high heels, she slowly climbed the wide dirt path leading to the shacks.

She had never been to **Efrain's** house, but she knew more or less where it was. She had heard about the dangers of those shanty towns where no stranger dared to go. Even the police were reluctant to pursue criminals that chose to hide in those hills.

She was not afraid. Who would want to harm an old woman? She felt quite reassured upon noticing that not all the dwellings were shacks. Some were made of cement blocks, and a few were even two stories high.

She paused frequently to catch her breath, to quiet her rapidly pounding heart.

People stared at her curiously. Barefoot, half-naked children stopped their games and giggled as she walked by.

Just before reaching the top of the hill, she turned around and gazed at the town below. A gentle breeze cooled her flushed face.

Bathed in the mellow, diffused glow of the twilight, still vibrant with the afternoon heat, the town had never looked more beautiful.

Overcome by an odd, undefinable premonition of doom, her eyes searched for the silhouette of her building.

A girl's friendly voice dispelled her feelings. "Do you need any help?" she asked, regarding her curiously. "Are you lost?"

"I'm looking for **Efrain Sandoval's** house," **Frida Herzog** responded. So absorbed had she been in locating her building, she **hadn't** noticed that it was almost night. "Can you tell me where **Efrain** lives?" She repeated her question several times, while the girl kept staring at her, a blank expression on her face. It was obvious that she had not understood a word she was saying.

"You have gone too far," an old man squatting nearby informed her politely. He was barely outlined by the faint light escaping from the unevenly hammered boards of a shack.

"Go down a bit and turn left onto the walkway. It's the yellow house. You can't miss it. It looks like a canary."

There was a worried look in his eyes as he watched her unsteady steps down the hill. "You'd better go home though," he called after her. "There are a lot of drunks around at this time, and they get into fights."

But **Frida Herzog** didn't hear his warning words: They were drowned by the angry shouts of men and the sound of hurried, thudding steps.

Before she had a chance to turn and see what was happening, she felt a sharp blow.

The ground seemed to move underneath her, and she crashed through a makeshift railing put up to mark, rather than safeguard, a vertical drop.

For an instant, she saw in horror how the rock-covered ground below advanced to meet her. There were voices, some loud, some soft, and then there was only silence and darkness.

Efrain awoke with a start: He had had an uncanny dream.

As he had done so many times before in his sleep, he had again talked with **Hans Herzog**.

His friend was urging him to take matters in his own hands and marry **Antonia**. Together they should take a tour around the world.

Efrain had laughed. He told his friend that he would rather hear one of his stories about those foreign places.

Hans Herzog had refused, saying that it was time for **Efrain** to see those places himself.

Although **Efrain** was accustomed to the vividness of his dreams of **Hans Herzog**, this particular one had been so suggestive: It had left a lingering sense of reality which **Efrain** could not dispel.

To this day he had doggedly refused to admit that his friend and employer was dead. After all, he saw him and talked to him every night in his dreams.

Efrain lit the kerosene lamp on the table by his bed and opened the bottle of beer he had put on a stool. He poured it into a tall glass and blew the foam from the rim before taking a long gulp. He didn't mind that the beer was warm.

"To taking matters in my own hands!" he toasted, removing the gold-plated pen from his satchel.

Chuckling contentedly, he unscrewed the seal, hooked it onto the cap's hollow end, and stamped his arm repeatedly.

A week ago he had decided to take matters in his own hands and arranged with an engraver at a jewelry store to make him an exact replica of the seal but with his name on it.

Efrain had no doubt that luck had intervened in his favor.

How else could he explain this startling coincidence: The day he was to pick up the stamp bearing his name and address, **Frida Herzog**, by mistake, had put her own gold-plated pen in his satchel along with the six he was to deliver.

He poured the rest of the beer in his glass and sipped contentedly. Perhaps some unconscious part of **Frida Herzog** had wanted him to have the pen. He liked to believe that.

An insistent knocking on his door intruded on his thoughts.

"**Efrain!**" someone called, the voice urgent. "An old foreign lady who was looking for you has been knocked down by a drunk."

"**Frida Herzog!**" Grabbing the satchel from the table he rushed outside toward the crowd gathered at the bottom of the hill.

"It can't be," he repeated, pushing the people aside.

She was sprawled on the ground.

He kneeled down by her. The dim light of a kerosene lamp cast a yellowish gleam on her face.

He tried to say something, but not a word passed his lips. All he could do was stare into her pale blue eyes.

Without her glasses, which lay smashed beside her, her eyes looked wide, watchful, almost childlike.

The suggestion of a frown hovered around her lips, slightly parted to reveal her white teeth. He felt that there was something she wanted to say.

"I ve got the pens," he said reassuringly, taking the six boxes from the satchel. He held them close to her face.

"I couldn't deliver them today," he lied, "because I got involved with filling out some order forms for you. We have four new clients."

Her frown deepened. Her lips moved, mumbling something about his being fired from the job and about **Antonia**. Her eyes grew wider, her pupils dilated, and then life ran out.

"I work for her," **Efrain** said to no one in particular.

"Life is so strange. Only this morning she gave me this most beautiful pen," he explained, removing the gold-plated pen from his pocket.

With precise, careful movements he hooked the seal to the pen's cap and pressed it against his forearm.

He read his name and address in a loud clear voice, "**Efrain Sandoval**. The Canary Shack. **Curmina**; and I can arrange for any of you to buy one of these precious pens on credit."

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Version 2007.03.03

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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It was Sunday morning, and I was sitting with dona **Mercedes** in the plaza, waiting for **Candelaria** to come out of church. Only an hour earlier, I had had my last meeting with **Efrain Sandoval**.

On a nearby bench was a well-dressed, dignified old man, reading out loud from a **Caracas** newspaper.

He read in a grave voice, absorbed in what seemed important to him: He never noticed the smiles of the people around him.

Across the street, a disheveled old man came out of a bar that was already open.

He put on his hat, and clutching a bottle in a plastic sack tightly under his arm, he walked down the street, coughing and wheezing.

With an inexplicable feeling of sadness I glanced at dona **Mercedes**.

She was wearing sunglasses, and I couldn't see the expression in her eyes as she looked straight ahead of her. She folded her arms across her chest and hugged herself as if touched by a sudden cold wind.

She listened attentively as I tried to tell her how I had understood so far all the stories I had heard.

"You are showing me the different ways to manipulate that force that **Florinda** calls intent" I said.

"To make it move is not the same as to manipulate it," she corrected me, still hugging herself.

"And I'm trying much more than that. As I said, I'm putting you temporarily under the shadow of those people so that you can feel the wheel of chance moving.

"Without that feeling, everything you're doing will be empty. You must follow the ups and downs of the person who is telling you his tale: For an instant you must be under his shadow."

"How about Efrain Sandoval? He certainly had nothing to do with what happened to him. Why should I be placed under his shadow?" I asked.

"Because the wheel moved for him. He didn't move it himself, yet it's his life that changed. I wanted you to feel that change, to feel that movement of the wheel.

"As I've already mentioned to you, a ghost, the spirit of Hans Herzog, moved it for him.

"Just as Victor Julio, at the moment of dying, moved the wheel of chance and ruined the life of Octavio Cantu, Hans Herzog moved that wheel after he was dead and enriched the life of Efrain Sandoval."

Dona Mercedes took off her glasses and looked straight into my face. She opened her mouth to add something, but instead she smiled and rose from the bench. "Mass will be over any moment now," she said.

"Let's wait for Candelaria at the church door."

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Version 2007.03.03

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by Florinda Donner-Grau

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"Musiua, are you there?" Mercedes Peralta whispered, opening the door to my room noiselessly. Outlined by the weak beam of my reading light, she was the picture of a witch with her long black dress and her wide-brimmed felt hat that hid half of her face.

"Don't turn on the light," she said as I reached for the switch. "I can't bear the brightness of a bulb."

She sat on my bed. Her brow was set tightly in concentration as she smoothed out the wrinkles in my blanket.

She looked up and fixed her unblinking eyes on my face.

Self-consciously I ran my fingers over my cheeks and chin, wondering whether there was something wrong.

Giggling, she turned toward the night table and began neatly stacking my small, thin notepads.

"I must go to Chuao right now," she finally said, her voice low and grave.

"Chuao?" I repeated. "At this hour?"

Seeing her emphatic nod, I added, "We'll get stuck in the mud if it rains."

Chuao was a village near the coast, at least an hour's drive from Curmina.

"It will rain," she casually admitted. "But with your jeep we won't get stuck."

She sat hunched over the night table, biting her lower lip, deliberating whether to say more. "I have to be there tonight by midnight," she

murmured in a tone that betrayed urgency rather than desire. "I have to get some plants that will be available only tonight."

"It's past eleven," I pointed out, checking the illuminated dial of my wristwatch. "We'll never make it by midnight."

Grinning, dona Mercedes reached for my jeans and shirt hanging at the front of the iron bedstead. "We'll make your watch stop counting the hours."

A faint smile lit up her face; her eyes, trusting and expectant, held mine. "You'll take me, won't you?"

Heavy raindrops drummed on the jeep the moment we left town. Within seconds the rain came in a solid sheet, dense and dark.

I slowed down, unable to see, irritated by the squeaking of the wipers clearing an arc of glass that was instantly blurred again.

The trees fringing the road waved indistinctly beside and above us, giving the impression that we were driving through a tunnel.

Only the intermittent solitary bark of a dog indicated that we had passed another shack.

The rainstorm ended with the same abruptness with which it had begun, yet the sky remained overcast. The clouds hung oppressively low.

I kept my eyes glued to the windshield, intent on avoiding the frogs, which, momentarily blinded by the headlights, jumped across the road.

All at once, as if they had been erased from the sky, the clouds vanished the moment we turned onto the road that led to the coast.

The moon shone brightly upon a flat landscape where an occasional tree swayed gently in the breeze, its leaves shining silvery in the unreal light.

I stopped in the middle of a crossroad and got out of the jeep. The air, warm and humid, smelled of the mountains and the sea.

"What made you stop here, Musiua?" Mercedes Peralta asked, her voice full of bewilderment as she got out and stood beside me.

"I'm a witch," I explained, looking into her eyes.

I knew that if I'd told her that I just wanted to stretch my legs, she wouldn't believe me.

"I was born in a place like this," I went on, "somewhere between the mountains and the sea."

Mercedes Peralta frowned at me, then a humorous, delighted twinkle shone in her eyes.

Giggling uncontrollably, she sat on the wet ground and pulled me down with her. "Perhaps you weren't born like a normal human being; maybe a curiosa lost you on her way across the sky," she said.

"What is a curiosa?" I asked.

She regarded me cheerfully and explained that curiosas were witches who were no longer concerned with the obvious aspects of sorcery: symbolic paraphernalia, rituals, and incantations.

"Curiosas," she whispered, "are beings preoccupied with things of the eternal. They are like spiders, spinning fine, invisible threads between the known and the unknown."

She took off her hat, then lay on her back, flat on the ground, with her head precisely in the middle of the crossroad, pointing north.

"Lie down, Musiua," she urged me, stretching her arms toward the east and the west. "Make sure the top of your head touches mine and that your arms and legs are in the same position as mine."

It was comfortable lying head to head on the crossroad. Although separated by our hair, I had the feeling our scalps were fused together. I turned my head sideways and to my great amusement noticed how much longer her arms were than mine.

Seemingly aware of my discovery, dona **Mercedes** moved her arms closer to mine.

"If someone sees us, they'll think we're crazy," I said.

"Perhaps," she conceded. "However, if it's people who usually walk by this crossroad at this time of the night, they will run away in fright, thinking they have seen two **curiosas** ready for flight."

We were silent for a moment, but before I asked her about the **curiosas'** flight, she spoke again.

"The reason I was so interested to know why you stopped at the crossroad," she said, "was that there are people who swear they have seen a *curiosa* lying naked on this very spot.

"They say that she had wings growing out of her back and that they saw her body become translucent white as she took off into the sky."

"I saw your body turn transparent at the seance for **Efrain Sandoval**," I said.

"Of course you did," she retorted with an amused casualness. "I did that just for you because I know that you'll never be a healer. You're a medium and, perhaps, even a witch but not a healer. I should know it, I'm a witch myself."

"What makes one a witch?" I asked in between fits of giggles. I did not want to take her seriously.

"Witches are creatures not only capable of moving the wheel of chance," she replied, "but also capable of making their own link.

"What would you say if at this moment we took off flying, joined at our heads?"

For a second or two, I had the most terrifying apprehension.

Then, a feeling of utter indifference invaded me.

"Repeat any of the incantations the spirit of my ancestor taught you," she commanded. "I'll say it with you."

Our voices merged into a single harmonious sound, filling the space around us, enveloping us into a giant cocoon.

The words rose into a deep continuous line, carrying us up and up. I saw the clouds advancing at me.

We began to turn like a wheel until everything was black.

Someone was shaking me vigorously. I woke up with an unexpected jolt.

I was sitting behind the steering wheel of my jeep. And I was driving! I had no recollection of walking back to the car.

"Don't fall asleep," dona **Mercedes** said. "We'll crash and die like two fools."

I stepped on the brakes and turned off the ignition.

The thought that I had been driving asleep made me tremble with fear.

"Where are we going?" I asked. My voice sounded an octave lower.

She smiled and made a gesture of exasperation, raising her eyebrows.

"You get tired too easily, **Musiua**," she said. "You're too little. But, I think that's your best feature. If you were bigger, you would be unbearable."

I insisted on knowing our destination: I meant it in terms of physical locale, so that I could drive with a sense of direction.

"We are going to meet **Leon Chirino** and another friend," she informed me. "Let's go. I'll give you directions as you drive."

I started the jeep and drove in silence. I was still drowsy.

"Is **Leon Chirino** a medium and a healer?" I asked shortly.

She laughed softly but did not answer.

After a long moment she asked, "What makes you think that?"

"There's something quite inexplicable about him," I said. "He reminds me of you."

"Does he now?" she asked mockingly: Then in a sudden serious tone she admitted that **Leon Chirino** was a medium and a clairvoyant.

Lost in thought, I did not hear her directions and was jolted when she yelled. "You passed it! You've got to back up now," she admonished, pointing to a tall **bucare** tree.

"Pull up there!" She smiled, then added, "We have to walk from here on."

The tree marked the entrance to a narrow path. The ground was covered with small flowers. I knew them to be red, but they appeared black in the moonlight. **Bucares** hardly ever grow by themselves: Usually, they are found in groves, shading coffee and cacao trees.

Following a narrow, overgrown trail bordered by other **bucare** trees, we headed toward a cluster of hills looming darkly before us.

There were no other sounds than **Mercedes Peralta's** uneven breathing and the crackling of twigs being crushed under our feet.

The path ended in front of a low house bordered by a wide clearing of hard-packed earth.

Its mud walls, plastered over a cane frame, were badly weathered. The roof was partially covered with zinc sheets and dried palm fronds. Deep eaves extended to make a wide porch. The front had no windows, only a narrow door through which a faint light escaped.

Dona **Mercedes** pushed the door open. Flickering candles cast more shadows than light in a sparsely furnished room.

Leon Chirino, sitting on a straight-backed chair, stared at us with an expression of surprise and delight.

Haltingly, he stood up, embraced the healer warmly, and guided her to the chair he had just vacated.

He greeted me and jokingly shook my hand. "Let me introduce you to one of the greatest healers around," he said. "Second only to dona **Mercedes** herself."

But before he could continue, someone cried out, "I'm **Agustin**."

Only then did I notice the low-hanging hammock in the corner.

A small man lay in it. His body was half-twisted, one foot touching the ground, so that he could rock the hammock back and forth.

He **didn't** seem particularly young, nor was he old. He was perhaps in his thirties, yet his hollowed cheeks and sharp bones made him look like a starved child.

The most remarkable thing about him was his eyes. They were light blue, and in his black face they shone with a dazzling intensity.

Awkwardly, I stood in the middle of the room. There was something eerie about the uncertain light of the candles playing with our shadows on the walls, gauzy with cobwebs.

The Spartan furniture- a table, three chairs, two stools, and a **cot**, all meticulously arranged against the wall- imparted an uninvited atmosphere to the room.

"Do you live here?" I asked **Agustin**.

"No. I don't," he said, approaching me. "This is my summer palace." Pleased with his joke, he threw his head back and laughed.

Embarrassed, I moved toward the nearest stool and screamed as something sharp scratched my ankle. A hideous, dirty-looking cat stared up at me.

"There is no need to yell the place down," **Agustin** said and gathered the scrawny feline in his arms.

It began to purr the instant he rubbed its head. "She likes you. Do you want to touch her?"

I shook my head emphatically. It **wasn't** so much the fleas and the mangy bare spots scattered over its yellowish fur that I minded, but its piercing yellow-green slitted eyes that never left my face.

"We better go if we want to get the plants in time," **Leon Chirino** said, helping dona **Mercedes** to her feet.

He unhooked the oil lamp hanging from a nail behind the door, lit it, and then signaled us to follow him.

A low-arched doorway covered by a plastic curtain led into a back room that served as a kitchen and storage area.

One side of the room opened to a large plot filled with short, stubby trees and tall shrubs. In the faint light of the lantern, it looked like an abandoned fruit orchard.

We squeezed through a gap in the seemingly impenetrable wall of bushes and found ourselves in a desolate landscape.

The hillside, with its recently burned underbrush and charred stumps, looked frighteningly grotesque in the moonlight.

Without a sound, **Leon Chirino** and **Agustin** vanished.

"Where did they go?" I whispered to dona **Mercedes**.

"They went ahead," she said vaguely, pointing into the darkness.

Shadows, animated by the oil lamp she carried, zigzagged beside and ahead of us on the narrow path leading into the thicket.

I saw a light in the distance, gleaming through the bushes. Like a glowworm, it appeared and disappeared in quick succession.

As we came closer to it, I felt sure I could hear a monotonous chant mingling with the distinct sound of buzzing insects and of leaves stirring in the breeze.

Mercedes Peralta turned off the oil lamp. But before the last glimmer died out, I saw her billowing skirt settle near a crumbling low wall, about twelve feet from where I stood.

A glowing cigar illuminated her features. A diaphanous, shimmering radiance escaped through the top of her head.

I called out her name, but there was no answer.

Fascinated, I watched a misty cloud of cigar smoke hover directly above me in a circle. It **didn't** disperse the way smoke would, but stayed fixed in midair for a long moment.

Something brushed my cheek. Automatically, I brought my hand to my face and then in utter astonishment gazed at my fingertips; they were phosphorescent.

Frightened, I ran toward the low wall where I had seen dona

Mercedes sit down. I had barely moved a few steps, when I was intercepted by **Leon Chirino** and **Agustin**.

"Where are you going, **Musiua**?" **Leon Chirino** asked mockingly.

"I have to help dona **Mercedes** collect her plants."

My response seemed to amuse them. They chuckled.

Leon Chirino patted me on the head, and **Agustin** daringly grabbed my thumb and squeezed it as if it were a rubber pump.

"We have to wait here patiently," **Agustin** said. "I've just pumped patience inside you through your thumb."

"She brought me here to help her," I insisted.

"Sure," he said reassuringly. "You have to help her but not with her plants."

Taking my arm, he guided me toward a fallen tree trunk. "Let's wait for dona **Mercedes** here."

Leaves hung from **Mercedes Peralta's** forehead, silvery green and shining.

Quietly, she fastened the oil lamp on a branch, then squatted on the ground and proceeded to sort the plants she had collected into separate piles.

Verbena roots were prescribed for menstrual pains. Valerian roots soaked in rum were an ideal remedy for nervousness, irritability, anxiety, and nightmares. **Torco** roots, soaked in rum, cured anemia and yellow fever. **Guaritoto** roots, basically a male remedy, were prescribed for bladder difficulties. Rosemary and rue were used mainly as disinfectants. **Malva** leaves were applied on skin rashes, and Artemisia boiled in sugarcane juice eased menstrual pains, killed parasites, and reduced fevers. **Zabila** cured asthma.

"But you grow all these plants in your yard," I said puzzled. "Why did you come here to collect them?"

Agustin grinned gleefully. "Let me tell you something, **Musiua**," he whispered, bringing his head close to mine. "These plants have grown out of corpses."

He made a sweeping gesture with his hand. "We are in the middle of a cemetery."

Alarmed, I looked around. There were neither tombstones nor mounds to indicate that we were in a graveyard, but I **hadn't** seen any tombstones in the other cemetery either.

"Our ancestors are buried here," **Agustin** said and crossed himself. "On nights like this, when a full moon alters the distance of graves and paints white shadows at the foot of trees, one can hear a pitiful moaning and the rattling of chains."

"Men carrying their cutoff heads wander about. They are the ghosts of slaves who, after having dug a deep hole to bury their masters' treasures, were decapitated and interred with the gold."

"But there is no need to be frightened," **Agustin** hastened to add. "All they want is a bit of rum. If you give them some, they will tell you where the treasures are buried."

"There are also ghosts of friars who died blaspheming and now want to confess their sins, but there is no one to hear them."

"And there are the ghosts of pirates who came all the way to **Chuo** in search of the Spaniards' gold."

He chuckled, then added in a confidential tone, "There are also the

lonely ghosts, who whistle at passersby. These are the simplest of them all. They don't ask for much. All these lonely ghosts want is for someone to say an Our Father for them."

Mercedes Peralta, a root poised in one hand, slowly lifted her head.

Her dark eyes held mine in their gaze. "**Agustin** has an inexhaustible supply of stories," she said. "Each tale he garnishes to the limit."

Agustin rose. The way he stretched his body and limbs gave the impression that he was boneless.

He plopped down in front of dona **Mercedes** and buried his head in her lap.

"We better get going," she said, stroking his head tenderly. "I'm sending the **musiua** to your place in a few days."

"But I treat only children," **Agustin** stammered, looking up at me with a sad, apologetic face.

"She **doesn't** need a healing." Dona **Mercedes** laughed. "All she wants is to watch you and to hear your stories."

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Florinda Donner-Grau - The Witch's Dream: Chapter 22

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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I sat up with a jolt: Something had plopped down on my bed by my feet with a forceful thump.

The dog sleeping nearby raised its head, pricked its ears, but hearing nothing other than my mumbled imprecations, put its muzzle back on its forepaws.

For a moment, I was totally disoriented as to where I was, but when I heard dona **Mercedes**' soft, yet persistent murmur, I realized I was in the house of **Leon Chirino**'s brother, in a small town an hour's drive from **Curmina**.

I was on the **cot** they had set up for me in the kitchen. I had driven **Leon Chirino** and dona **Mercedes** there in the middle of the night, for they had to conduct a private seance for his brother.

Closing my eyes, I settled back on the lumpy pillow and abandoned myself to the comforting sound of the healer's voice. I felt the sound wrap itself around me. I was definitely falling asleep when another thumping noise woke me up again.

The musty blanket I was covered with was all bunched up around my neck.

I half rose to straighten it out and screamed upon seeing **Agustin**'s cat perched on my knee.

"Why do you always shriek when you see my pet?" His voice coming from the darkness was full of gentle mockery. **Agustin**, sitting cross-legged at the foot of my **cot**, reached for his cat.

"I've come to protect you from the dog," he explained, his dazzling blue eyes fixed on my face. "Dogs don't really sleep at night. If you open your eyes in the darkness you can see how a dog watches you all night long. That's why they are called **watchdogs**." He laughed at his own joke.

I opened my mouth to speak to him, but no sound crossed my lips. I reached out, but **Agustin** and the cat wavered indistinctly before my eyes

until they finally faded away.

Perhaps they are all outside, I thought, and stepped into the yard, still shrouded by the shadows of dawn. There was no one about.

I looked at my wristwatch. Only two hours had passed since dona **Mercedes**, **Leon Chirino**, and I had arrived.

Realizing that I had had far too little sleep, I went back to my **cot**, pulled the blanket over my head, and dozed off.

I awoke to the sound of voices and music and the scent of coffee.

Leon Chirino, bent over the kerosene stove, was listening to the radio as he strained freshly made coffee through a flannel sieve.

"Did you have a good sleep?" he asked, motioning me to sit down by him.

I joined him at a big, square table covered with brand-new oilcloth. He half filled two cups with coffee and added to each a generous amount of cane liquor.

"For strength," he said, pushing the steaming porcelain cup toward me.

Afraid to get drunk, I took a few hesitant sips. The cup had golden edges and painted roses on its surface.

He replenished his own cup with more coffee and cane liquor.

"Dona **Mercedes** says that you're clairvoyant," I said. "Can you tell me what fate has in store for me?" I hoped that my abrupt question would elicit a candid response.

"My dear," he said in that charming forbearance older people show when addressing someone much younger. "I'm an old friend of dona **Mercedes**."

"I live with her ghosts and her memories. I share her solitude." He spat through his teeth, then taking two cigarettes from the pack on the table, he put one behind each ear.

"You'd better go and see **Agustin**," he advised. "He starts early. Let me show you the way into town."

"You really haven't answered my question," I said undaunted by his eagerness to get me out of the house.

A sardonic, bemused expression appeared on his face. "I can't tell you what's in store for you," he affirmed.

"Clairvoyants have glimpses of things they don't understand and then make up the rest."

He took my arm and practically pulled me outside. "Let me show you the way to **Agustin**'s house," he repeated.

He pointed to a trail winding down the hill. "If you follow this path, you'll reach town. Anyone there will tell you where **Agustin** lives."

"What about dona **Mercedes**?" I asked.

"We'll come and get you in the evening," he replied, then bent toward me and in a conspiratorial whisper he added, "Dona **Mercedes** and I will be busy the whole day with my brother's business."

The twittering of bluebirds in the trees and the fragrance of the ripe mangoes, shimmering amid the dark foliage like clumps of gold, filled the air.

A well-trodden path winding down the slope ran into a wide dirt-packed street and branched off again into the hills at the other end of the hot, sunlit town.

Women sweeping the cement sidewalks in front of their brightly

painted houses paused for an instant to return my greeting as I walked by.

"Can you tell me where the healer **Agustin** lives?" I asked one of the women.

"I sure can," she replied, resting her chin on her hands cupped over the end of the broom handle. In a loud voice- no doubt for the benefit of her curious neighbors- she directed me to the green stucco house at the very end of the street. "It's the one with the big antenna on the roof. You can't miss it."

She lowered her voice to a murmur and in a confidential tone assured me that **Agustin** could cure anything from insomnia to **snakebites**. Even cancer and leprosy were not too much for him. His young patients always got well.

I knocked repeatedly on **Agustin's** front door, but there was no answer.

"Just walk right in," a young girl shouted, leaning out a window across the street. "**Agustin** can't hear you. He's way in the back."

Following her advice, I stepped through the front door that opened into the inside patio. I peeked into each of the three rooms I passed, which also opened onto the patio.

Except for a hammock in each of them, the first two rooms were empty.

The third one was the living room. Calendars and magazine pictures decorated the walls. A row of straight-backed chairs and a plastic-covered couch faced an enormous television set.

Farther back was the kitchen. Beyond the kitchen through an alcove was yet another room. I saw **Agustin** there, seated at a large table.

As I approached, he rose smiling and stood scratching his head, his other hand thrust deep into the pocket of his worn khaki pants. His white shirt had patches, and the cutoff sleeves were frayed at the **unhemmed** cuffs.

"This is my working room!" he exclaimed proudly, extending his arm about in a circle. "I've got everything in here. And I'm about to open. My patients come through the side door. That door brings both of us luck."

The room, well lit and ventilated by two windows facing the hills, smelled of disinfectant.

There were rows of unvarnished, unpainted shelves on all the walls. On the shelves, neatly arranged and all properly labeled, stood various-sized flasks, bottles, jars, and boxes filled with dried roots, bark, leaves, and flowers. These items were not only identified by their common names but also by their scientific Latin nomenclature.

The table was hand carved and faced the open windows. Bottles, bowls, pestles, books, and two scales were lined up on the highly polished surface.

A **cot** and the three-foot-tall crucifix hanging in a corner with its votive candle burning on a triangular ledge beneath it indeed confirmed that I had stepped into the working room of a healer, not an old-fashioned apothecary.

Without much ado, **Agustin** brought in another chair from the kitchen and invited me to observe him at work.

He opened the lucky side door he had pointed out earlier. There were three women and four children in the adjacent room.

The hours passed swiftly. He treated each patient by first examining a jar filled with the child's urine that had been brought in by the mother. Prompted by each woman's account of her child's symptoms, **Agustin** proceeded to "read the waters."

The odor, the color, and the kind of microbes, or filaments, as he preferred to call them and which he claimed to see with the naked eye, were all carefully considered before he arrived at a diagnosis.

Fevers, colds, indigestion, parasites, asthma, rashes, allergies, anemia, and even measles and smallpox were among the most prevalent illnesses **Agustin** claimed to recognize after a thorough "reading of the waters."

In respectful silence, each woman waited for **Agustin** to invoke the help of Christ before he prescribed the appropriate medication.

He mixed his own herbal concoctions. Being familiar with, and a believer in, modern pharmacopoeia, **Agustin** was inclined to supplement his own remedies with milk of magnesia, antibiotics, aspirins, and vitamins, which he had repacked and **rebottled** in his own containers.

Like **Mercedes Peralta**, he charged no set fee but left it to the judgment of his clients: That is, they paid whatever they could afford.

Our late lunch of chicken and pork **empanadas**, brought to us by a woman in the neighborhood, came to an abrupt end when a man carrying a small boy walked into the kitchen. The child, perhaps six or seven years old, had cut the calf of his leg while playing in the field with his father's machete.

In his calm, sure manner, **Agustin** carried the child to the **cot** in his working room and undid the makeshift, blood-soaked bandage. First he bathed the deep gash with rosemary water, and then with peroxide.

It was hard to tell whether the child was being hypnotized by **Agustin's** soothing touch, as he massaged the anxious little face, or by his soft voice, as he recited an incantation, but in a matter of moments, the boy was asleep.

And then **Agustin** began the most important part of his treatment. To stop the bleeding, he applied to the wound a poultice of leaves that had been soaked in clear, sugarcane liquor.

Then he prepared a paste that, he claimed, would heal the wound in less than ten days and leave no scar.

Invoking the guidance of Christ, **Agustin** sprinkled a few drops of a milky substance on an abalone shell. With slow, rhythmic motions he began to grind the shell with a broad wooden pestle. A half hour elapsed before he had little less than a half teaspoon of a greenish, musky-smelling substance.

He examined the cut once more, pressed the wound closed with his fingers, and carefully spread the paste over the gash. Mumbling a prayer, he expertly bandaged the leg with strips of white cloth.

A satisfied smile lit his face as he handed the sleeping boy into the father's arms and told him to bring him every other day to change the dressing.

Late in the afternoon, certain that there would be no more patients that day, **Agustin** gave me a tour of his yard.

His medicinal plants grew in neat rows and square patches, arranged as carefully as the jars and bottles were on the table and shelves in his working room.

At the far end of the yard, leaning against a tool shed, stood an old

kerosene refrigerator.

"Don't open it!" **Agustin** cried out, holding my arm in a firm grip.

"How could I?" I protested. "It's padlocked. What secrets do you keep in there?"

"My witchcraft," he whispered. "You do know that I practice witchcraft, don't you?"

His tone was mocking, but his face was somber when he added, "I'm a specialist in healing children and bewitching adults."

"Do you really practice witchcraft?" I asked incredulously.

"Don't be obtuse, **Musiua**," **Agustin** chided.

He paused for a moment, then in an emphatic tone, added, "Dona **Mercedes** must have told you that the other side of healing is bewitching. They go together because one is useless without the other. I heal children. I bewitch adults," he repeated, knocking on the top of the refrigerator. "I'm very good at both.

"Dona **Mercedes** says that one day I will bewitch the same ones I healed when they were children." He smiled at my startled face. "I don't think I will. But only time will tell."

Taking advantage of his expansive mood, I finally told him what had been on my mind the whole day. That I had seen and talked to him when I was in a dreamlike state.

Agustin listened attentively, but his gaze betrayed nothing.

"I can't quite define what it was," I said, "but it **wasn't** a dream!"

Exasperated by his unwillingness to comment or to explain, I urged him to say something.

"I like you so much that I wanted to know if you're really a medium," he said, smiling. "Now I know you are."

"I think you're humoring me," I said, even more exasperated.

Agustin's eyebrows raised in arcs of astonishment. "It must be horrible to have big feet."

"Big feet?" I stammered uncomprehendingly, looking down at my sandals. "My feet are in perfect proportion to my size."

"They should be smaller," **Agustin** insisted, putting his fingers to his lips as though to suppress a smile. "Your feet are too large."

"That's why you live in perpetual reality. That's why you want everything explained." There was mockery in his voice, mixed with a tinge of compassion that did nothing to reassure me.

"Witchcraft follows rules that cannot be empirically demonstrated or repeated, unlike other laws of nature. Witchcraft is precisely the act of persuading reason to rise above itself or, if you wish, to move below itself." He chuckled and gave me a push.

I stumbled over my feet, and he quickly grabbed my arm to keep me from falling.

"Do you see now that your feet are too big?" **Agustin** asked and then laughed.

I wondered if he was trying to hypnotize me, for he gazed at me without blinking. I was held captive by his eyes. Like two drops of water, they seemed to spread wider and wider, blurring everything around me. All I was aware of was his voice.

"A sorcerer chooses to be different from what he was raised to be," he continued. "He has to understand that witchcraft is a lifelong task."

"A sorcerer, through witchcraft, weaves patterns like webs; patterns

that transmit invoked powers to some superior mystery.

Human actions have an endless, spreading network of results; he accepts and reinterprets these results in a magical way."

He brought his face even closer to mine and lowered his voice to a soft whisper. "A sorcerer's hold on reality is absolute. His grip is so powerful, he can bend reality every which way in the service of his art. But he never forgets what reality is or was."

Without another word he turned and walked toward the living room. Swiftly, I followed after him.

He plopped down on the sofa and crossed his legs the way I had seen him do on my **cot**.

Smiling up at me, he patted the place beside him. "Let's have some real witchcraft," he said, switching on the remote control of the enormous **TV** set.

There was no time to ask any more questions. In the next instant, we were surrounded by a group of giggling children from the neighborhood.

"Each evening they come here to watch **TV** with me for an hour or so," **Agustin** explained. "Later on, you and I will have time to talk."

After that initial meeting, I became **Agustin's** unbiased admirer. Attracted not only by his healing skills but by his haunting personality, I practically moved into one of the empty rooms of his house.

He wove countless stories for me, including the one **Mercedes Peralta** wanted me to hear.

Startled by a faint moan, **Agustin** opened his eyes.

In a shaft of light, a spider suspended on invisible thread dropped from the crumbling cane ceiling all the way to the ground where **Agustin** lay curled up like a cat.

He reached toward the spider, crushed it between his fingers, and ate it. Sighing, he drew his knees even closer to his chest as he felt the cold of dawn seep through the cracks of the weather-beaten mud walls.

Agustin couldn't remember whether days or weeks had passed since his mother brought him to this dilapidated, abandoned hut, where bats hung from the ceiling like unlit bulbs and cockroaches swarmed around in daylight and in darkness.

All he knew was that he had been hungry ever since; that the slugs, spiders, and grasshoppers he caught never stilled the gnawing pain in his swollen belly.

Agustin heard the faint moan again. It came from the shadowy corner at the far end of the room.

He saw an apparition of his mother sitting on the mattress, her mouth slightly open as she rubbed her naked belly. She was riding the mattress as though she were on a donkey, her naked shadow moving up and down on the soot-stained wall.

Only a few hours before, he had seen his mother struggling with a man. He had seen her thin legs, like black snakes, wrapped tightly around the man's torso, squeezing the breath out of him. And when he heard his mother's piercing scream, followed by a silence that had lasted for the rest of the night, he knew that the man had won the struggle. He had killed her.

Agustin's tired eyes closed with pleasure at the thought that he was now an orphan. He was safe. They would take him at the mission.

Half-conscious of his mother's ghostly sighs, giggles, and whispers

whirling about the room, he dozed off again.

A loud groan shattered the morning stillness. **Agustin** opened his eyes and pressed his fist against his lips to stifle a scream as he saw the same man from the night before sit up on the mattress.

Agustin didn't know the man, yet he was sure he was from **Ipairi**. **Agustin** vaguely remembered seeing him talking to his mother in the plaza.

Had the women from the small hamlet in the hills sent the man to take **Agustin** back? To perhaps kill him? It **couldn't** be. He must be having a vivid horrible dream.

The man cleared his throat and spat on the ground. His voice filled the room. "I **ll** take you away today. But I can't take the boy. Why **didn't** you leave him with the Protestants? You know that they have a place for children: Even if they won't take him, they **ll** feed him."

When **Agustin** heard his mother's harsh reply he knew that he was wide awake: He knew that she was not a ghost.

"The Protestants won't take any children unless they are orphaned," his mother said. "There was nothing else I could do but bring the boy to this abandoned shack. I'm waiting for him to die."

"I know of a woman who **ll** take him," the man said. "She **ll** know what to do with him. She's a witch."

"It's too late now," his mother said. "I wish I had given **Agustin** to a witch when he was born.

"Ever since he was a baby, a witch in **Ipairi** wanted him. She used to feed him strange potions and hang amulets around his wrists and neck, allegedly to guard him from calamities and disease.

"I know she cast a spell on the boy. That witch is responsible for all my misfortune."

His mother was silent for a moment; then in a strangled whisper, as though she were under attack by an unseen enemy, she added, "I'm terrified of witches. If I went to one now, she'd know that I haven't been feeding the boy. She'd kill me."

Tears rolled down **Agustin's** cheeks as he remembered the days in **Ipairi** when his mother used to cradle him in her arms. She would smother him with kisses and tell him that his eyes were like pieces of the sky.

But when the women in the neighboring shacks forbade their children to play with him, his mother became a different person. She no longer touched or kissed him. Finally, she ceased speaking to him altogether.

One afternoon, a woman carrying a dead child in her arms burst into their shack. "Blue eyes in a black face," she screamed at **Agustin's** mother, "that's the work of the devil. That's the devil himself. He killed my baby with the evil eye. If you don't get rid of that boy, I will."

That same night, his mother fled with him to the hills. **Agustin** was certain that it was that woman who had cast a spell on his mother so she would hate him.

The man's loud voice cut into **Agustin's** reveries.

"You don't have to take him to the witch yourself. I can leave word with her to pick the kid up tonight.

"We **ll** be gone by then. I **ll** take you far away from here, where no witch will ever find you," the man promised.

His mother remained silent for a long time; then she flung her head back and laughed hysterically.

She rose from the mattress and wrapped the dirty blanket tightly around her body. Stepping around the broken table and the few crates scattered about, she made her way across the room.

"Look at him," she hissed, jerking her chin toward the corner where **Agustfn** lay curled up, pretending to be asleep. "He's only six years old, yet he looks like an evil old man.

"His hair has fallen out. His body is covered with scabs. His stomach is swollen with parasites. Yet, he survives.

"He has no clothes. He sleeps without a blanket. Yet, he **doesn't** even catch cold."

She turned toward the man on the mattress. "Can't you see that he is indeed the devil? The devil will find me wherever I go."

His mother's eyes shone feverishly bright under her disheveled hair. "The thought of having suckled the devil at my own breast fills me with fear and revulsion."

She reached up to a niche in the wall where she had hidden the **corncakes** the man had brought her last night. She gave one to the man, and nibbling on the other one, she lowered herself beside him on the mattress.

In a monotonous, **trancelike** tone she recounted that **Agustfn** was a changeling.

"One of the nurses at the hospital changed my own baby for the devil," she continued, her tone suddenly vehement.

"Everyone knew that I was going to have a girl. My pregnant belly was broad instead of pointed. My hair began to fall out. Blisters and blemishes appeared on my skin. My legs swelled. Those are the symptoms of carrying a girl.

"At first, even though I knew he was a changeling, I **couldn't** help but love him. He was so beautiful and so clever. He never cried. He spoke before he walked, and he sang like an angel.

"I refused to believe any of the women in **Ipairi** who accused **Agustin** of having the evil eye. Even after my stillborn pregnancy I **didn't** pay any attention to the neighbors' insinuations.

"I just thought they were ignorant, and worst of all, envious of the boy's beautiful eyes. After all, who ever heard of a child having the evil eye?"

She scraped out the white, soft center of the corncake and flung the dry crust across the room. "But when my man died in an accident at the mill, I had to agree with the women." She covered her face with her hands, and quietly added, "**Agustin** has never been ill in his life. I should have left him to his fate in **Ipairi**. Then his death would not be on my conscience."

"Let me get word to the woman I've been telling you about," the man said, his voice soft, yet persuasive. "I know she **ll** take him."

At great length he explained about his job at the pharmaceutical laboratory. He worked in the storeroom and was on very good terms with his boss. He foresaw no difficulties in convincing the man of his need for an advance.

"With the money, the two of us can go to **Caracas**," he said. He rose and dressed. "Wait for me at the laboratory. I **ll** be out by five. I **ll** have

everything arranged by then."

Agustin reached for the dry crust on the ground. On unsteady legs, he walked toward the narrow, back doorway, which no longer had a door, and stepped out into what had once been a yard.

He headed toward his favorite place, the gnarled, no-longer-blooming acacia tree overhanging the ravine. He sat on the ground, his legs extended in front of him, his naked back resting against a portion of the crumbling low wall that had once encircled the grounds.

The scrawny, sickly looking cat that had followed him all the way from **Ipairi** rubbed its coarse fur against his thigh. **Agustin** gave it a small piece of the crust, then pushed the cat away toward the lizards scuttling in and out of the crevices in the mud wall.

He would not part with another crumb. He was never capable of satisfying his own relentless hunger; a hunger that filled his days and nights with dreams of food. With a sigh on his lips he dozed off.

Startled by a gust of wind, he woke up. Dead leaves swirled in a circle around him. The leaves rose high up in the air and then descended in brown rustling whirlpools into the ravine.

He could hear the murmuring stream below. When it rained the shallow water grew into a seething river, sweeping along trees and dead animals from the hamlets in the mountains.

Agustin turned his head slightly and gazed at the silent hills around him. Thin columns of smoke drifted up into the sky, melting with the moving clouds. Could the Protestant mission be that close? he asked himself. Or perhaps the smoke was from the house of the woman who **wasn't** afraid to take him.

He rested his cheek on his small bony hand. Flies buzzed around his open mouth. He pressed his parched lips together, spread his legs, and urinated. He was hungry. He could feel the pain inside him as he again fell asleep.

The sun was high when **Agustin** awoke. The cat was nearby, devouring a large lizard. He crawled toward the feline. It snarled viciously, holding the half-eaten reptile tightly under its paw. **Agustin** kicked the cat in the stomach, then reached for the slippery entrails and swallowed them. He looked up and found his mother watching him from the doorway.

"Holy Virgin!" she exclaimed. "He **isn't** human." She crossed herself. "It won't be long before he poisons himself."

Again she made the sign of the cross and, folding her hands in prayer, murmured, "Holy Father. Get him out of my way. Make him die a natural death, so I won't have him on my conscience."

She went inside, lifted the mattress, and pulled out her only dress. She caressed it and lovingly pressed the wrinkled dress against her body, then shook it repeatedly and laid it out on the mattress with great care.

Curiously, **Agustin** watched her light a fire in the cooking pit. Humming a little tune, she retrieved the coffee and the pieces of sugar loaf she kept in a crate nailed high up on the wall.

Agustin wanted a piece of that sugar. He tried to stand up, but overcome by nausea he crouched with his elbows against the ground and vomited unchewed pieces of lizard.

Salty tears dribbled down his sunken cheeks. He gagged repeatedly, foam and bile spurting from his trembling lips.

He wiped his mouth and chin on his shoulders. With a painful moan he tried to straighten up but slumped forward on the ground.

The sound of the murmuring ravine engulfed him like a soft veil. When the smell of coffee filtered through his nostrils and he heard his mother say that she had made him sweet coffee, he knew that he was dreaming. His dry lips grimaced.

He wanted to smile when he heard her laugh; that high, abrupt, happy laughter he used to know so well. He wondered if she would put on her red dress and meet the man at the pharmaceutical laboratory.

Agustin opened his eyes. On the ground next to him stood a small tin filled with coffee. Afraid the vision would vanish, he reached out and lifted the can to his mouth. Indifferent to the burning pain on his lips and tongue, he sipped the strong, very sweet brew. It cleared his head and stopped his nausea.

Dreamily, **Agustin** gazed at the slanted rain lines in the distance. Within moments dark clouds, edged with gold, floated across the sky. The clouds stained the hills with purple shadows and turned the sky a smoky black.

A cold wind, followed by a deafening roar, rose from the bottom of the ravine. The rainwater from the distant hills gushed down the deep gorge with outrageous force. Within moments large heavy drops burst from the sky.

Agustin rose, tilted his face skyward, and, with arms outstretched, welcomed the soothing coolness that washed him clean. Driven by an inexplicable impulse, he went into the house and picked up the dress on the mattress.

Clutching it with trembling hands, he hurried outside to the very edge of the ravine and threw the garment into the wind. It flew like a kite, landing on a leafless branch of the old acacia tree overhanging the steep slope.

"You devil! You monster!" his mother screamed, rushing toward him, her hair tumbling wildly about her face, her arms extended. As if transfixed by the sound of the roaring water, she just stood there between the boy and the fluttering dress, her eyes filled with hatred, unable to say a word.

Then, holding on to weeds and exposed roots, she carefully eased herself toward the overhanging branch of the acacia tree.

Agustin watched her from behind the gnarled trunk with fascinated interest. Her feet moved with unerring agility on the steep slippery ground.

She will get the dress by any means, he thought. He felt anger and fear.

She was only a few inches away from it. She stretched her arm as far as she could. She touched the dress with the tip of her fingers and then lost her footing and tumbled over the brink.

Her horror-stricken scream mingled with the sound of the roaring water was carried away by the wind.

Agustin moved closer to the edge. His eyes shone with a hollow depth as he saw his mother's body spin helplessly in the thick brown water on its journey to the sea.

The storm died away. The rain ceased. The wind dropped: All but the turbulent water in the ravine regained its habitual murmuring calm.

Agustin walked into the house, lay down on the mattress, and covered himself with the thin, dirty blanket. He felt the coarse, wet fur of the cat seeking the warmth of his body. He pulled the blanket over his eyes and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

It was night when he awoke. Through the open doorway he could see the moon entangled in the barren branches of the acacia tree. "We'll go now," he murmured, stroking the cat.

He felt strong. It would be easy to walk across the hills, he decided. With each other as companions, he had the vague certainty that he and the cat would find the Protestant mission or the house of the woman who was not afraid to take him.

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Chapter 23

Mercedes Peralta came rushing into my room, sat on my bed, and shifted about until she was comfortably settled.

"Unpack your gear," she said. "You can't go to see **Agustin** anymore. He's left for his yearly trip to remote areas in the country."

She spoke with such certainty that I had the feeling she had just finished talking to him over the telephone; but I knew there **wasn't** one in the neighborhood.

Candelaria came at that moment into the room holding a tray with my favorite dessert: guava jelly and a few slices of white cheese.

"I know it's not the same as sitting spiritually with **Agustin** in front of a **TV** set," she remarked, "but I'm all you have for the moment." She placed the tray on the night table and sat down on the bed opposite from dona **Mercedes**.

Dona **Mercedes** laughed and urged me to eat my treat. She said that **Agustin** was known in distant, **godforsaken** towns and visited them yearly. At great length she talked about his gift for healing children.

"When will he be back?" I asked. The thought that I might not see him again filled me with indescribable sadness.

"There's no way to know," dona **Mercedes** said. "Six months, perhaps even longer. He does this because he feels he has a great debt to pay."

"Whom does he owe?"

She looked at **Candelaria**, then both of them looked at me as though I ought to have known.

"Witches understand debts of this kind in a most peculiar manner," dona **Mercedes** finally said. "Healers pray to the saints, and to the Virgin, and to our Lord Jesus Christ.

"Witches pray to power: They entice it with their incantations." She rose from the bed and paced about the room.

Softly, as though she were talking to herself, she continued to say that although **Agustin** prayed to the saints, he owed something to a higher order; an order that was not human.

Dona **Mercedes** was silent for a few moments, looking at me but allowing no expression to be read on her face.

"**Agustin** has known about that higher order all his life, even as a

child," she continued. "Did he ever tell you that the same man who was going to take his mother away found **Agustin** on a pitch-black night, in the rain, already half-dead, and brought him to me?"

Dona **Mercedes** did not wait for my response but quickly added, "To be in harmony with that higher order has always been the secret of **Agustin**'s success. He does it through his healing and bewitching."

Again she paused for a moment, looking up at the ceiling. "That higher order made **Agustin** and **Candelaria** a gift," she continued, lowering her gaze toward me. "It helped them from the moment they were born.

"**Candelaria** pays part of her debt by being my servant. She is the best servant there is."

Dona **Mercedes** moved toward the door, and before stepping outside, she turned to face **Candelaria** and me, a dazzling smile on her face. "I think that in some measure you, too, owe a great deal to that higher order," she said. "So try by all means to pay back the debt you have."

Not a word was said for a long time. The two women looked at me with a sense of expectancy. It occurred to me that they were waiting for me to make the obvious connection- obvious to them: Just as **Candelaria** was a born witch, **Agustin** was a born sorcerer.

Dona **Mercedes** and **Candelaria** listened to me with beaming smiles.

"**Agustin** is capable of making his own links," dona **Mercedes** explained. "He has a direct connection to that higher order which is the wheel of chance itself; and the witch's shadow as well, or whatever it is that makes that wheel move."

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Chapter 24

Sharing the faint light of the bulb above us, **Candelaria** and I sat across from each other at the kitchen table. She was studying the glossy pictures in the magazine I had bought for her; I was transcribing my tapes.

"Did you hear a knock at the front door?" I asked, pulling the earphone from my ear.

Totally oblivious to my words, she pointed to the picture of a blond model. "I can't decide which girl I like better," she mused. "If I cut out this one, I'll lose the one on the other side of the page, the brunette walking down the street with a tiger on a leash."

"I would save the one with the tiger," I suggested. "There will be more blond models in the magazine." I touched her arm. "Listen, someone's at the door."

It took **Candelaria** a moment to draw herself away from the magazine and another moment to realize that indeed there was someone knocking.

"Who could it possibly be at this late hour?" she mumbled indifferently, as she shifted her attention back to the glossy pages.

"Perhaps it's a patient." I glanced at my watch. It was almost midnight.

"Oh no, my dear," **Candelaria** said calmly and looked up. "No one ever comes at this hour. People know that dona **Mercedes doesn't** treat anyone this late unless it's an emergency."

Before I had a chance to say that it probably was an emergency there was another, this time more insistent, knock.

I hurried to the front of the house.

For a moment I hesitated outside the healing room, deliberating whether I should let **Mercedes Peralta** know that there was someone at the door.

For three days **Mercedes Peralta** had been in that room. Day and night she had lit candles on the altar, smoked cigar after cigar, and, with a rapturous expression on her face, had recited unintelligible incantations until the walls vibrated with the sound.

Mercedes Peralta had never answered any of my questions, yet, she seemed to welcome my interruptions when I brought her food or insisted she rest for a few hours.

Another knock sent me hurrying to the front door, which **Candelaria** always bolted as soon as it got dark; an unnecessary precaution, for anyone wanting to come inside could have done so through the open kitchen.

"Who is it?" I asked before unlatching the iron bolt.

"**Gente de paz**, peaceful folk," a man's voice answered.

Amazed to hear someone with a faint foreign accent reply in the archaic convention dating from the days of the Spanish Conquest, I automatically responded in the required manner, "Hail the Virgin Mary," and opened the door.

The tall, white-haired man leaning against the wall regarded me with such a baffled expression on his face, I burst into laughter.

"Is this **Mercedes Peralta**'s house?" he asked in a halting voice.

I nodded, studying his face. It was not so much that it was wrinkled but rather eroded, ravaged as though by grief or pain. His watery blue eyes were sunken in wide circles of age and weariness.

"Is **Mercedes Peralta** in?" he asked, looking past me into the dimly lit hallway.

"She is," I replied. "But she **doesn't** see people this late."

"I've been walking around town for hours, pondering whether I should come," he said. "I need to see her. I'm an old friend or an old enemy."

Shaken by the anguish and despair in the man's voice, I invited him inside.

"She's in her working room," I said. "I'd better let her know that you've come to see her." I stepped ahead of him and smiled encouragingly. "What is your name?"

"Don't announce me," the man begged, gripping my arm. "Let me go in by myself. I know the way."

Stiffly, he limped across the patio and down the corridor. He paused for a second in front of dona **Mercedes'** room, then climbed the two steps leading inside.

I followed close behind him ready to take the blame should **Mercedes Peralta** be annoyed by the intrusion.

For an instant, I thought she had already gone to bed: But as soon as my eyes became accustomed to the shadowy darkness, I saw her sitting

in her high-backed chair at the far end of the room, barely outlined by the faint light of a single candle burning on the altar.

"**Federico Mueller!**" she gasped, staring at him in total panic.

She seemed not to trust her vision and repeatedly rubbed her eyes with her hands. "How can it be? All these years I thought you were dead."

Awkwardly, he went down on his knees, buried his face in the healer's lap, and cried with the abandonment of a despairing child. "Help me, help me," he repeated in between sobs.

Hastily, I moved toward the entrance, only to halt abruptly when I heard **Federico Mueller** fall on the floor with a dull thump.

I wanted to summon **Candelaria**, but dona **Mercedes** stopped me. "How extraordinary!" she exclaimed in a trembling tone. "Everything is fitting into place like a magical jigsaw puzzle.

"This is the person you remind me of. You brought him back to me."

I wanted to tell her that I saw no similarity between the old man and myself, but she sent me to her bedroom to fetch her basket with medicinal plants. When I returned, **Federico Mueller** was still lying curled up on the floor. Dona **Mercedes** was trying to revive him.

"Get **Candelaria**," she said. "I can't handle **Federico Mueller** by myself."

Candelaria had heard the commotion and was already standing by the entrance. She walked in.

There was an expression of disbelief, of sheer horror in **Candelaria's** eyes. "He's come back," she murmured, approaching **Federico Mueller**.

Candelaria crossed herself, then turned to dona **Mercedes** and asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"His soul is detaching itself from his body," she answered. "I'm too weak to try to push it back."

Candelaria sat on her haunches and swiftly moved **Federico Mueller's** inert body to a sitting position. She gave him a sort of bear hug from behind. The bones of his back cracked as if they were breaking into a hundred pieces.

Candelaria propped him in a sitting position against the wall. "He's very ill," she said to me. "I think he's come back here to die." She left the room crossing herself.

Federico Mueller opened his eyes. He took in everything in one glance, then he looked at me as if he were silently begging me to leave him alone with dona **Mercedes**.

"**Musiu**," she said in a weak voice as I was walking out of the room, "since you have brought him back to my life, you ought to stay."

I sat down awkwardly on my stool.

He began to talk to no one in particular. He rambled on incoherently for hours.

Mercedes Peralta listened attentively: Whatever he was saying seemed to make all the sense in the world to her.

A long silence ensued after **Federico Mueller** stopped talking.

Slowly, dona **Mercedes** rose and lit a candle in front of the statue of the Virgin. Poised before the altar, she looked like an ancient wood statue, her face an expressionless mask.

Only her eyes seemed alive as they filled with tears. She lit a cigar and drew each breath deep inside her, as if she were feeding a force within her chest.

The flame grew brighter as the candle shrank. It cast an eerie light on her features as she turned to face **Federico Mueller**.

Mumbling a soft incantation, she massaged first his head and then his shoulders.

"You can do anything you want with me," he said, pressing both her palms against his temples.

"Go into the living room," dona **Mercedes** said, her voice a shaky whisper. "I'll be along shortly with a valerian potion. It will put you to sleep." Smiling, she patted his hair into place.

Hesitantly, he limped across the patio and down the corridor. The sound of his steps echoed faintly through the house.

Mercedes Peralta turned once again to the altar but could not reach it. She was beginning to fall, when I jumped up and caught her.

Feeling the uncontrollable tremor of her body, I realized how immense had been her stress and her poise. She had comforted **Federico Mueller** for hours.

I had seen only his turmoil: She had revealed nothing about her own.

"**Musiua**, tell **Candelaria** to get ready," dona **Mercedes** said, stepping into the kitchen where I was writing. "You're taking us in your jeep."

Certain that she was already asleep, I went immediately to look for **Candelaria** in her room. She was not there.

The door of her wardrobe stood wide open, exposing the **beveled** mirror on its door and all her clothes. They were arranged not only by color but also by the length of the **hems**.

Her narrow bed- a frame of laths, and a horsehair mattress- stood between two bookcases filled with romance novels and photo albums containing cutout magazine pictures.

Everything was in immaculate order, nothing was rumpled.

"I'm ready," **Candelaria** said behind me.

Startled, I turned around. "Dona **Mercedes** wants you to--" She did not let me finish, but propelled me toward my room down the corridor.

"I've taken care of everything," she assured me. "Hurry up and change. We don't have much time."

On my way out I peeked into the living room. **Federico Mueller** was sleeping peacefully on the couch.

Dona **Mercedes** and **Candelaria** were already waiting for me in my jeep. There was no moon or a single star in the sky, yet it was a lovely night; soft and black with a cool wind blowing from the hills.

Following **Candelaria**'s directions, I drove the two women to the homes of the people who regularly attended the spiritualists' meeting.

As was customary, I waited outside. Except for **Leon Chirino**, I had never met any of them, yet I knew where each one of them lived.

I wondered if the two women were setting a date for a seance, for they did not stay long at any of the houses.

"And now to **Leon Chirino**'s house," **Candelaria** said, helping dona **Mercedes** settle in the backseat.

Candelaria seemed angry. Nonstop she rambled on about **Federico Mueller**.

Although I was bursting with curiosity, I could not pay attention to her seemingly incoherent statements. I was too preoccupied watching the distraught look on dona **Mercedes**' face in the **rearview** mirror.

She opened her mouth several times to speak, but instead she shook

her head and looked out the window, seeking aid and comfort from the night.

Leon Chirino took a long time coming to the door. He must have been sound asleep and unable to hear **Candelaria**'s impatient, loud banging.

He opened the door with his arms crossed, protecting his chest from the cold, humid breeze spreading the dawn across the hills. There was a look of foreboding in his eyes.

"**Federico Mueller** is at my house," dona **Mercedes** said before he had time to even greet her.

Leon Chirino did not say a word. Yet, it was evident that he had been thrown into a state of profound agitation, of great indecision. His lips trembled, and his eyes alternately shone with rage or filled with tears under his white, bushy brows.

He motioned us to follow him to the kitchen. He made sure dona **Mercedes** was comfortably settled in a hammock hanging near the stove, then he made a fresh pot of coffee, while we sat in complete silence.

As soon as he had served **Candelaria** and me a cup, he helped dona **Mercedes** into a sitting position, and standing behind her proceeded to massage the back of her head.

He moved down to her neck, then to her shoulders and arms, all the way to her feet. The sound of his melodious incantation floated over the room, clear like the dawn, peaceful and infinitely lonely.

"Only you know what to do," **Leon Chirino** said to her, helping her up. "Do you want me to come with you?"

Nodding, she embraced him and thanked him for lending her his strength. A mysterious smile curved her lips as she turned to the table, and leisurely sipped her cup of coffee.

"Now we have to see my **compadre**," she said, taking my arm. "Please take us to **El Mocha**'s house."

"**Lucas Nunez**?" I asked, looking from one to the other.

All three nodded, but no one said a word.

I had remembered **Candelaria**'s comment about the godfather of dona **Mercedes**' adopted son **Elio**: **Candelaria** had told me that **Lucas Nunez** blamed himself for **Elio**'s death.

The sun had already risen above the mountains when we reached the small town along the coast where **Lucas Nunez** lived.

The place was hot and salty from the sea and musky with flowering mimosa trees.

The town's main street lined with brightly painted colonial houses, a small church, and a plaza ended at the edge of a coconut plantation.

Beyond was the sea. It could not be seen, but the wind carried the sound of waves breaking on the shore.

Lucas Nunez's house stood on one of the town's side streets, which were not really streets but wide paths covered with stones.

Dona **Mercedes** rapped lightly on the door and, without waiting for an answer, pushed it open and stepped inside a dark, damp room.

Still blinded by the brightness outside, I could at first barely make out the silhouette of a man reading at a wooden table in a small back patio.

He gazed at us with such a desolate expression on his face I wanted to flee.

Haltingly, he stood up and silently embraced dona **Mercedes**, **Leon**

Chirino, and **Candelaria**.

The man was tall and bony. His white hair was cropped so close to his head that the darkness of his scalp shone through.

I felt a strange anguish upon noticing his hands and realized why he was nicknamed **El Mocho**, the maimed one. The first joint of each finger was missing.

"**Federico Mueller** is at my house," dona **Mercedes** said softly. "The **musiua** here brought him to my door."

Slowly, **Lucas Nunez** turned toward me. There was something so intense about the man's narrow face, about his shiny eyes, that I shrank back.

"Is she related to him?" he asked in a harsh voice, no longer seeming to see me.

"The **musiua** has never seen **Federico Mueller** in her life," dona **Mercedes** remarked. "But she brought him to my door."

Lucas Nunez leaned against the wall. "If he is in your house, then I will kill him," he declared in a strangled whisper.

Dona **Mercedes** and **Leon Chirino** each took him by an arm and led him into one of the rooms.

"Who is this **Federico Mueller**?" I asked **Candelaria**. "What did he do?"

"But, **Musiua**," she said impatiently. "I've been telling you during the whole trip about the horrible things **Federico Mueller** did."

She looked at me baffled, shaking her head in disbelief.

Despite my insistence that she repeat them, she would not say another word about **Federico Mueller**.

Instead of going to rest in her hammock upon returning to her house, **Mercedes Peralta** asked **Candelaria** and me to join her in her working room.

Mercedes Peralta lit seven candles on the altar, and reaching behind the folds of the Virgin's blue mantle, pulled out a revolver.

Horrified and fascinated, I watched her caress the gun. She smiled at me, and pressed the revolver into my hands.

"It's unloaded," she said. "I unloaded it the day you arrived."

I knew then that I **wasn't** going to need it, but I **didn't** know that you were going to bring him back to me."

She went over to her chair and, heaving a deep sigh, sat down. "I've had that gun for almost thirty years," she went on. "I was going to kill **Federico Mueller** with it."

"And you should do it now!" **Candelaria** hissed through clenched teeth.

"I know what I'm going to do," dona **Mercedes** went on, ignoring the interruption. "I'm going to take care of **Federico Mueller** for as long as he lives."

"Dear God!" **Candelaria** exclaimed. "Have you lost your mind?"

A childlike look of innocent hope, a wave of affection, shone in dona **Mercedes**' eyes as she regarded us intently.

She held up her hand, pleading us to silence. "You brought **Federico Mueller** to my door," she said to me.

"And now I know that there is nothing to forgive. Nothing to understand; and he came back to make me realize just that.

"This is why I'll never mention what he did. He was dead, but he's not

now."

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Chapter 25

There were several empty rooms in the house, but **Federico Mueller** chose to sleep in the narrow alcove back of the kitchen. It was just large enough for a **cot** and a night table.

Quite vehemently, he declined my offer to drive him to **Caracas** and get his belongings.

He said that nothing of what he had there would be of any value to him now; yet, he was grateful, when at dona **Mercedes**' prompting, I bought him several shirts and a pair of khaki pants, and toiletries.

And thus, **Federico Mueller** became part of the household. Dona **Mercedes** pampered him. She indulged him.

Every morning and again every afternoon she treated him in her working room; and each night she made him drink a valerian potion laced with rum.

Federico Mueller never left the house. He spent all his time either in a hammock in the yard, or talking to dona **Mercedes**.

Candelaria ignored his existence: He did likewise; not only with her, but also with me.

One day, however, **Federico Mueller** began to speak to me in German, haltingly at first: It cost him a tremendous effort to form the words.

But soon he gained a total command of the language, and never again did he speak a word of Spanish with me.

That changed him radically. It was as though his problems, whatever they may have been, were encased in the sound of Spanish words.

Candelaria was, at first, mildly curious about the foreign language. She began asking **Federico Mueller** questions, and ended up succumbing to his innate charm.

He taught her German nursery rhymes, which **Candelaria** sang the whole day long with faultless pronunciation.

And he repeated to me again and again in a perfectly coherent way what he had said to dona **Mercedes** the night he arrived.

As happened every night, **Federico Mueller** woke up screaming.

He sat up in bed, his back pushed against the headboard in an effort to escape that one particular face: It always came so close to him he could see the cruel mocking glint in the man's eyes and his gold-rimmed teeth as he laughed in great guffaws.

Beyond him were all the other faces of the people who always populated his nightmares: faces distorted by pain and fear. They always screamed in agony, begged for mercy.

All of them except her. She never screamed. She never broke her stare. It was a look he could not bear.

Moaning, **Federico Mueller** pressed his fists against his eyes, as if with that gesture he could keep his past at bay. For thirty years he had been tormented by those nightmares, and by the memories and visions

that would follow in a wave of dreadful lucidity.

Exhausted, he slid back under the covers.

Something palpable, yet unseen, lingered in the room. It prevented him from falling asleep.

He pushed the blanket aside, and reluctant to turn on the light, limped across to the window, and pulled back the curtain.

Spellbound, he gazed at the white mist of dawn filtering into the room. He strained his eyes wide open to reassure himself that he was not dreaming.

As it had so often happened, she materialized out of that formless haze, and sat by his working table amid the stuffed birds that stared at him impassively from their dead, empty glass eyes.

Carefully, he approached the figure. Swiftly she vanished, like a shadow that leaves no trace.

The bells of the nearby church and the hurried steps of old women on their way to early mass echoed through the silent streets.

The familiar sounds reassured him that today was going to be like any other day.

He washed and shaved, then prepared his morning coffee and ate standing at the stove.

Feeling decidedly better, he settled down to work on his birds.

A vague restlessness, some undefined dread, prevented him from finishing his work on the owl he had promised a client for that afternoon.

He put on his good suit, and went outside for a walk.

The city still had an air of restful clarity at that early hour.

Slowly, he limped down the narrow street. The section of **Caracas** where he lived had been bypassed by the frenzy of modernization that had swept through the rest of the city.

Except for a casual greeting, he never stopped to talk to anyone.

Yet, he felt oddly protected by these old streets with their one-story colonial houses alive with the laughter of children, and the voices of women gossiping in front of their doors.

At first, people had talked a great deal about him, but he never gave in to the need to explain his presence. He was aware that because of his aloofness, his neighbors speculated and were suspicious of him.

Over the years, as was to be expected, people's interest in him finally waned. Nowadays, they merely thought of him as an eccentric old man who stuffed birds for a living, and wanted to be left alone.

Federico Mueller caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror outside a shop.

As always when he saw his reflection, he **couldn't** help but be startled to discover that he looked so much older than his years could possibly warrant.

Not a vestige remained of the tall, handsome man with blond curls and a deep tan.

Although he had been only thirty when he first came to live in this section of **Caracas**, he already looked the way he did now at sixty: old before his time, with a useless leg, white hair, deeply etched wrinkles, and a death-like pallor that **wouldn't** disappear regardless of how long he stayed outdoors.

Shaking his head, he resumed his walk toward the plaza and rested on a bench.

A few old men were already about, sitting with their hands between their knees, each one lost in his own memories. He found something oddly disturbing in their unshared solitude.

He rose and walked on, limping through block after block of crowded streets.

The sun was hot. The contours of buildings had lost their early-morning preciseness, and the noise in the streets intensified the dizzying shimmer of the haze hanging over the city.

And again, as he had done so many times before, he found himself standing in front of the same bus depot.

His eyes caught a dark face in the crowd. "**Mercedes**," he whispered, knowing that it **couldn't** possibly be her.

He wondered if the woman had heard him, for suddenly she looked into his eyes. It was a rapid, yet deliberate glance that filled him with apprehension and hope.

Then the woman vanished in the crowd.

"Have you seen a dark, tall woman pass by?" he asked one of the hawkers roaming around the bus depot, his tray of candies and cigarettes strapped in front of him.

"I've seen hundreds of women," the man said, making a wide circle with his hand. "There are lots of women around here." He grabbed **Federico Mueller's** arm and turned him slightly to the left. "See those buses over there? They are filled with women. Old ones, dark ones, tall ones. Anyway you like them. They are all going to the coastal towns." Laughing, the man continued weaving in and out of the waiting buses, advertising his wares.

Possessed by an irrational certainty that he would find that face, **Federico Mueller** got on a bus and walked down the aisle gazing intently at each passenger. They stared back at him in silence.

For an instant, he thought that all the faces resembled hers. He had to rest for a moment, he thought, and sat on one of the empty seats at the back of the bus.

A faint, faraway voice demanding his ticket roused him from his slumber. The words vibrated in his head.

A drowsiness pressed heavily on his brow, and he had difficulty opening his eyes. He gazed out the window. The city was far behind.

Puzzled and embarrassed, he looked up at the ticket collector. "I **didn't** intend to go anywhere," **Federico Mueller** stammered apologetically. "I only came looking for someone."

He paused for a moment, then mumbled to himself. "Someone I hoped and dreaded to find on this bus."

"That happens," the man remarked sympathetically. "Since you have to pay the full fare, you might as well take advantage of the ride, and go all the way to **Curmina**."

The man smiled and patted **Federico Mueller** on the shoulder. "There you can get a bus that will take you back to the capital."

Federico Mueller handed him some money. "When does the bus come back to **Caracas**?" he asked.

"Around midnight," the man said vaguely. "Or whenever there are enough people to make the trip worthwhile." The man gave him back his change, then continued down the aisle, and collected the rest of the tickets from the passengers.

It was fate that I had to catch this bus without having planned to do so, **Federico Mueller** thought.

A half smile flittered across his face. His worn eyelids closed with a feeling of hope, quiet and deep. Fate was finally forcing him to surrender to his past. An unknown peacefulness filled him as he recalled that past.

It all began at a party in **Caracas**, where he was approached by a high-ranking general in the government, who asked him point-blank to join the secret police.

Believing him to be drunk, **Federico** did not take the man's words seriously. It came as a surprise when a few days later an army officer knocked on his door.

"I'm Captain **Sergio** Medina," he introduced himself. There had been nothing sinister about the short, powerfully built man with the **copperish** skin and the gold-rimmed teeth that flashed in a strong open smile.

Convincingly, he talked about the excitement involved in the job they had in mind for him, the good pay, the fast promotions. Flattered and intrigued, **Federico** accompanied Medina to the general's house.

Patting him affectionately on his back, like an old friend, the general took him to his study. "This job will earn you the respect and gratitude of this country," the general said. "A country that, after all, is your own and yet **isn't**. This will be your chance to truly become one of us."

Nodding, **Federico** could not help but agree with the general.

He had been sixteen years old when his parents had immigrated to Venezuela. Under the auspices of a government program, they had settled in the interior to farm the vast **acreages** of land allotted to them, which they had hoped to own one day.

After an accident that killed both of his parents, **Federico**, not in the least interested in farming, apprenticed himself to a German zoologist, an expert in taxidermy who taught him all he knew.

"I can't think how I could be of use to you," **Federico** said to the general. "All I know is how to trap and stuff birds."

The general laughed uproariously. "My dear **Federico**," he emphasized, "your experience as a taxidermist is the ideal cover for the job we have in mind for you."

The general smiled confidentially, and leaning closer added, "We have accurate reports of a subversive group operating in the **Curmina** area. We want you to find out about them."

He laughed again, gleefully, like a child. "So far, we have been unsuccessful with the men we have sent into the area. But you, my friend, a **musiu** trapping birds, will not arouse any suspicion."

Federico was never given the opportunity to refuse the job. Within days, a brand-new jeep equipped with the latest instruments and chemicals of a quality he had never been able to afford were put at his disposal.

Federico was always careful when in the hills. One morning, however, upon seeing a rare toucan in one of his traps, he leapt out of his hammock without first putting on his boots.

He felt a sting between his toes. He swore, and thought he had stepped on a thorn. But when a sharp pain radiated from the small punctures- where two little drops of blood had formed- and quickly spread through his whole foot, and up his leg, he knew he had been bitten

by a snake: A snake he had neither seen nor heard.

He rushed to his jeep parked nearby and rummaged through his gear until he found his first-aid **kit**. He tied a handkerchief halfway up the calf of his leg, then expertly cut across the two punctures and bled the wound.

But too much poison had already gone into the bloodstream. Flashing pains shot all the way to his buttocks, and his foot swelled to twice its size.

He would never make it to **Caracas**, he thought, easing himself behind the steering wheel. He would have to take his chances in the nearest town.

The nurse at the dispensary near the plaza calmly informed him that they were out of antivenin serum.

"What am I supposed to do? Die?" **Federico** shouted, his face contorted with anger and pain.

"I hope not," the nurse remarked calmly. "I'm sure you've already discarded the chances of reaching **Caracas** in time."

She studied him, carefully considering her next words. "I know of a healer here. She has the best **contras**, the secret potions to counteract a snake's poison."

The nurse smiled apologetically. "That's why we hardly ever stock up on serum. Most victims prefer to go to her."

She examined the swollen foot once more. "I don't know what kind of snake bit you, but it looks bad to me. Your only chance is the healer. You'd better take it."

Federico had never been to a witch doctor in his life, but at that moment he was willing to try anything. He **didn't** want to die. He was beyond caring who helped him.

The nurse, assisted by two customers from the bar across the street, carried **Federico** to the witch doctor's house in the outskirts of town. He was put on a **cot** in a smoke-filled room that smelled of ammonia.

At the rasping sound of a match, **Federico** opened his eyes. Through the haze of smoke, he saw a tall woman lighting a candle on an altar.

In the flickering light her face was like a mask, very still with high-molded bones over which her tautly stretched skin, dark and smooth, shone like polished wood. Her eyes, hooded by heavy lids, revealed absolutely nothing as they looked into his.

"A **macagua** bite for sure," she diagnosed, shifting her gaze to his foot. "That snake gave you all she had."

"You were lucky the nurse brought you here. There is no serum for this kind of poison."

She pulled up a chair beside him, then examined his foot with great attention, her long fingers soft and gentle as she probed the skin around the wound.

"You don't have to worry," she stated with absolute conviction. "You're young. You'll survive the poison and my treatment."

Turning toward the table behind her, she reached for two large decanters filled with a **syruplike** greenish brown liquid in which roots, leaves, and snake entrails floated around. From one jar, she poured a certain amount in a metal plate: From the other one, she half filled a small tin mug.

She lit a cigar. Inhaling deeply, she closed her eyes and swayed her head. Abruptly, she bent over his foot and blew what seemed to be the

accumulated smoke of the entire cigar into the cut he had made with his knife. She sucked the blood, then quickly spit it out and rinsed her mouth with a clear, strong-smelling liquid. Seven times she repeated this procedure.

Thoroughly exhausted, she rested her head against the back of her chair.

A few moments later she began to mumble an incantation. She unbuttoned his shirt, and with her middle finger which she had dipped into the cigar's ashes, she drew a straight line from the base of his throat down to his genitals. With remarkable ease, she turned him around, pulled off his shirt, and painted a similar line down his back.

"I've halved you now," she informed him. "The poison can't go over to the other side." She then retraced the back and front lines with a **dab** of fresh ashes.

In spite of his pain, **Federico** laughed. "I'm sure the poison spread all over my body a long time ago," he said.

She held his face between her hands, forcing him to look into her eyes. "**Musiu**, if you don't trust me, you'll die," she warned him, then proceeded to wash his foot with the liquid she had poured into the metal plate.

That done, she reached for the tin mug. "Drink it all," she commanded, holding it to his lips. "If you throw up, you're done for."

Uncontrollable waves of nausea threatened to bring the foul-tasting potion up.

"Force yourself to keep it down," she urged him, placing a small rectangular pillow filled with dried maize kernels under his neck.

She watched him attentively as she soaked a handkerchief in a mixture of rose water and ammonia.

"Now breathe!" she ordered, holding the handkerchief over his nose. "Breathe slowly and deeply."

For a moment he struggled under the suffocating pressure of her hand, then gradually relaxed as she began to massage his face.

"Don't get close to pregnant women. They'll neutralize the effect of the contra," she admonished.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly, then mumbled that he did not know any pregnant women.

Seemingly satisfied with his statements, **Mercedes Peralta** turned to the altar, lined up seven candles around the statue of Saint John, and lit them.

Silently, she gazed at the flickering flames, then with a sudden jerk, she threw back her head and recited an oddly dissonant litany.

The words turned into a cry, which rose and fell with the regularity of her breathing. It was an inhuman-sounding lament that caused the walls to vibrate and the candle flames to waver.

The sound filled the room, the house, and went far beyond, as if it were meant to reach some distant force.

Federico was vaguely aware of being moved into another room.

The days and nights blurred into each other as he lay half-conscious on the **cot**, hounded by fevers and chills.

Whenever he opened his eyes, he saw the healer's face in the darkness, the red stones in her earrings shining like an extra pair of eyes. In a soft melodious voice, she sent the shadows, the terrible phantoms of

his fever, scurrying to their corners.

Or, as if she were part of his hallucinations, she identified those unknown forces and commanded him to wrestle with them.

Afterward, she bathed his sweat-covered body and massaged him until his skin was cool again.

There were times when **Federico** felt someone else's presence in the room. Different hands, larger and stronger, yet as gentle as the healer's, cradled his head while she urged him in a harsh tone to drink the foul-tasting potions she held to his lips.

The morning she brought him his first meal of rice and vegetables, a young man holding a guitar followed her into the room.

"I'm **Elio**," he introduced himself. Then strumming his guitar, he began to sing a funny little ditty that related the events of **Federico's** bout with the poison.

Elio also told him that the day the nurse at the dispensary brought him to his mother's house, he set out for the hills, and with his machete, **slayed** the **macagua** that had bitten him. Had the snake survived, the potions and incantations would have been useless.

One morning, upon noticing that the purple swollen flesh had returned to normal, **Federico** reached for his laundered clothes hanging over the bedstead.

Eager to test his strength, he walked out into the yard, where he found the healer bent over a tub **rilled** with rosemary water. Silently, he watched her dip her hands into the purple liquid.

Smiling, she looked up at him. "It keeps my hair from turning white," she explained, combing her fingers repeatedly through her curls.

Bewildered by the surge of desire welling up inside him, he moved closer. He longed to kiss the drops of rosemary water trickling down her face, her neck, into the bodice of her dress.

He **didn't** care that she might be old enough to be his mother. To him she was ageless and mysteriously seductive.

"You saved my life," he murmured, touching her face. His fingers lingered on her cheeks, her full lips, her warm smooth neck. "You must have added a love potion to that foul-tasting brew you forced me to drink every day."

She looked straight into his eyes but did not answer.

Afraid she had taken offense, he mumbled an apology.

She shook her head, her raspy laughter starting low in her throat.

He had never heard such a sound. She laughed with her whole soul, as if nothing else in the world mattered.

"You can stay here until you're stronger," she said, tousling his blond curls. In her veiled eyes, there was a hint of mockery but also of passion.

Months passed swiftly. The healer accepted him as her lover. Yet, she would never let him stay a full night in her room.

"Just a little longer," he pleaded each time, caressing the silken texture of her skin, fervently wishing that for once she would give in to his demand. But she always pushed him out into the darkness, and laughing, would close the door behind him.

"Perhaps if we stay lovers for three years," she used to tell him every time.

The rainy season had almost come to an end before **Federico** resumed his trips into the hills.

Elio accompanied him, at first to protect him, but soon he too was caught up with trapping and stuffing birds.

Never before had **Federico** taken someone with him. Despite the ten-year age difference, they became the best of friends.

Federico was surprised at how readily **Elio** endured the long hours of silence as they waited for a bird to fall into a trap; and how much he enjoyed their leisurely walks along the cool, hazy summits, where one was easily overtaken by fog and wind.

Federico was often tempted to tell **Elio** about Captain Medina, but somehow he never dared to break that intimate, fragile stillness.

Federico felt a vague guilt about the easy days in the hills and the secret nights with the healer. Not only had he convinced **Elio** and the healer, but he himself had begun to believe that Captain Medina was merely the middleman from **Caracas** who sold his stuffed birds to schools, museums, and curio shops.

"You've got to do better than catch those damn birds," Captain Medina said to him one afternoon as they were having a beer at a local bar. "Mingle more with the healer's patients. Through gossip, one learns the most astounding things. At any rate, you must finish your brilliant maneuver."

Federico had been surprised and, in turn, upset when Captain Medina had congratulated him on his clever scheme: The captain actually believed that **Federico** had let the snake bite him on purpose.

"It's the intellectuals," **Federico** said, "the educated people, who plan and plot against a dictatorship. Not poor farmers and fishermen. They are too busy making a living to notice what kind of government they have."

"**Musiu**, you aren't paid to give me your opinions," Medina cut him short. "Just do what you're supposed to do."

Medina turned the empty beer glass in his hands, then looked up at **Federico** and added in a whisper, "Not too long ago the leader of a small, but fanatic, revolutionary group escaped from jail. We have reason to believe that he's hiding in the area."

Laughing, Medina placed his right hand on the table. "He left in jail the first joint of each of his fingers. For that, he's now called **El Mocho**."

The rain had kept on falling since early afternoon: The sound of the defective gutter by his window prevented **Federico** from falling asleep.

He went out into the corridor and was about to light a cigarette when he heard a soft murmur coming from the healer's working room.

He knew it was not the healer. That morning he had driven her to a neighboring town where she was to attend a seance.

Federico tiptoed down the corridor. Among the different voices, he distinctly recognized **Elio**'s excited voice.

At first, he could not make much sense of their conversation, but when the words 'dynamite', 'the proposed dam in the hills', and 'the dictator's unofficial visit to it' crop up several times, he realized with disturbing clarity that he had unwittingly stumbled on a plot to assassinate the head of the military government.

Federico leaned against the wall, his heart beating violently, then he resolutely walked up the two steps into the dark room.

"**Elio!** Is that you?" **Federico** said. "I heard voices and got worried."

There were several men in the room: They recoiled instantly into the shadows.

Elio was not in the least perturbed. He took **Federico** by the arm and introduced him to the man sitting on the chair by the altar.

"Godfather, this is the **musiu** I've been telling you about," he said. "He's a friend of the family. He's to be trusted."

Slowly, the man rose. There was something saintly about his bony face, with the wide cheekbones standing out sharply under his dark skin and eyes that shone with a chilling fierceness. "A pleasure to meet you," he said. "**I'm Lucas Nunez**."

For a moment **Federico** stared at the proffered hand, then shook it. The first joint of each finger was missing.

"I feel that you can be trusted," he said to **Federico**. "**Elio** says that you may be willing to help us."

Nodding, **Federico** closed his eyes, afraid his voice and gaze would betray his turmoil.

Lucas Nunez introduced him to the group of men.

One by one they shook his hand, then sat back on the floor, forming a half-circle. The faint flicker of the candles on the altar barely outlined their faces.

Federico listened attentively to **Lucas Nunez**'s precise, calm arguments as he discussed the past and present political situation in Venezuela.

"And how can I help you?" **Federico** asked him at the end of his explanation.

Lucas Nunez's eyes revealed a sad, reflective mood: His face clouded over, struck with unwelcome memories.

But then, he smiled and said, "If the others agree, you could drive some explosives into the hills for us."

They all agreed instantly. **Federico** sensed that they had accepted him so fully and so quickly because they knew he was **Mercedes Peralta**'s lover.

It was after midnight when their conversation ceased, bit by bit, like the flapping wings of an injured bird. The men looked pale, haggard.

Federico felt a chill as they embraced him. Without a sound, they left the room and disappeared into the darkness of the hall.

He was stunned by the devilish irony of his situation. **Lucas Nunez**'s last words rang in his ears. "You're the perfect man for the job. No one will suspect a **musiu** trapping birds in the hills."

Federico pulled the jeep over to a small clearing beside the road. A light drizzle swathed the hills as with gauze, and the half-moon filtering through the misty clouds gave a spectral radiance to the landscape.

Silently, he and **Elio** unloaded the well-padded box packed tightly with dynamite sticks.

"I'll carry the stuff down to the shack," **Elio** said, smiling reassuringly. "Don't look so worried, **Federico**. They'll have the bridge mined by dawn."

Federico watched him descend the steep overgrown trail into the shadows below. Often he had come with him to this spot, looking for wild **pomarrosas**, a peculiarly fragrant fruit that smells like rose petals. It was the healer's favorite fruit.

Federico sat on a fallen tree trunk and buried his face in his hands.

Except for the vague guilt he had felt, at times, for accepting the generous pay- which far exceeded the worth of even the rarest of birds

he had delivered to Medina- he had dismissed all thought regarding the implications of what he was doing.

Until now, it had all seemed to him like a make-believe adventure in a movie or in some exotic novel. It had nothing to do with having to betray people he knew and loved; people who trusted him.

He wished **Elio** would hurry: **Federico** had seen Medina's jeep parked in a secluded place on the outskirts of town, secretly following him.

Federico had told Medina everything, and now it was too late to regret it.

He leapt to his feet as a dazzling flash of lightning illuminated the sky. Thunder broke in a deafening roar, echoing in the depths of the ravine. Rain came in a solid sheet, so dense it blurred everything around him.

"What a fool I am!" he cried out loud, running down the steep trail. With absolute certainty, **Federico** knew that Medina had no intention of honoring his promise to spare the healer and her son, that he had only given it as a means to get **Federico** to divulge everything he knew.

"**Elio!**" **Federico** screamed, but his shout was drowned by the resounding volley of a machine gun and the startled cries of hundreds of birds rising up into the dark sky.

In the few minutes that it took him to reach the shack, his mind raced through a nightmare. With devastating clarity he saw how his life, in one instant, had taken a fatal turn.

Almost mechanically, he went through the motions of sobbing over **Elio**'s lifeless, torn body. He neither heard nor saw Medina and the two soldiers entering the shack.

Medina was shouting at one of his men, but his voice was only a distant murmur. "You goddamn fool! I told you not to shoot! You could have had us all blown to pieces with that dynamite."

"I heard someone running in the dark," the soldier defended himself. "It could have been an ambush. I don't trust this **musiu!**"

Medina turned away from the man and pointed his flashlight into **Federico**'s face. "You're **re** dumber than I thought," he spit. "What did you think this was going to be? Make believe?"

He ordered the soldiers to take the box with the explosives up the ravine.

Federico brought the jeep to such a violent halt in front of the healer's house that he pitched forward, hitting his head on the windshield.

For a moment he sat dazed looking uncomprehendingly at the closed door; at the closed shutters.

No light shone through the cracks of the wooden panels, yet the blaring sound of a radio playing a popular tune could be heard for miles.

Federico went around to the yard, where he saw the army jeep parked on the side street. "Medina!" he screamed, running across the patio through the kitchen to the healer's working room.

Defeated, utterly worn-out, he fell to the ground, not far from where the healer lay moaning in the corner by the altar.

"She **doesn't** know anything," **Federico** shouted. "She's not involved in this."

Medina threw his head back and laughed uproariously: His gold-rimmed teeth caught the light of the candles burning on the altar. "To be

a double-crossing spy, you have to be infinitely more clever than I," he said. "I have practice. Being cunning and suspicious is my livelihood." He kicked **Federico** in the groin. "If you wanted to warn her, you should have come here first and not wasted time crying over the boy you killed."

The two soldiers grabbed the healer by the arms, forcing her to stand up. Her half-closed eyes were bruised and swollen. Her lips and nose were bleeding. Shaking herself loose, she glanced around the room until her eyes found **Federico**.

"Where is **Elio**?" she asked.

"Tell her, **Federico**," Medina laughed, his eyes shining with malice. "Tell her how you killed him."

Like an enraged animal unleashing its last strength, she pushed Medina against the altar, then turned to one of the soldiers and reached for his gun.

The soldier fired a shot.

The healer stood still, her hands pressed on her chest, trying to stop the blood from seeping through the bodice of her dress. "I curse you to the end of your days, **Federico**."

Her voice dropped: The words were unclear. She seemed to be reciting an almost inaudible incantation.

Softly, like a rag doll, she collapsed on the ground.

With a last surge of lucidity, **Federico** made a final decision: in death, he would join the people he had betrayed.

His thoughts ran ahead of him. He would atone by killing the men responsible for everything: himself, and his accomplice- Medina.

Federico unsheathed his hunting knife and plunged it into Medina's heart.

He expected to be killed instantly, but one of the soldiers only shot him in the leg.

Hand-cuffed, blindfolded, and gagged, **Federico** was carried outside into a car. He wondered if it was already daylight, for he heard the mocking babble of a flock of parrots crossing the sky.

He was certain they had arrived in **Caracas** when the car stopped hours later.

He was put into a cell. He confessed to anything his torturers hinted at: Everything, he said, was immaterial to him. His life had already ended.

Federico had no idea how long he remained in jail. Unlike the other prisoners, he did not count the weeks, months, and years. All the days were the same to him.

One day he was set free.

It was a morning of great agitation. People were screaming, crying, and laughing in the streets. The dictatorship had come to an end.

Federico moved to an old section of the city and he began to stuff birds again. He no longer went into the hills to trap them, however.

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[Florinda Donner-Grau](#) - The Witch's Dream: Chapter 26

Version 2007.03.04

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by [Florinda Donner-Grau](#)

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Chapter 26

"Human nature is most strange," dona [Mercedes](#) said. "I knew that

you were going to do something for me. I knew it from the first moment I laid eyes on you.

"And yet, when you did what you were here to do, I **couldn't** believe my eyes. You have actually moved the wheel of chance for me.

"I can say that you enticed **Federico Mueller** to return to the realm of the living. You brought him back to me by the force of your witch's shadow."

My retort was cut off before I had time to open my mouth. "During all these months you've been at my house," she said, "you have been under my shadow, in a minimal way, of course; yet the usual would've been for me to make a link for you, and not the other way around."

I wanted to clarify matters. I insisted that I had not done anything. But she would not hear of it.

For the sake of understanding, I proposed a line of thought: She had made the link herself with her conviction that I was the one who would bring her something.

"No," she said, puckering her face. "Your reasoning is wrong. It makes me very sad that you seek explanations that only impoverish us."

She rose and embraced me. "I feel sorry for you," she whispered in my ear.

Suddenly, she laughed, a joyful sound that dispelled her sadness. "There is no way to explain how you've done this," she said. "I'm not talking about human arrangements or about the shadowy nature of witchcraft, but about something as elusive as timelessness itself."

She almost stammered, searching for words. "All I know and feel is that you made a link for me. How extraordinary! I was trying to show you how witches move the wheel of chance, and then you moved it for me yourself."

"I told you I can't take credit for that," I insisted and meant it. Her fervor embarrassed me.

"Don't be so thick, **Musiua**," she retorted in an annoyed tone that reminded me of **Agustin**. "Something is helping you to create a transition for me. You can say, and be thoroughly accurate in saying it, that you have used your witch's shadow without even knowing it."

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The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by **Florinda Donner-Grau**

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The rainy season was almost over, yet it still rained every afternoon; a torrential downpour accompanied by thunder and lightning.

Usually, I spent these rainy afternoons with dona **Mercedes** in her room, where she lay in her hammock, either bemused with or indifferent to my presence.

If I asked her a question, she would answer me: If I said nothing, she would remain silent.

"No patient ever comes after the rain," I said, watching the downpour from her bedroom window.

The storm was soon over, and it left the street flooded.

Three buzzards landed on a nearby roof. With wings outstretched

they leapt about, then lined up at the very ridge and faced the sun bursting through the clouds.

Half-naked children came out of their houses. They booed the buzzards away, then chased one another across the muddy puddles.

"No one ever comes after the rain," I repeated and turned to dona **Mercedes**, who was sitting silently in her hammock, one leg crossed over the other, staring at her cutoff shoe.

"I think I'll go and visit **Leon Chirino**," I said and got up from my chair.

"I **wouldn't** do that," she mumbled, her gaze still on her toes.

She looked up. There was a heavy brooding look in her eyes.

She hesitated, frowning and biting her lips, as if she wanted to say something else. Instead, she rose and, taking my arm, led me to her working room.

Once inside, she moved with great speed, her skirt swishing noisily as she went from one corner to another, looking over and over again in the same places, turning everything upside down on the table, on the altar, and inside the glass cabinet. "I can't find it," she finally said.

"What did you lose?" I asked. "Perhaps I know where it is."

She opened her mouth to speak, but instead she turned to the altar. She lit a candle, then a cigar, which she puffed on nonstop until it was just a stub, her eyes fixed on the ashes falling on the metal plate in front of her.

She turned abruptly, stared at me still standing by the table, and went down on her haunches. She crawled underneath the table and, reaching behind the bottles, dragged out a long gold chain on which a clump of medals was attached.

I began, "What are you--"

I stopped in **midsentence** as I remembered the night she threw the chain high up in the sky. "When you see the medals again, you'll return to **Caracas**," she had said.

I never found out if some kind of trick had been involved or if I had merely been too tired to witness their fall. I had totally forgotten about the medals, for I had not seen them since.

Mercedes Peralta was grinning as she stood up. She hung the medals around my neck and said, "Feel how heavy they are. Pure gold!"

"They really are heavy!" I exclaimed, bouncing the clump in my hand.

Smooth and shiny, the medals had a luxuriant orange tinge to them, characteristic of Venezuelan gold.

They ranged in size from a dime to a silver dollar. Not all of them were religious medals. Some bore the likeness of Indian chieftains from the time of the Spanish Conquest.

"What are they for?" I asked.

"To diagnose," dona **Mercedes** said. "To heal. They're good for anything I choose to do with them."

Sighing loudly, she sat on her chair by the table.

With the chain still around my neck, I stood in front of her. I wanted to ask her where I should put the medals, but a feeling of utter desolation rendered me speechless. As I gazed into her eyes, I saw boundless melancholy and longing reflected in them.

"You're an experienced medium now," she murmured. "But your time here has ended."

She had tried for a week to help me summon the spirit of her ancestor: It seemed that my incantations had no more power. We had failed to lure the spirit as I alone had done every night for months.

Dona **Mercedes** laughed a little tinkling laughter that sounded oddly ominous. "The spirit is telling us that it's time for you to move on.

"You have fulfilled what you came to do. You came to move the wheel of chance for me.

"I moved it for you the night I saw you at the plaza from **Leon Chirino's** car. It was at that precise instant that I wished you to come here.

"Had I not done so, you would never have found me regardless of who sent you to my door. You see, I, too, used my witch's shadow to make a link for you."

She gathered the boxes, candles, jars, and scraps of material from the table, piled them in her arms, then carefully eased herself out of her chair. "Help me," she said, pointing with her chin to the glass cabinet.

After placing each item neatly on the shelves, I turned to the altar and lined up the knocked-over saints.

"A part of me will always be with you," dona **Mercedes** said softly. "Wherever you go, whatever you do, my invisible spirit will always be there. Fate has woven its invisible threads and tied us together."

The thought that she was saying good-bye brought tears to my eyes. It struck me like a revelation that I had taken her for granted, loved her carelessly and easily the way one loves the old.

I had no time to express my feelings, for at that moment an old woman burst into the room.

"Dona **Mercedes!**" she cried out, clutching her folded hands against her shriveled bosom. "You have to help **Clara**."

"She's had one of her attacks, and there is no way I can bring her here. She's just lying on her bed as if she were dead."

The woman spoke rapidly out of the side of her mouth, her voice rising sharply as she moved toward the healer.

"I don't know what to do. There is no use calling the doctor, for I know that she's having one of her attacks."

She paused and crossed herself, and as she looked about the room, she discovered me. "I **didn't** realize you were with a patient," she mumbled contritely.

Offering the woman a chair, dona **Mercedes** put her at ease. "Don't worry, **Emilia**. The **musiua** is no patient. She's my helper," she explained. Then she sent me to fetch her basket from the kitchen.

As I stepped outside I heard dona **Mercedes** ask **Emilia** if the aunts had been to visit **Clara**. I took my time closing the curtain behind me so that I could hear the woman's answer.

"They finally left this morning," she said. "They have been here for almost a week. They want to move back here. **Luisito** came, too. As usual he was anxious to take **Clara** back with him to **Caracas**."

Although I had no way of assessing what the information meant to dona **Mercedes**, I knew that she deemed it necessary to include the house in her treatment, for she sent **Emilia** to the drugstore to purchase a bottle of **luvia de oro**, golden rain; a bottle of **luvia de plata**, silver rain; and a bottle of **la mono poderosa**, the powerful hand.

These flower extracts, mixed with water, are used to wash the

bewitched as well as their houses. It is a task the bewitched themselves have to perform.

The valley and the gentle slopes south of town- where sugarcane fields used to be- had been claimed by industrial centers and unattractive rows of boxlike houses.

Amid them, like some relic of the past, stood what remained of the hacienda **El Rincón**: a large pink house and an orchard.

For a long time dona **Mercedes** and I stood gazing at the house, the peeling paint, the closed doors, and shutters.

Not a sound came from inside. Not a leaf stirred in the trees.

We walked through the front gate. The traffic noise from the wide streets around us was muted by the crumbling high wall enclosing the property and by the tall **casuarina** trees, which also shut out the direct sun.

"Do you think **Emilia** has returned?" I whispered, intimidated by that eerie silence; by the afternoon shadows falling across the wide walkway.

Without answering, dona **Mercedes** pushed open the front door.

A gust of wind redolent of decay scattered dead leaves at our feet.

We walked along the wide corridor bordering the inside patio full of shade and humidity.

Water trickled from a flat dish held perfectly balanced on the raised hands of a chubby angel.

We turned a corner and continued along another corridor past endless rooms.

Half-opened doors allowed glimpses of **unmatching** odds and ends of furniture thrown together in the most haphazard fashion.

I could see sheets draped over couches and armchairs, rolled-up carpets, and statues. Beveled mirrors, portraits, and paintings were propped against the walls, as if waiting to be rehung.

Dona **Mercedes**, not in the least perturbed by the chaotic atmosphere of the house, only shrugged her shoulders when I commented on it.

With the confidence of someone familiar with her surroundings, she stepped into a large, dimly lit bedroom.

At the very center stood a wide mahogany bed draped with mosquito nets as delicate as mist. Dark, heavy curtains covered the windows, and a black cloth was flung over the mirror on the dresser.

The smell of burning tallow, incense, and holy water made me think of a church.

Books lay everywhere, piled carelessly on the floor, on the bed, on the two armchairs, on the night table, on the dresser, and even on an upside-down chamber pot.

Mercedes Peralta turned on the lamp by the night table. "**Clara**," she called softly, pushing the netting aside.

Expecting to see a child, I stood gaping at a young woman, perhaps in her late twenties, propped against the raised headboard with her limbs all awry like a rag doll that had been carelessly tossed on the bed.

A red Chinese silk robe embroidered with dragons barely covered her voluptuous figure. In spite of her disheveled appearance, she was stunningly beautiful, with high slanted cheekbones, a sensual full mouth, and dark skin burnished to a fine gloss.

"**Negrita, Clarita**," dona **Mercedes** called, shaking her gently by the shoulder.

The young woman opened her eyes with a start- like someone awakening from a nightmare- then shrank back, her pupils enormously dilated. Tears flowed down her cheeks, but no expression crossed her face.

Pushing the books onto the floor, dona **Mercedes** placed her basket at the foot of the bed, retrieved a handkerchief, sprinkled it with perfumed water and ammonia, her favorite remedy, and held it under the woman's nose.

The spiritual injection, as dona **Mercedes** called it, did not seem to affect the young woman, for she only stirred slightly. "Why can't I die in peace?" she asked, her voice querulous with fatigue.

"Don't talk nonsense, **Clara**," dona **Mercedes** said, rummaging through her basket. "When a person is ready to die, I'll gladly help them prepare for their eternal sleep.

"There are sicknesses that bring a body's death, but your time to die **hasn't** come yet."

As soon as dona **Mercedes** had found what she was after, she rose and motioned me to come closer.

"Stay with her. I'll be back shortly," she whispered in my ear.

Uneasily, I watched her leave the room, then shifted my attention to the bed, and caught sight of the deathlike stillness in the woman's face.

She did not even appear to be breathing, but she seemed aware of my intense scrutiny: her lids slowly opened, flickering lazily, hurt by the dim light.

She reached for the brush on the night table. "Would you braid my hair for me?" she asked.

Smiling, I nodded and took the brush. "One or two braids?" I asked, running the brush through her long curly hair; over and over to get out the tangles.

Like dona **Mercedes**' and **Candelaria**'s, her hair smelled of rosemary.

"How about one nice thick braid?" I asked.

Clara did not answer. With a fixed, but absent, gaze she stared at the farthest wall in the room, where oval-framed photographs hung surrounded by palm fronds braided in the form of a cross.

With her face contorted by pain she turned toward me. Her limbs began to shake violently. Her face darkened as she gasped for air and tried to push herself up the headboard.

I ran to the door, but afraid to leave her all by herself, I did not dare go out of the room. Repeatedly, I called for dona **Mercedes**: There was no answer.

Certain that some fresh air would do **Clara** good, I stepped over to the window and pulled open the curtain.

A faint glimmer of daylight still lingered outside. It made the leaves of the fruit trees vibrate with color and chased the shadows out of the room.

But the warm breeze drifting through the window made **Clara** only worse. Her body shook convulsively: Heaving and gasping, she collapsed on the bed.

Afraid that she might be suffering from an epileptic seizure and might bite off her tongue, I tried to get the hairbrush between her chattering teeth.

That filled her with terror. Her eyes dilated further. Her fingernails turned purple, and her wildly racing heartbeat throbbed in the swelling

veins of her neck.

At a total loss as to what to do, I clutched the gold medals, which were still around my neck, and swung them back and forth in front of her eyes. I was not guided by any definite thought or idea; it was a purely automatic response.

"**Negrita, Clarita**," I murmured the way I had heard dona **Mercedes** call her earlier.

With a feeble effort, **Clara** tried to lift her hand.

I lowered the chain within her reach. Moaning softly, she clasped the medals and held them against her breasts.

She seemed to be drawing strength from some magic force, for the swollen veins in her neck receded. Her breathing became easier. Her pupils went back to normal, and I noticed that her eyes were not dark but a light brown, like amber.

A faint smile formed on her lips, which stuck dryly to her teeth. Closing her eyes, she let go of the medals and slipped sideways on the bed.

Dona **Mercedes** walked in so swiftly that she seemed to materialize at the foot of the bed, as if conjured up by the shadows invading the room.

In her hands, she held a large aluminum mug filled with a strong-smelling potion. Tightly clasped under her arm was a pile of newspapers.

Pressing her lips firmly together, she gestured me to remain silent, then placed the mug on the night table, and the newspapers on the floor.

She picked up the gold chain from the bed and, smiling, hung the medals around her neck.

Mumbling a prayer, she lit a candle and again rummaged through her basket until she found a tiny black clump of dough wrapped in leaves.

She rolled the dough between her palms into a ball and dropped it into the mug. It dissolved instantly with a fizzling sound.

She stirred the potion with her finger, and after tasting it brought the mug to **Clara**'s lips. "Drink it all," she ordered.

Dona **Mercedes** watched silently, with an oddly detached expression on her face, as **Clara** gulp the liquid down.

An almost imperceptible smile appeared on **Clara**'s face. It quickly turned into a harsh laughter, and ended in a terrified chatter, of which I did not catch a single word.

Moments later, she lay flat on the bed, whispering broken excuses and asking forgiveness.

Totally unperturbed by her outburst, dona **Mercedes** bent over **Clara** and massaged around her eyes; her fingers describing identical circles.

She moved to her temples, then with downward strokes, massaged the rest of her face, as if she were pulling off a mask.

Expertly, she rolled **Clara** toward the edge of the bed. Then, making sure **Clara**'s head was hanging directly over the newspapers on the floor, she pressed hard on **Clara**'s back until she vomited.

Nodding with approval, dona **Mercedes** examined the dark clump on the floor, wrapped it in the papers, and tied the bundle with a string.

"Now we'll have to bury this mess outside," she said, and in one swift motion she lifted **Clara** off the bed.

Gently, she wiped her face clean and tightened the belt on her robe.

"**Musiuu**," dona **Mercedes** called, turning toward me, "hold **Clara**'s

other arm."

With the young woman in between us, we slowly shuffled down the corridor out into the yard and down the wide cement steps that led to the terraced slope where fruit trees grew.

There dona **Mercedes** buried the bundle in a deep hole she made me dig. **Clara** sat on the stone steps and watched us indifferently.

For six consecutive days **Clara** fasted. Every afternoon at precisely six o'clock, I drove dona **Mercedes** to **El Rinc n**. She treated **Clara** in exactly the same manner. Each session ended under a fruit tree, where the newspaper bundle, smaller each day, was buried.

On the sixth and last day, hard as she tried, **Clara** did not vomit. Nevertheless, dona **Mercedes** made her bury the empty, bundled-up paper.

"Will she be all right now?" I asked on the way home. "Are the sessions over?"

"Not quite, to both questions," she said.

"Starting tomorrow, you're going to see **Clara** every day by yourself as part of her treatment." She patted my arm affectionately. "Get her to talk to you. It'll do her a lot of good.

"And," she added as an afterthought, "it'll do you a lot of good too."

Clothes and **shoebox** in hand, **Clara** hurried down the corridor into the bathroom.

She dropped everything on the floor, then took off her nightgown and admired herself in the mirrored walls.

She moved closer to see if her budding breasts had grown a bit more overnight. A satisfied smile spread over her face as she bent her head and counted her few pubic hairs.

Humming a little tune, she turned on the hot and cold water faucets in the enormous shell-shaped bathtub, then went over to the dressing table and carefully examined the various bottles arranged on the marble top.

Unable to decide which of the bath **gels** or salts to use, she poured a small amount of each into the water.

For a moment she stood staring at the foaming bubbles.

How different it had been in **Piritu**. Water had to be drawn from the river or from the newly installed municipal faucet by the road and had to be carried up the hill in tin cans.

Only a year had passed since her arrival at **El Rinc n**, yet it seemed she had been living in this large old house forever.

She had made no conscious effort to forget her life in **Piritu**. Her memories, however, had begun to fade like visions in a dream.

All that remained was her grandmother's face, with the sound of her rocking chair creaking on the dirt-packed floor on that last day in the shack.

"You're almost grown up, **Negra**," her grandmother had said, her face looking older, more tired than it ever had before. The child knew at that instant that the only person she had in the world was going to die.

"That's what old age does," her grandmother had said, aware of the child's realization. "When a body is ready to die, there is nothing one can do but lie down and close one's eyes.

"I've already traded my rocking chair for a coffin, and this shack for a Christian burial."

"But grandmother--"

"Hush, child," the old woman stopped her in mid-sentence.

She pulled out a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, untied the knot in one corner, and counted the few coins she kept there for an emergency. "It's enough to get you to **El Rinc n**."

She ran her fingers over the child's face, then braided her long curly hair.

"No one knows who your father is, but your mother, my daughter, is don **Luis**'s illegitimate child.

"She left for **Caracas** right after you were born. She went to seek her fortune; but fortune **doesn't** need to be sought...quot;

Her voice trailed off. She had lost her train of thought.

After a long silence she added, "I'm sure don **Luis** will recognize you as his granddaughter. He's the owner of **El Rinc n**. He's old and lonely."

She took the child's hands in hers, pressed them against her wrinkled cheeks, and kissed the leaf-shaped mole in her right palm. "Show this to him."

The candle burning before the figure of a black Christ blurred before the child's eyes.

She let her gaze wander to the **cot** in the corner, to the basket stuffed with starched, unironed clothing, to the wheelbarrow leaning against the wall in which she pushed her grandmother around.

For one last time her eyes rested on the old woman: Settled back in her rocking chair, she stared with empty eyes into the distance, her face already shrunken with death.

It was dusk when the bus driver let her off right in front of the recessed arched doorway built into the wall surrounding **El Rinc n**.

She walked up the terraced hillside, where fruit trees grew all evenly spaced from one another.

Halfway up she stopped short and remained utterly still, her whole being taken over by the sight of a small tree covered with white blossoms.

"That's an apple tree," a voice said; and then inquired, "And who are you? Where have you come from?"

For an instant, she believed it was the tree that had spoken, then she became aware of an old man standing beside her.

"I fell out of the apple tree," she said, holding out her hand in greeting.

Surprised by her formal gesture, he stared at her hand. Instead of shaking it, he just held it in his, her palm turned up. "Strange," he murmured, his thumb moving over the leaf-shaped mole.

"Who are you?" he asked again.

"I think I'm your granddaughter," she said hopefully: She had taken an instant liking to him.

He was frail-looking, with silver-white hair that contrasted sharply with his tanned face. From his nose to the corners of his mouth ran two deep lines. She wondered if they had been drawn by worry and hard work, or by smiling a lot.

"Who sent you here?" the old man asked, his thumb still rubbing over the leaf-shaped mole.

"My grandmother, **Eliza Gomez**, of **Piritu**. She used to work here. She died yesterday morning."

"And what's your name?" he asked, studying her upturned face with the wide, amber-colored eyes, the fine nose, the full mouth, and the

determined angle of her chin.

"They call me **La Negra**...", she faltered under his intense scrutiny.

"**La Negra Clara**," he said. "That was my grandmother's name. She was as dark as you."

To make light of his words, he led her around the apple tree.

"It was the size of a parsley sprig when I brought it back with me from a trip to Europe. People laughed at me, saying that the tree would never grow in the tropics.

"It's old now. It **hasn't** grown very tall, nor has it ever borne any fruit. But once in a while it dresses itself all in white."

Wistfully, he looked at the delicate blossoms: Then his glance came to rest on the child's eager face, and he said, "It's just as well that you fell out of the apple tree. This way I'll never take such a gift for granted."

Emilia's voice roused **Clara** from her reveries. "**Negraaaaa**," she called, sticking her head through the door. "Hurry up, child. I heard the car down the road."

Hastily, **Clara** stepped out of the tub, dried herself, and still half-wet, slipped into her favorite dress. It was yellow with embroidered daisies around the collar, the sleeves, and the waistband.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she giggled. The dress made her look even darker, but she liked it.

She had no doubt that her cousin **Luisito** would like it, too. He was to spend the whole summer at **El Rincón**. She had never met him: Last summer his parents had taken him to Europe.

Upon hearing the sound of an engine, **Clara** rushed along the corridor to the living room just in time to see from the open window a shiny black limousine pull up the driveway.

Amazed, she watched the uniformed chauffeur and a corpulent woman dressed in a white smock alight from the car.

Somber faced, they unloaded an endless number of suitcases, boxes, baskets, and bird cages.

Silently, they carried everything inside, disdaining **Emilia's** help when she ran out to give them a hand.

Before they were quite done, a loud, uninterrupted honking echoed down the road. Within moments a second car, just as large, black, and shiny as the first one, pulled up.

A short fat man, dressed in a beige **guayabera**, a Panama hat, and dark pants stuffed into boots that creaked with newness, moved out from behind the steering wheel.

Clara knew it was **Raul**; a very important man in the government and her grandfather's son-in-law.

"Don **Luis!**" **Raul** shouted. "I've brought your daughters; the Three Graces!"

He bowed low, almost sweeping the ground with his hat, then opened the back door of the limousine and held out his hand to help three women out of the car: the twins, Maria **del** Rosario and Maria **del** Carmen; and the youngest sister, Maria **Magdalena**, **Raul's** wife.

"**Luisito**," **Raul** called, opening the car's front door. "Let me help you with those..."

Clara, not waiting to hear the rest of his words, rushed outside.

"**Luisito!** I've been looking forward--" She came to a dead halt.

Bewildered, **Clara** stared at the little boy holding on to a pair of

crutches. "I **didn't** know you had an accident."

Glowing, **Luisito** looked into her dark face. "I **didn't** have an accident," he said matter-of-factly.

For being so slight and frail, he had a booming voice. "I had poliomyelitis," he explained, and noticing her uncomprehending expression, he added, "I'm a cripple."

"A cripple?" she repeated with a quizzical, yet calm, acceptance. "No one told me."

His little white hands and dark curls framing his pale, delicately featured face made her think of something unworldly. He reminded her of the blossoms on the apple tree.

She knew him to be thirteen, a year older than she, but to look at him one would think he was seven or eight.

His lips turned up at the corners, twitching, as if he had guessed her thoughts, and was suppressing his laughter.

"**Oh, Luisito.**" She sighed with relief and bent to kiss his cheek. "You look like an angel."

"Who is she?" one of the twins asked, turning to **Emilia**. "Did you find someone to help you in the kitchen? Is she a relative of yours?"

"I'm **Clara!**" the child retorted, planting herself between the housekeeper and the aunt. "**La Negra Clara**, your niece!"

"My what?" the woman shrieked, grabbing **Clara** by the arm and shaking her.

"**Negrita, Clarita**," the boy cried excitedly. With the aid of only one crutch he limped toward her.

"**Didn't** you hear, Aunt Maria **del** Rosario? She's my cousin!" Taking **Clara's** hand, he pulled her away from his startled parents and his aunts. "Let's see what's keeping Grandfather."

Before **Clara** could explain that Grandfather was in town, **Luisito** had turned to the wide gravel path that led to the orchard behind the house. He maneuvered his crutches so swiftly and skillfully, he made her think of a monkey rather than a cripple.

"**Luisito!**" Maria **del** Rosario called after him. "You have to rest after the long, tiring drive. It's too hot to be outdoors."

"Leave him alone," **Raul** said, ushering the three women inside. "The fresh air will do him good."

"Where is Grandfather?" **Luisito** asked, easing himself to the ground under the shade of the mango tree growing by the wall.

"In town," **Clara** said, sitting beside him. She was glad she had not accompanied her grandfather on his rounds as usual.

She liked going with him to the barber shop, to the pharmacy where he bought the latest medicines which he never took, and to the bar where he had a glass of brandy and played a game of dominoes.

But today, she **wouldn't** have missed **Luisito's** arrival for anything in the world.

"Let's surprise Grandfather. He **didn't** expect you until late in the afternoon," **Clara** suggested. "Let's go into town without telling anybody."

"I can't walk that far." **Luisito** lowered his head and slowly pushed his crutches away.

Clara sucked in her lower lip. "We'll make it," she declared with fierce determination. "I'll push you in the wheelbarrow. I'm good at that."

She held her hand over his lips to stop him from interrupting her. "All you have to do is slide into the wheelbarrow and sit."

She pointed to the narrow arched doorway in the wall. "I'll meet you there."

She gave him no time to voice any objections but rose and ran to the tool shed halfway down the slope.

"You see how easy it was." **Clara** laughed and helped him into the wheelbarrow. "No one will know where we are." She placed the crutches on his lap, then pushed him along the wide, newly paved road, past factories, and still, empty stretches of land.

Sighing heavily, she brought the wheelbarrow to an abrupt halt. The heat made the landscape waver in the distance. The shimmering light hurt her eyes.

Her grandmother, although tiny and skinny, had certainly weighed more than **Luisito**, she thought, yet **Clara** didn't recall having had such a hard time pushing her about as she did now with her cousin.

"It'll take forever to get into town on this road," she declared, wiping the dust and perspiration off her face with the back of her hand. "Hold on tight, **Luisito**!" she cried out, steering the wheelbarrow down an empty field, green with weeds from the recent rains.

"You're a genius," the boy said laughing. "This is better than anything!"

"You make me feel very happy; and happiness is what makes people healthy. I know it because I'm a cripple."

Excitedly, he pointed one of his crutches skyward. "Look, **Clara**. Look at those vultures above us. They are so powerful, so free."

He grabbed her arm. "Look at them! Look at their open black wings, how their legs stretch out beneath their tails. Look at their fierce beaks dripping blood. I'll bet you they're happy, too."

"The slaughterhouse is nearby," **Clara** explained.

"Push me to that pack of vultures on the ground," he begged, pointing to a place where the birds had settled like black shadows at the other side of the slaughterhouse.

"Faster, **Clara**!" he yelled. "Faster!"

The vultures hopped aside, then lifted lazily into the air and flew low in ever tightening circles before descending again a bit farther away.

Watching his flushed face, his eyes shiny with excitement, **Clara** knew that she was making him happy.

For a moment, her attention strayed from the uneven terrain, and she failed to maneuver the wheelbarrow around a large stone.

Luisito fell forward amid a clump of tall grass. He lay so still he looked dead.

"**Luisito**," **Clara** called anxiously, kneeling beside him. He didn't respond.

Carefully, she turned him around. Blood trickled from a cut on his forehead, and the weeds had scratched his cheeks.

His lids fluttered open. His eyes, round and puzzled, looked up into hers.

"You're wounded," she said. Taking his hand, she pressed it against his forehead, then showed him his bloodstained fingers.

He looked so happy, so pleased with himself that she laughed.

"Let's see if you're injured anyplace else," she said. "What about your leg?"

He sat up, then lifted his pant leg and said, "The braces are fine. If the braces ever get twisted, my father knows how to adjust them."

"But what about your leg?" she insisted. "Is it all right?"

Luisito shook his head sadly. "It will never be all right," he declared and swiftly pushed down his pants.

He explained to her what poliomyelitis was. "I've been to many doctors," he continued. "Father has taken me to the United States and to Europe, but I will always be a cripple."

He shouted the word so many times he became exhausted by his effort, and broke into a fit of coughing.

He looked at her sheepishly. "I'll go with you anywhere you want me to," he said, pressing his head against her shoulder. "**Clara**, are you really my cousin?"

"Do you think I'm too dark to be your cousin?" she retorted.

"No," he replied thoughtfully. "You're too nice to be my cousin."

"You're the only one who doesn't make fun of me or look at me with pity and disdain."

He pulled out a white handkerchief from his pocket, folded it into a triangle, then rolled it and fastened it around his forehead. "This will be the best summer I've ever had," he said happily. "Come on, cousin, let's find Grandfather."

Before opening the dining room door, **Clara** brushed a few loose strands of hair behind her ears: Since the aunts' arrival from **Caracas**, her grandfather and she no longer had breakfast in the kitchen.

Maria del Rosario sat at the far end of the table, arranging flowers in a vase, tweaking them here and there with impatient gestures.

Maria del Carmen, with her head buried in her missal, sat silently beside her sister.

Luisito's parents, who had only stayed for a few days at **El Rincón**, had left for Europe.

"Good morning," **Clara** mumbled, taking her seat at the long mahogany table next to **Luisito**.

Don **Luis** looked up from his plate, and winked at her impishly.

He was trying to provoke the twins; he went on dunking his roll in his coffee, slurping noisily: They never ate before going to mass.

From over the rim of her hot-chocolate cup, **Clara** stole a glance at the disapproving faces of the twins.

They no longer bore any resemblance to the oil paintings of the young beautiful girls hanging in the living room. With their sallow complexions, their sunken cheeks, and their dark hair pulled back in a small bun, they reminded her of the embittered nuns that taught catechism at school.

Of the two, **Maria del** Rosario was the most difficult. **Clara** felt anxious and uneasy in her presence.

Maria del Rosario had the nervous eyes of a person who does not sleep; eyes of impatience and alarm; eyes that were always watching and judging. She was only agreeable when she had her own way.

One hardly noticed **Maria del** Carmen, on the other hand. Her heavy-lidded eyes seemed to be weighed down by some ancestral tiredness. She walked with noiseless steps and spoke in a voice so soft it seemed as though she was only moving her lips.

Maria del Rosario's sharp voice intruded on **Clara's** musings.

"Won't you convince **Luisito** that you two should go with us to mass

this Sunday, **Clara**?" she addressed the child as if speaking to her was against her better judgment.

"No. She won't," **Luisito** answered for her. "We'll go in the evening with **Emilia**."

Clara stuffed a fritter into her mouth to hide her smile.

She knew Maria **del** Rosario would not insist. She hated scenes on Sunday, and there was no one like **Luisito** to get his way.

Aside from his grandfather, **Luisito** never heeded anyone's advice.

He used and abused the terror he inspired by his rages whenever his aunts tried to oppose his wishes; rages expressed in such frantic banging of his crutches against any object in front of him, obscene gestures, and foul language that it put the women on the verge of fainting.

"**Clara**, finish your breakfast," Maria **del** Rosario ordered. "The maid wants to clear everything away before we leave. She, too, wants to go to church."

Clara gulped down the rest of her hot chocolate and handed the cup to the tall, grave-looking woman the twins had brought with them from **Caracas**. She was from the Canary Islands and had taken over the running of the house.

Emilia was not in the least upset, for all she had to do now was to prepare don **Luis**' food. He absolutely refused to eat the vegetarian dishes the aunts were so partial to.

"Not even dogs would eat this food," he would say each time they all sat down for a meal.

Clara wasn't particularly fond of vegetarian dishes either, but she thought it the height of elegance when Maria **del** Rosario had the chauffeur drive her each morning to the fields of the Portuguese farmers, so that she could pick the vegetables for that day's meal, and pay twice as much as **Emilia** would at the open market on Saturdays.

The instant **Clara** heard the light tap of **Luisito**'s crutches coming down the corridor, she climbed out the window and ran halfway down the terraced slope to the mango tree growing by the wall.

Unconcerned about her yellow dress getting dirty, she stretched full length on the ground, and kicked off her shoes.

Unable to find a comfortable position she turned this way and that. She felt her blood hammering in her temples, in her breasts, in her thighs. It filled her with a strange desire she **didn't** understand.

She sat up abruptly upon hearing **Luisito** approach.

"Why **didn't** you answer?" he asked, easing himself down beside her. He placed the crutches within reach and added, "They have all gone to mass, including Grandfather."

Smiling, she searched his face with tender admiration. He had a dreamy, soft-edged look, sweet, yet daring.

She wanted to tell him so many things, but she could not express any of them. "Kiss me the way they do in the movies," she demanded.

"Yes," he whispered, and that one word answered all her turmoil, that strange desire she **didn't** understand. "**Oh, Negrito**," he mumbled, burying his face in her neck. She smelled of the earth and the sun.

Her lips moved, but there was no sound. Wide-eyed, she watched him open his pants. She **couldn't** shift her gaze away.

His face shone down on her with glowing animation: His eyes seemed to melt between his long lashes. Carefully, so his steel braces would not

hurt her, he eased himself on top of her.

"We'll stay together forever," **Luisito** said. "I've convinced my parents that I'll be happier at **El Rincón**. They are going to send a tutor out here."

Clara closed her eyes. In the last three months her love for **Luisito** had taken on monumental proportions. Daily they lay together in the shade of the mango tree.

"Yes," she whispered. "We'll stay together forever." She wrapped her arms around him.

She **didn't** know what she heard first: **Luisito**'s muffled sigh or Maria **del** Rosario's horrified scream.

The aunt shrieked. She moved closer and, lowering her voice, said, "**Luisito**, you are a disgrace to the family. What you have done is unspeakable."

Her hard, implacable eyes never wavered for an instant from the red and white blossoms hanging over the wall.

"And as for you, **Clara**," she went on, "your behavior comes as no surprise. No doubt you'll end up in the gutter, where you belong."

She hurried up the steps. At the top, she halted. "We'll be returning to **Caracas** this very day, **Luis**. And don't pull any of your tantrums. It won't work this time. No obscene gesture, no foul language, could be worse than what you have done."

Luisito began to cry.

Clara took his pale face in her hands and wiped the tears from his lashes with her fingers. "We'll love each other forever. We'll always be together," she said, and then she let him go.

Clara watched the evening shadows darken everything around her. Through a veil of tears she gazed up at the tree above her.

The leaves, outlined against the starlit sky, took on unexpected forms, shapes she did not quite recognize.

A swift breeze erased the patterns. All that remained was the sound of the wind; a desolate cry, bringing an end to the summer.

"**Clara**," her grandfather called.

Torn between remorse and anxiety, she **didn't** answer.

The light shimmering among the fruit trees **didn't** waver. The certainty that her grandfather would wait for her, even if it took her the whole night to answer, filled her with gratitude.

Slowly, she rose and brushed the leaves and the dampness from her dress. "Grandfather," she called softly, climbing the steps toward the light, and the love and understanding that awaited her.

"Let's look at the apple tree," don **Luis** said. "Perhaps it'll bloom again next summer."

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Chapter 28

Two weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, dona **Mercedes** announced that she had to go to **El Rincón**.

"Has **Clara** taken ill again?" I asked, alarmed.

"No," dona **Mercedes** said, rising from the hammock in her bedroom. "I want to make sure she follows my instructions: She's a willful patient."

Dona **Mercedes** rested her hands on my shoulders. "Today, you and I will help **Clara**. Together we'll move the wheel of chance for her."

She turned to the blue and pink painted wardrobe that blocked the door facing the street, and fumbled with the key.

Before unlocking it, she looked back at me and said, "Gather all your clothes and put them in your jeep."

"Seeing that you're packed, **Clara** will think you are leaving for **Caracas**. She may decide to take advantage of the ride."

"In the depths of her, she knows that she will be well only if she leaves **El Rincón**."

I was really surprised at the scarcity of my belongings. I had brought much more, but then I remembered that I had given away most of what I had to some of **Agustín**'s young patients.

"**Clara**'s story is a sort of bonus to you," dona **Mercedes** said as she helped me put my bag in the jeep. "At least I **didn't** expect it."

"It came out of nowhere, but it's very appropriate."

"I encouraged you to talk to **Clara** and to spend time with her. Under her shadow, I'm sure you have felt the turns of the wheel of chance in her life."

"She's another person with a natural gift; a natural control over the witch's shadow."

Definitely, **Clara** was a very strong person. I felt that her emotional conflicts made her rather somber: She seemed, at least to me, always preoccupied; reflecting on something unsaid.

Dona **Mercedes** agreed with my assessment of **Clara**, and added that **Clara** needed our combined help.

"Let me put it this way," she said.

"**Clara** is so strong that she has now engaged your witch's shadow and mine to move the wheel of chance for her."

"What is the meaning of that, dona **Mercedes**?"

"It means that you and I are going to help her leave, not so much because we're good **Samaritans**, but because she is forcing us to do it."

There was a strong compulsion in me to disagree with her or, rather, to set the record straight.

"Nobody is forcing me to do anything," I said.

Dona **Mercedes** peered at me quizzically, her glance half-pitying, half-mocking: Then she lifted my bag, and gently placed it on the back seat.

"You mean to say you **wouldn't** move a finger to help her?" she asked in a whisper.

"No. I **didn't** say that. I merely said that **Clara** is not forcing me at all. I'd gladly do it all by myself without her asking me."

"**Ah**, there is the link. **Clara** forces us without saying a word."

"Neither you nor I could remain impassive. In one way or another, we have been under her shadow too long."

Through the **rearview** mirror I could still see **Candelaria**, a hazy lonely figure waving farewell. She had fastened a yellow, blue, and red plastic pinwheel to the jeep's antenna. It whirled noisily in the wind.

"Do you think **Candelaria** wanted to come with us to **Caracas**?" I asked dona **Mercedes**.

"No," she mumbled: Dona **Mercedes** had already settled in her seat to doze. "**Candelaria** hates **Caracas**. She always gets a headache the moment she reaches the outskirts of the capital."

As soon as I brought the jeep to a full stop in front of **El Rincón**, dona **Mercedes**, not waiting for me to help her out, alighted from the car, and dashed into the house.

Swiftly, I caught up with her, and followed her toward the swishing sound of a broom.

It was **Clara** cleaning the patio.

She looked up. She smiled but did not speak to us.

She seemed to be sweeping the silence and the shadows, for there **wasn't** a single leaf on the ground.

Dona **Mercedes** lit two candles on the stone ledge circling the fountain.

She closed her eyes and waited for **Clara** to finish.

"I did all you told me to do," **Clara** said, sitting between the two lit candles.

Dona **Mercedes** did not look at her but began to sniff the air, trying to identify some elusive scent.

"Listen carefully, **Clara**," she said shortly. "The only thing that will keep you well is to leave this house."

"Why should I leave it?" **Clara** asked, alarmed. "Grandfather left it to me. He wanted me to stay here."

"He wanted you to have the house," dona **Mercedes** corrected her. "He did not want you to stay here. Don't you remember he said that to you before he died?"

Seemingly indifferent to **Clara**'s mounting agitation, dona **Mercedes** lit a cigar.

She smoked with slow, even puffs and began to massage **Clara**'s head and shoulders.

She blew the smoke around her, as if she were outlining her form against the air.

"This house is inhabited by ghosts and memories that don't belong to you, **Clara**," she went on. "You were only a guest in this house."

"You ruled this place from the moment you arrived because you had luck and strength. These two forces were disguised in you as affection and a great ease with people."

"But there's no one here anymore. It's time to leave."

"Only ghosts remain here: Ghosts and shadows that don't belong to you."

"But what can I do?" **Clara** asked tearfully.

"Go to **Caracas**!" dona **Mercedes** exclaimed. "Go and live with **Luisito**!"

"Really, dona **Mercedes**!" **Clara** retorted indignantly. "How can you suggest such a thing. It's downright indecent."

Dona **Mercedes** replied, "You sound like your aunts," and she regarded **Clara** cheerfully; then flung her head back and laughed. "Don't be an ass, **Clara**."

"What's indecent is to pretend to be prudish. Have you forgotten what you and **Luisito** have been doing since you were twelve years old?"

Clara remained silent, seemingly lost in thought. "I can't be rushed into a decision." She smiled, tracing the cement cracks on the ground

with her toes. "I can't just leave all this."

"You can if you have guts," dona **Mercedes** said. "The **musiua** here is also leaving today. We will take you to **Luisito**."

"And what about **Emilia**?" **Clara** asked.

Dona **Mercedes** replied, "**Emilia** will be happy with your aunts."

"Your aunts have been wanting to come back to **El Rinc n** for a long time. This place holds all their memories; all their feelings."

"Here, the three women can set back the clock to an ideal time that never was. The shadows of the past will dim the present, and erase their frustrations."

Dona **Mercedes** was silent for an instant, then she took **Clara**'s hands in hers, perhaps to communicate the urgency of her words. "Put on your yellow dress. Yellow suits you. It'll give you strength."

"Change quickly. You need nothing else."

"When you came to **El Rinc n** you had only one dress; you should leave the same way."

Seeing **Clara**'s hesitation, Dona **Mercedes** pressed her point. "This is your last chance, girl."

"I've already told the **musiua** that the only way for you to keep well is to love **Luisito** with abandon and completeness, as you did when you were a child."

Clara's large eyes, bright with tears, closed in a hurt blink. "But I love him," she murmured. "You know that I have never loved anyone but him."

Dona **Mercedes** regarded her thoughtfully. "True," she admitted and, turning toward me, added, "She had dozens of rich suitors."

"She still does, and she still gets a malicious pleasure disappointing them. She's escaped from more sure engagements than I care to remember."

Clara's laughter rang out loud. She put her arm around dona **Mercedes**' shoulders and brushed her lips across her cheek.

"You always exaggerate everything," she said, her tone betraying how delighted she was. "But in spite of all my admirers, I never loved anyone but **Luisito**."

Dona **Mercedes** took her arm and guided her toward her room. "You have to love **Luisito** in the world the way you love him within the crumbling walls of **El Rinc n**."

She pushed **Clara** inside, and said, "Go on and put on your yellow dress. We'll be waiting for you in the jeep."

Clara's description of **Luisito** had not prepared me for the astonishingly handsome man who greeted us at his apartment door in **Caracas**.

I knew that he was in his late twenties, but he looked like a teenager with black curly hair, green-yellow eyes, and smooth white skin.

When he smiled, his cheeks dimpled.

In spite of his pronounced limp, there was nothing awkward about his movements.

His engaging personality and his self-sufficient manner did not allow for pity.

Luisito was not in the least surprised to see us; and when he served us a sumptuous meal, I knew that dona **Mercedes** had arranged things beforehand.

We stayed until late: It was an unforgettable night.

I had never seen dona **Mercedes** in such an expansive mood.

Her flawless mimicry of the people we all knew in **Curmina**, her knack for recalling the most absurd situations, her talent for dramatizing them, and her shameless exaggerations turned her anecdotes into memorable tales.

It was shortly before midnight when, declining **Luisito**'s invitation to stay for the night, **Mercedes Peralta** rose and embraced both **Clara** and **Luisito** at the same time.

Then, with her arms wide open, she approached me with an exuberant gesture of affection.

I said, "Don't embrace me like that. You're not saying good-bye to me, too. I'm going back with you."

I laughed and returned her embrace.

I reached for the ignition. Wrapped around my keys was a chain.

With trembling fingers I untangled it. It was a long gold chain with a huge medal hanging from it.

"You better wear it," dona **Mercedes** said, looking at me. "It's Saint **Christopher**, the remarkable patron saint of travelers."

A sigh of contentment escaped her lips as she settled back in her seat. "You'll be well protected. After all, you're a traveler who has stopped only for a moment."

Instead of heading for **Curmina**, dona **Mercedes** directed me along specific streets; clear across town.

I had the feeling we had been driving in circles, when she finally made me stop in front of an old, green colonial house.

"Who lives here?" I asked.

"My ancestors lived here," she replied. "It's their house. And I am just a leaf of an enormous tree."

She looked at me so intently she seemed to be imprinting my face in the depths of her eyes.

Leaning closer, she whispered in my ear. "A witch has to have luck and strength to move the wheel of chance."

"Strength can be groomed, but luck cannot be beckoned: It cannot be enticed. Luck, independent of witchcraft or human arrangements, makes its own choice."

She ran her fingers through my hair and over my face, feeling rather than seeing me, then added, "That's why witches are so attracted to it."

I was filled with an odd premonition.

I looked at her questioning, but she reached for her basket and pulled out a reddish brown leaf shaped like a butterfly.

"Look at it carefully," she said, handing me the leaf. "The spirits of my ancestors told me to always carry a dry leaf."

"I am this leaf, and I want you to throw it through that window."

She pointed to the house in front of us. "As you throw it, recite an incantation. I want to know how powerful your incantations are."

Willing to humor her, I examined the leaf from every angle, turning it over and over. I surveyed its surface and searched its depths.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"Throw it through the window," she repeated.

I climbed up the wrought-iron grill, pushed the heavy curtain aside, and threw the leaf inside as an incantation flowed out of me.

Instead of falling to the ground, the leaf fluttered upward toward the

corner by the ceiling like a moth.

Alarmed, I jumped down.

Mercedes Peralta was no longer in the jeep. Certain that she had gone into the house, I knocked softly on the door.

It was open. "Dona **Mercedes**," I whispered and stepped inside.

The house, built around a patio and shadowy corridors, was like a silent dark cloister.

Long rain gutters dropped from the dark roof, and metal rings dangled from the ancient protruding eaves.

I walked to the center of the patio, toward a weeping willow shrouded in mist.

Like phantom beads, the tiny silvery dew-drops on its leaves slid soundlessly into the fountain beneath.

A gust of air shook the willow tree, scattering fresh dry leaves all around me.

Gripped by an irrational fear, I ran out into the street.

I sat in my jeep determined to wait for **Mercedes Peralta**. I reached under my seat for a box of tissue paper and felt my camera and tape recorder.

Puzzled, I turned around: I had no recollection of packing anything but my clothes.

To my utter astonishment, I discovered a box on the backseat. It contained my tapes and my diaries.

Stuck to the box was an unsigned note.

I recognized **Candelaria**'s bold handwriting.

It read, "A witch's farewell is like dust from the road; it sinks in as one tries to slough it off."

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[Florinda Donner-Grau](#) - The Witch's Dream: Epilogue

Version 2007.03.04

The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge - 1985 by [Florinda](#)

[Donner-Grau](#)

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Epilogue

I returned to [Los Angeles](#), and then I went to Mexico to face

[Florinda](#).

Upon hearing a detailed summary of my experiences, she found it quite extraordinary and inexplicable that my life in dona **Mercedes**' world began with her own handwritten note, hidden among my clothes, and ended with **Candelaria**'s, hidden among my tapes.

Although **Florinda** made fun of what she called my compulsive thoroughness, she urged me to see if I could use my numerous tapes to write my dissertation.

Working with the material, I became aware that in spite of the fact that I had had no theoretical plan to organize my objectives, the events in dona **Mercedes**' house seemed prearranged to introduce me to spiritualists, witches, healers; and the people they deal with; and what they do in the context of their daily activities.

Having followed dona **Mercedes**' activities in healing, and having learned to use her own system of interpretation, I sincerely believed that I had mastered, at least intellectually, the way healers see themselves, each other, and their knowledge.

I was certain that my experience and the notes I had collected would suffice to write a dissertation.

However, after transcribing, translating, and analyzing my tapes and notes, I began to doubt my intellectual mastery of healing.

My attempt to organize the data to fit a meaningful framework proved to be futile: My notes were riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, and my knowledge of healing could not fill in the gaps.

Florinda then made a cynical suggestion: Either alter the data to fit my theories, or forget about the dissertation altogether.

I forgot about the dissertation.

Florinda has always urged that I look beneath the surface of things.

In the case of my experience with dona **Mercedes**, she suggested that I look deeper than the possible academic value. She thought my academic bias blinded me to more important aspects.

I read and reread the stories dona **Mercedes** had selected for me and finally understood what **Florinda** wanted.

I realized that if I removed the academic emphasis from my own work, I would be left with a document about human values- human values definitely foreign to us, yet perfectly understandable, if we momentarily placed ourselves outside our usual frame of reference.

With those stories, dona **Mercedes** proposed to show me that witches, or even ordinary people, are capable of using extraordinary forces that exist in the universe to alter the course of events, or the course of their lives, or the lives of other people.

The course of events, she called 'the wheel of chance,' and the process of affecting it, she called 'the witch's shadow.'

She claimed that we can alter anything without directly intruding upon the process; and sometimes without even knowing that we are doing so.

For Westerners, this is an unthinkable proposition.

If we find ourselves affecting the course of events without directly intruding upon them, we think of coincidence as the only serious explanation; for we believe that direct intervention is the only way of altering anything.

For example, men of history affected events with complex social decisions.

Or in a more reduced scope, people directly intervene through their actions in the lives of others.

In contrast, the stories selected by dona **Mercedes** make us aware of something that we are not familiar with.

The stories point to the incomprehensible possibility that without direct mediating, we can be more influential than we think in shaping the course of events.

On the whole, **Florinda** was satisfied with the results of my journey to Venezuela.

She said that she had wanted me to get firsthand knowledge of my hidden resources.

Her idea was that I had to function effectively in an environment unknown to me, and that I had to learn to adapt quickly to situations outside the boundaries of what I know, accept, and can predict.

Florinda maintained that nothing could be more appropriate for bringing out those hidden resources than a confrontation with the social

unknown.

My life in dona **Mercedes'** house, and my interaction with her patients and friends was that social unknown.

I admitted to **Florinda** that her admonitions about the woman-warrior philosophy- which were quite incomprehensible to me at the time- actually became the basis for all my acts while I stayed with dona **Mercedes**.

"There are many ways of behaving when one is in a normal setting," **Florinda** commented, "but when one is alone, in danger, or in darkness, there is only one way: the warrior's way."

Florinda said that I had discovered the value of the warrior's way and the meaning of all its premises.

Under the impact of an unfamiliar life situation, I had found out:..

.. that not surrendering means freedom;..

.. that not feeling self-important breeds an indomitable fierceness;..

.. and that vanquishing moral judgments brings an all-soothing humbleness that is not servitude.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Author's Note

Version 2007.03.05

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Author's Note

My first contact with the sorcerers' world was not something I planned or sought out: It was rather a fortuitous event.

I met a group of people in northern Mexico, in July of 1970, and they turned out to be the strict followers of a sorcerers' tradition belonging to the Indians of **pre**-Columbian Mexico.

That first meeting had a long-range, overpowering effect on me.

It introduced me to another world that coexists with ours.

I have spent twenty years of my life committed to that world.

This is the account of how my involvement began, and how it was spurred and directed by the sorcerers who were responsible for my being there.

The most prominent of them was a woman named **Florinda Matus**. She was my mentor and guide. She was also the one who gave me her name, **Florinda**, as a gift of love and power.

To call them sorcerers is not my choice.

Brujo or **bruja**, which mean sorcerer or witch, are the Spanish terms they themselves use to denote a male or a female practitioner.

I have always resented the negative connotation of those words, but the sorcerers themselves put me at ease, once and for all by explaining that what is meant by sorcery is something quite abstract; the ability,

which some people develop, to expand the limits of normal perception.

The abstract quality of sorcery voids automatically, then, any positive or negative connotation of terms used to describe its practitioners.

Expanding the limits of normal perception is a concept that stems from the sorcerers' belief that our choices in life are limited, due to the fact that they are defined by the social order.

Sorcerers believe that the social order sets up our lists of options, but we do the rest: By accepting only these choices, we set a limit to our nearly limitless possibilities.

This limitation, they say, fortunately applies only to our social side and not to the other side of us; a practically inaccessible side, which is not in the realm of ordinary awareness.

Their main endeavor, therefore, is to uncover that side.

They do this by breaking the frail, yet resilient, shield of human assumptions about what we are and what we are capable of being.

Sorcerers acknowledge that in our world of daily affairs there are people who probe into the unknown in pursuit of alternative views of reality.

The sorcerers contend that the ideal consequences of such **probings** should be the capacity to draw from our findings the necessary energy to change, and to detach ourselves from our definition of reality.

But the sorcerers argue that unfortunately such **probings** are essentially mental endeavors: New thoughts and new ideas hardly ever change us.

One of the things I learned in the sorcerers' world was that without retreating from the world, and without injuring themselves in the process, sorcerers do accomplish the magnificent task of breaking the agreement that has defined reality.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 1

Version 2007.03.05

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 1

On an impulse after attending the baptism of a friend's child in the city of **Nogales, Arizona**, I decided to cross the border into Mexico.

As I was leaving my friend's house, one of her guests, a woman named **Delia Flores**, asked me for a ride to **Hermosillo**.

She was a dark-complexioned woman, perhaps in her mid-forties, of medium height and stout build.

She was powerfully big, with straight black hair arranged into a thick braid.

Her dark, shiny eyes highlighted a shrewd, yet slightly girlish, round face.

Certain that she was a Mexican born in **Arizona**, I asked her if she needed a tourist card to enter Mexico.

"Why should I need a tourist card to enter my own country?" she retorted, widening her eyes with exaggerated surprise.

"Your mannerism and speech inflection made me think you were from **Arizona**," I said.

"My parents were Indians from **Oaxaca**," she explained, "but I am a

ladina."

"What's a **ladina**?"

"Ladinos are sharp Indians who grow up in the city," she elucidated. There was an odd excitement in her voice.

I was at a loss to understand as she added, "They take up the ways of the white man, and they are so good at it that they can fake their way into anything."

"That's nothing to be proud of," I said **judgingly**. "It's certainly not too complimentary to you, **Mrs. Flores**."

The contrite expression on her face gave way to a wide grin:

"Perhaps not to a real Indian or to a real white man," she said cheekily, "but I am perfectly satisfied with it myself."

She leaned toward me, and added, "Do call me **Delia**. I've the feeling we're going to be great friends."

Not knowing what to say, I concentrated on the road.

We drove in silence to the check point.

The guard asked for my tourist card, but **didn't** ask for **Delia**'s. He **didn't** seem to notice her- no words or glances were exchanged between them.

When I tried to talk to **Delia**, she forcefully stopped me with an imperious movement of her hand.

Then the guard looked at me questioningly. Since I **didn't** say anything, he shrugged his shoulders and waved me on.

"How come the guard **didn't** ask for your papers?" I asked when we were some distance away.

"**Oh**, he knows me," she lied, and knowing that I knew she was lying, she burst into a shameless laughter.

"I think I frightened him, and he **didn't** dare to talk to me," she lied again.

And again she laughed.

I decided to change the subject, if only to save her from escalating her lies.

I began to talk about topics of current interest in the news; but mostly we drove in silence.

It was not an uncomfortable or strained silence. It was like the desert around us; wide and stark, and oddly reassuring.

"Where shall I drop you?" I asked as we drove into **Hermosillo**.

"Downtown," she said. "I always stay in the same hotel when I'm in the city."

"I know the owners well, and I'm sure I can arrange for you to get the same rate I get."

I gratefully accepted her offer.

The hotel was old and run down.

The room I was given opened to a dusty courtyard.

A double, four-poster bed and a massive, old-fashioned dresser shrunk the room to claustrophobic dimensions.

A small bathroom had been added, but a chamber pot was still under the bed: It matched the porcelain washing set on the dresser.

The first night was awful.

I slept fitfully, and in my dreams I was conscious of whispers and shadows moving across the walls.

Shapes of things, and monstrous animals rose from behind the

furniture.

People materialized from the corners; pale, ghostlike.

The next day I drove around the city and its surroundings; and that night, although I was exhausted, I stayed awake.

When I finally fell asleep into a hideous nightmare, I saw a dark, amoeba-shaped creature stalking me at the foot of the bed.

Iridescent tentacles hung from its cavernous crevices.

As the creature leaned over me, it breathed, making short, raspy sounds that died out into a wheeze.

My screams were smothered by its iridescent ropes tightening around my neck.

Then all went black as the creature- which somehow I knew to be female- crushed me by lying on top of me.

That timeless moment between sleep and wakefulness was finally broken by the insistent banging on my door, and the concerned voices of the hotel guests out in the hall.

I turned on the light, and mumbled some apologies and explanations through the door.

With the nightmare still sticking to my skin like sweat, I went into the bathroom.

I stifled a scream as I looked into the mirror: The red lines across my throat and the evenly spaced red dots running down my chest looked like an unfinished tattoo.

Frantically, I packed my bags. It was three o'clock in the morning when I walked out into the deserted lobby to pay my bill.

"Where are you going at this hour?" **Delia Flores** asked, emerging from the door behind the desk:

"I heard about your nightmare. You had the whole hotel worried."

I was so glad to see her I put my arms around her, and began to sob.

"There, there," she murmured soothingly, stroking my hair:

"If you want to, you can come and sleep in my room. I'll watch over you."

"Nothing in this world will make me stay in this hotel," I said. "I'm returning to **Los Angeles** this very instant."

"Do you often have nightmares?" she casually asked, leading me toward the creaky old couch in the corner.

"Off and on," I said. "I've suffered from nightmares all my life. I've gotten sort of used to them."

"But tonight it was different: It was the most real, the worst nightmare I've ever had."

She gave me an appraising, long look and then slowly dragging her words said, "Would you like to get rid of your nightmares?"

As she spoke, she gave a half glance over her shoulder toward the door, as if afraid that someone might be listening there. "I know someone who could truly help you."

"I would like that very much," I whispered, untying the scarf around my neck to show her the red marks.

I told her the explicit details of my nightmare.

I asked, "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

"Looks pretty serious," she pronounced, carefully examining the lines across my throat. "You really **shouldn't** leave before seeing the healer I have in mind."

"She lives about a hundred miles south of here; about a two-hour ride."

The possibility of seeing a healer was most welcome to me: I had been exposed to them since birth in Venezuela.

Whenever I was sick, my parents called a doctor, and as soon as he left, our Venezuelan housekeeper would bundle me up and take me to a healer.

As I grew older and no longer wanted to be treated by a **witchdoctor**- none of my friends were- she convinced me that it **couldn't** possibly do any harm to be twice protected.

The habit was so ingrained in me that, when I moved to **Los Angeles**, I made sure to see a doctor as well as a healer whenever I was ill.

"Do you think she will see me today?" I asked.

Seeing her uncomprehending expression, I reminded her that it was already Sunday.

"She'll see you any day," **Delia** assured me. "Why don't you just wait for me here, and I'll take you to her. It won't take me but a minute to get my belongings together."

"Why would you go out of your way to help me?" I asked, suddenly disconcerted by her offer. "After all, I'm a perfect stranger to you."

"Precisely!" she exclaimed, rising from the couch.

She gazed down at me indulgently, as though she could sense the nagging doubts rising within me.

"What better reason could there be?" she asked rhetorically.

"To help a perfect stranger is an act of folly or one of great control.

"Mine is one of great control."

At a loss for words, all I could do was to stare into her eyes, which seemed to accept the world with wonder and curiosity.

There was something strangely reassuring about her.

It was not only that I trusted her, but I felt as if I had known her all my life: I sensed a link between us; a closeness.

And yet, as I watched her disappear behind the door to get her belongings, I considered grabbing my bags and bolting for the car.

I **didn't** want to end up in a predicament by being daring as I had so many times before.

But some inexplicable curiosity held me back despite the familiar nagging feeling of alarm.

I had waited for nearly twenty minutes when a woman, wearing a red pantsuit and platform shoes, stepped out of the door behind the clerk's desk.

She paused underneath the light.

With a studied gesture, she threw her head back so that the curls of her blond wig shimmered in the light.

"You **didn't** recognize me, did you?" she laughed gleefully.

"It's really you, **Delia**," I exclaimed, staring at her, open-mouthed.

"What do you think?" Still cackling, she stepped out with me onto the sidewalk toward my car parked in front of the hotel.

She flung her basket and duffel bag in the back seat of my small convertible, then sat beside me.

Delia said, "The healer I'm taking you to see says that only the young and the very old can afford to look outrageous."

Before I had a chance to remind her that she was neither, she

confided that she was much older than she appeared to be.

Her face was radiant as she turned toward me and exclaimed, "I wear this outfit because I like to dazzle my friends!"

Whether she meant me or the healer, she **didn't** say: I certainly was dazzled.

It **wasn't** only her clothes that were different: Her whole demeanor had changed.

There **wasn't** a trace of the aloof, circumspect woman who had traveled with me from **Nogales** to **Hermosillo**.

"This will be a most enchanting trip," she pronounced, "especially if we put the top down."

Her voice was happy and dreamy. "I adore traveling at night with the top down."

I readily obliged her.

It was almost four o'clock in the morning by the time we left **Hermosillo** behind.

The sky, soft and black and speckled with stars, seemed higher than any other sky I had ever seen.

I drove fast, yet it seemed we were not moving.

The gnarled silhouettes of cactus and mesquite trees appeared and disappeared endlessly under the headlights: They seemed to be all the same shape; all the same size.

"I packed us some sweet rolls and a full thermos of **champurrado**," **Delia** said, reaching for her basket in the back seat. "It'll be morning before we get to the healer's house."

She poured me half a cup of the thick hot chocolate made with cornmeal, and fed me, bite by bite, a sort of Danish roll.

"We're driving through a magical land," she said as she sipped the delicious chocolate. "A magical land populated by warring people."

"What warring people are they?" I asked, trying not to sound patronizing.

"The Yaqui people of **Sonora**," she said and kept quiet, perhaps measuring my reaction.

"I admire the Yaqui Indians because they have been in constant war," she continued:

"The Spaniards first; and then the Mexicans- as recently as 1934- have felt the savagery, cunning, and relentlessness of the Yaqui warriors."

"I don't admire war or warlike people," I said.

Then, by way of apologizing for my belligerent tone, I explained that I came from a German family that had been torn apart by the war.

"Your case is different," she maintained. "You don't have the ideals of freedom."

"Wait a minute!" I protested. "It is precisely because I espouse the ideals of freedom that I find war so abhorrent."

"We are talking about two different kinds of war," she insisted.

"War is war," I interjected.

"Your kind of war," she went on, ignoring my interruption, "is between two brothers who are both rulers and are fighting for supremacy."

She leaned toward me, and in an urgent whisper added, "The kind of war I'm talking about is between a slave and the master who thinks that he owns people. Do you see the difference?"

"No. I don't," I insisted stubbornly, and repeated that war is war no matter what the reason.

"I can't agree with you," she said, and sighing loudly leaned back in her seat:

"Perhaps the reason for our philosophical disagreement," she continued, "is that we come from different social realities."

Astonished by her choice of words, I automatically slowed the car.

I **didn't** mean to be rude, but to hear her spout academic concepts was so incongruous and unexpected that I **couldn't** help but laugh.

Delia didn't take offense: She watched me, smiling, thoroughly pleased with herself, and said, "When you get to know my point of view, you may change your mind."

She said this so seriously and yet so kindly that I felt ashamed of myself for laughing at her.

"You may even apologize for laughing at me," she added as if she had read my thoughts.

"I do apologize, **Delia**," I said and truly meant it. "I'm terribly sorry for my rudeness.

"I was so surprised by your statements that I **didn't** know what to do." I glanced at her briefly, and added contritely, "So I laughed."

"I don't mean social apologies for your conduct," she said, shaking her head in disappointment. "I mean apologies for not understanding the plight of man."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said uneasily. I could feel her eyes boring through me.

"As a woman, you should understand that plight very well," she said. "You have been a slave all your life."

"What are you talking about, **Delia**?" I asked, irritated by her impertinence.

Then I immediately calmed down, certain that the poor Indian had no doubt an insufferable, overwhelming husband.

"Believe me, **Delia**, I'm quite free. I do as I please."

"You might do as you please, but you're not free," she persisted:

"You are a woman, and that automatically means that you're at the mercy of men."

"I'm not at the mercy of anybody!" I yelled.

I **couldn't** tell whether it was my assertion or my tone of voice that made **Delia** burst into loud guffaws. She laughed at me as hard as I had laughed at her before.

"You seem to be enjoying your revenge," I said, peeved. "It's your turn to laugh now, **isn't** it?"

Suddenly serious, she said, "It's not the same at all.

"You laughed at me because you felt superior.

"A slave that talks like a master always delights the master for a moment."

I tried to interrupt her and tell her that it **hadn't** even crossed my mind to think of her as a slave, or of me as a master, but she ignored my efforts.

In the same solemn tone she said that the reason she had laughed at me was because I had been rendered stupid and blind to my own womanhood.

"What's with you, **Delia**?" I asked, puzzled. "You're deliberately

insulting me."

"Certainly," she readily agreed and giggled, completely indifferent to my rising anger.

She slapped my knee with a resounding whack.

"What concerns me," she went on, "is that you don't even know that by the mere fact that you're a woman you're a slave."

Mustering up all the patience I was capable of, I told **Delia** that she was wrong: "No one is a slave nowadays."

"Women are slaves," **Delia** insisted. "Men enslave women.

"Men befog women.

"Men's desire to brand women as their property befogs us," she declared:

"That fog hangs around our necks like a yoke."

My blank look made her smile.

She lay back on the seat, clasping her hands on her chest.

"Sex befogs women," she added softly, yet emphatically:

"Women are so thoroughly befogged that they can't consider the possibility that their low status in life is the direct end result of what is done to them sexually."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," I pronounced.

Then, rather ponderously, I went into a long diatribe about the social, economic, and political reasons for women's low status.

At great length I talked about the changes that have taken place in the last decades; how women have been quite successful in their fight against male supremacy.

Peeved by her mocking expression, I **couldn't** refrain from remarking that she was no doubt prejudiced by her own experiences; by her own perspective in time.

Delia's whole body shook with suppressed mirth.

She made an effort to contain herself and said, "Nothing has really changed.

"Women are slaves. We've been reared to be slaves.

"The slaves who are educated are now busy addressing the social and political abuses committed against women.

"None of the slaves, though, can focus on the root of their slavery- the sexual act- unless it involves rape or is related to some other form of physical abuse."

A little smile parted her lips as she said that religious men, philosophers, and men of science have for centuries maintained, and of course still do, that men and women must follow a biological, God-given imperative having to do directly with their sexual reproductive capabilities.

"We have been conditioned to believe that sex is good for us," she stressed:

"This inherent belief and acceptance has incapacitated us to ask the right question."

"And what question is that?" I asked, trying hard not to laugh at her utterly erroneous convictions.

Delia didn't seem to have heard me: She was silent for so long I thought she had dozed off.

I was startled when she said, "The question that no one dares ask is, what does it do to us women to get laid?"

"Really, **Delia**," I chided in mock consternation.

"Women's befogging is so total, we will focus on every other issue of our inferiority except the one that is the cause of it all," she maintained.

"But, **Delia**, we can't do without sex," I laughed. "What would happen to the human race if we don't..."

She checked my question and my laughter with an imperative gesture of her hand.

"Nowadays, women like yourself, in their zeal for equality, imitate men," she said:

"Women imitate men to such an absurd degree that the sex they are interested in has nothing to do with reproduction.

"They equate freedom with sex, without ever considering what sex does to their physical and emotional well-being.

We have been so thoroughly indoctrinated, we firmly believe that sex is good for us."

She nudged me with her elbow, and then, as if she were reciting a chant, she added in a sing-song tone, "Sex is good for us. It's pleasurable. It's necessary.

"It alleviates depression, repression, and frustration.

"It cures headaches, low and high blood pressure. It makes pimples disappear.

"It makes your **tits** and ass grow. It regulates your menstrual cycle.

"In short, it's fantastic! It's good for women.

"Everyone says so. Everyone recommends it."

She paused for an instant, and then pronounced with dramatic finality, "A fuck a day keeps the doctor away."

I found her statements terribly funny, but then I sobered abruptly as I remembered how my family and friends, including our family doctor, had suggested- not so crudely to be sure- sex as a cure for all the adolescent ailments I had had growing up in a strictly repressive environment.

The doctor had said that once I was married, I would have regular menstrual cycles. I would gain weight. I would sleep better. I would be sweet tempered.

"I don't see anything wrong with wanting sex and love," I said defensively:

"Whatever I've experienced of it, I have liked very much.

"And no one befogs me. I'm free! I choose whom I want and when I want it."

There was a spark of glee in **Delia's** dark eyes when she said, "Choosing your partner does in no way alter the fact that you're being fucked."

Then with a smile, as if to mitigate the harshness of her tone, she added, "To equate freedom with sex is the ultimate irony:

"Men's befogging is so complete, so total, it has zapped us of the needed energy and imagination to focus on the real cause of our enslavement."

She stressed, "To want a man sexually or to fall in love with one romantically are the only two choices given to the slaves.

"And all the things we have been told about these two choices are nothing but excuses that pull us into complicity and ignorance."

I was indignant with her. I **couldn't** help but think that she was some kind of repressed, man-hating shrew.

"Why do you dislike men so much, **Delia**?" I asked in my most cynical tone.

"I don't dislike them," she assured me:

"What I passionately object to is our reluctance to examine how thoroughly indoctrinated we are.

"The pressure put upon us is so fierce and self-righteous that we have become willing accomplices.

"Whoever dares to differ is dismissed and mocked as a man-hater or as a freak."

Blushing, I glanced at her surreptitiously. I decided that she could talk so disparagingly about sex and love because she was, after all, old:

Physical desires were all behind her.

Chuckling softly, **Delia** put her hands behind her head:

"My physical desires are not behind me because I'm old," she confided, "but because I've been given a chance to use my energy and imagination to become something different than the slave I was raised to be."

I felt thoroughly insulted rather than surprised that she had read my thoughts.

I began to defend myself, but my words only triggered more laughter. As soon as she stopped, she turned toward me.

Her face was as stern and serious as that of a teacher about to scold a pupil.

"If you are not a slave, how come they reared you to be a **Hansfrau**?" she asked. "And how come all you think about is to **heiraten**, and about your future **Herr Gemahl** who will **Dich mitnehmen**?"

I laughed so hard at her use of German I had to stop the car lest we have an accident.

More interested in finding out where she had learned German so well, I forgot to defend myself from her unflattering remarks that all I wanted in life was to find a husband who would whisk me away.

Regardless of how hard I pleaded, however, she disdainfully ignored my interest in her German.

"You and I will have plenty of time to talk about my German later," she assured me.

She regarded me mockingly and added, "Or about your being a slave."

Before I had a chance to retort, she suggested that we talk about something impersonal.

"Like what?" I asked, starting the car again.

Adjusting the seat in an almost reclining position, **Delia** closed her eyes.

"Let me tell you something about the four most famous leaders of the **Yaquis**," she said softly:

"I'm interested in leaders; in their successes or their failures."

Before I had a chance to grumble that I really **wasn't** that interested in war stories, **Delia** said that **Calixto Muni** was the first Yaqui leader who had attracted her attention.

She **wasn't** a gifted storyteller: Her account was straightforward, almost academic, yet I was hanging on her every word.

Calixto Muni had been an Indian who had sailed for years under the pirates' flag in the Caribbean.

On his return to his native **Sonora**, he led a military uprising against

the Spaniards in the 1730s. Betrayed, he was captured and executed by the Spaniards.

Then **Delia** gave me a long and sophisticated elucidation of how during the 1820s, after the Mexican independence was achieved and the Mexican government attempted to parcel out the Yaqui lands, a resistance movement turned into a widespread uprising.

It was **Juan Bandera**, she said, who, guided by the spirit itself, organized military units among the **Yaquis**.

Often armed only with bows and arrows, **Bandera's** warriors fought the Mexican troops for nearly ten years. In 1832, **Juan Bandera** was defeated and executed.

Delia said that the next leader of renown was **Jose Maria Leyva**, better known as **Cajeme**- the one who **doesn't** drink.

He was a Yaqui from **Hermosillo**. He was educated, and had acquired vast military skills fighting in the Mexican army.

Thanks to those skills, he unified all the Yaqui towns. From his first uprising in the 1870s, **Cajeme** kept his army in an active state of revolt.

He was defeated by the Mexican army in 1887 in **Buatachive**; a fortified mountain stronghold. Although **Cajeme** managed to escape and hide in **Guay-mas**, he was eventually betrayed and executed.

The last of the great Yaqui heroes was **Juan Maldonado**, also known as **Tetabiate**- rolling stone.

He reorganized the remnants of the Yaqui forces in the **Bacatete** Mountains from which he waged ferocious and desperate guerrilla warfare against Mexican troops for more than ten years.

"By the turn of the century," **Delia** wrapped up her stories, "the dictator **Porfirio Diaz** had inaugurated a campaign of Yaqui extermination.

"Indians were shot down as they worked in the fields.

"Thousands were rounded up and shipped to **Yucatan** to work in the henequen plantations, and to **Oaxaca** to work in the sugar cane fields."

I was impressed by her knowledge, but I still **couldn't** figure out why she had told me all this.

I said admiringly, "You sound like a scholar; a historian in the Yaqui way of life. Who are you really?"

For an instant she seemed to be taken aback by my question, which was purely rhetorical, then she quickly recovered and said, "I **ve** told you who I am.

"I just happen to know a great deal about the **Yaquis**. I live around them, you know."

She was silent for a moment, then nodded as if she had reached some conclusion and added, "The reason I **ve** told you about the Yaqui leaders is because it is up to us women to know the strength and the weakness of the leader."

"Why?" I asked, puzzled. "Who cares about leaders? They are all **nincompoops** as far as I **m** concerned."

Delia scratched her head under the wig, then sneezed repeatedly and said with a hesitant smile, "Unfortunately, women must rally around men, lest women want to lead themselves."

"Whom are they going to lead?" I asked sarcastically.

She looked at me, astonished, then rubbed her upper arm; the gesture, like her face, girlish.

"It's quite difficult to explain," she murmured. A peculiar softness had entered her voice; part tenderness, part indecision, part lack of interest:

"I **d** better not. I might lose you completely.

"All I can say, for the time being, is that I **m** neither a scholar nor a historian. I **m** a storyteller, and I haven't told you the most important part of my tale yet."

"And what might that be?" I asked, intrigued by her desire to change the subject.

"All I **ve** given you so far is factual information," she said. "What I haven't mentioned is the world of magic from which those Yaqui leaders operated.

"To them, the actions of wind and shadows, and of animals and plants were as important as the doings of men.

"That's the part that interests me the most."

"The actions of wind and shadows, and of animals and plants?" I repeated mockingly.

Unperturbed by my tone, **Delia** nodded.

She pushed herself up in the seat, pulled off the blond curly wig and let the wind blow through her straight black hair.

"Those are the **Bacatete** Mountains," she said, pointing to the mountains to the left of us, barely outlined against the semidarkness of the dawn sky.

"Is that where we are going?" I asked.

"Not this time," she said, sliding down into her seat again.

A cryptic smile played around her lips as she half turned toward me.

"Perhaps one day you **ll** have a chance to visit those mountains," she mused, closing her eyes.

"The **Bacatetes** are inhabited by creatures of another world; of another time."

"Creatures of another world, of another time?" I echoed her in mock seriousness. "Who or what are they?"

"Creatures," she said vaguely. "Creatures that don't belong to our time, to our world."

"Now, now, **Delia**. Are you trying to scare me?" I **couldn't** help laughing as I turned to glance at her.

Even in the dark, her face shone. She looked extraordinarily young, the skin molded without wrinkles over curving cheeks, chin, and nose.

"No. I **m** not trying to scare you," she said matter-of-factly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I **m** simply telling you what is common knowledge around here."

"Interesting. And what kind of creatures are they?" I inquired, biting my lip to suppress my giggles. "And have you seen them?"

"Of course I **ve** seen them," she said indulgently. "I **wouldn't** be talking about them if I **hadn't**."

She smiled sweetly, without a trace of resentment. "They are beings that populated the earth at another time and now have retreated to isolated spots."

At first I **couldn't** help laughing out loud at her gullibility.

And then, seeing how serious and how convinced she was that these creatures indeed existed, I decided that rather than make fun of her I should accept her credulousness. [* credulousness- tendency to believe too readily and therefore to be easily deceived]

After all, she was taking me to a healer, and I **didn't** want to antagonize her with my rational probes.

"Are those creatures the ghosts of the Yaqui warriors who lost their lives in battle?" I asked.

She shook her head negatively, then, as if afraid someone might overhear, she leaned closer and whispered in my ear, "It's a well-known fact that those mountains are inhabited by enchanted creatures: birds that speak, bushes that sing, stones that dance.

"Creatures that can take any form at will."

She sat back and regarded me expectantly. "The **Yaquis** call these beings **surem**.

They believe that the **surem** are ancient **Yaquis** who refused to be baptized by the first Jesuits who came to Christianize the Indians."

She patted my arm affectionately. "Watch out. They say that the **surem** like blond women."

She cackled with delight. "Maybe that's what your nightmare was all about. A **surem** trying to steal you."

"You don't really believe what you're saying, do you?" I asked derisively, unable to keep my annoyance in check.

"No. I've just made up that the **surem** like blonds," she said soothingly. "They don't like blonds at all."

Although I **didn't** turn to glance at her, I could feel her smile and the humorous twinkle in her eyes.

It irked me to no end. I thought her to be either very candid, very coy, or, even worse, very mad.

"You don't believe that creatures from another world really exist, do you?" I snapped ill-humoredly.

Then, afraid I had offended her, I glanced at her with a word of half-anxious apology ready.

But before I could say anything, she answered in the same loud, ill-tempered tone of voice I had used.

"Of course I believe they exist. Why **shouldn't** they exist?"

"They just don't!" I snapped sharply and authoritatively, then quickly apologized.

I told her about my pragmatic upbringing and how my father had guided me to realize that the monsters in my dreams, and the playmates I had as a child- invisible to everyone, but me, of course- were nothing but the product of an overactive imagination.

"From an early age I was reared to be objective and to qualify everything," I stressed. "In my world, there are only facts."

"That's the problem with people," **Delia** remarked. "They are so reasonable that just hearing about it lowers my vitality."

"In my world," I continued, ignoring her comment, "there are no facts anywhere about creatures from another world, but only speculations and wishful thinking, and," I emphasized, "fantasies of disturbed minds."

"You can't be that dense!" she cried out delightedly in between fits of laughter, as if my explanation had surpassed all her expectations.

"Can it be proven that those creatures exist?" I challenged.

"What would the proof consist of?" she inquired with an air of obvious false diffidence. [* diffidence- lack of self-confidence]

"If someone else can see them, that would be a proof," I said.

"You mean that if, for instance, you can see them, that'll be proof of

their existence?" she inquired, bringing her head close to mine.

"We can certainly begin there."

Sighing, **Delia** leaned her head against the backrest of her seat and closed her eyes.

She was silent for such a long time I was certain she had fallen asleep, and I was thus startled when she sat up abruptly and urged me to pull over to the side of the road. She had to relieve herself, she said.

To take advantage of our stop, I, too, went into the bushes.

As I was about to pull up my jeans, I heard a loud male voice say, "How delicious!" and sigh just behind me.

With my jeans still unzipped I dashed to where **Delia** was.

"We'd better get out of here fast!" I cried out. "There is a man hiding in the bushes."

"Nonsense," she brushed my words aside. "The only thing behind the bushes is a donkey."

"Donkeys don't sigh like lecherous men," I pointed out, then I repeated what I had heard the man say.

Delia collapsed into helpless laughter, then seeing how distressed I was, she held up her hand in a conciliatory gesture. "Did you actually see the man?"

"I **didn't** have to," I retorted. "It was enough to hear him."

She lingered for a moment longer, then headed toward the car.

Right before we climbed up the embankment to the road, she stopped abruptly and, turning toward me, whispered, "Something quite mysterious has happened. I must make you aware of it."

She led me by the hand back to the spot where I had squatted, and right there, behind the bushes, I saw a donkey.

"It **wasn't** there before," I insisted.

Delia regarded me with apparent pleasure, then shrugged her shoulders and turned to the animal.

"Little donkey," she cooed in a baby voice, "did you look at her butt?"

She's a ventriloquist, I thought: She's going to make the beast talk.

However, all the donkey did was to bray loudly and repeatedly.

"Let's get out of here," I pleaded, tugging at her sleeve. "It must have been the owner who's lurking in the bushes."

"But this little darling has no owner," she cooed in that same silly baby voice, and scratched the animal's soft, long ears.

"It certainly has an owner," I snapped. "Can't you see how well fed and groomed it is?"

In a voice that was getting hoarse with nervousness and impatience, I stressed again how dangerous it was for two women to be out alone on a deserted road in **Sonora**.

Delia regarded me silently, seemingly preoccupied.

Then she nodded as if in agreement and motioned me to follow her.

The donkey walked close behind me, nudging my buttocks repeatedly with its muzzle.

Mumbling an imprecation, I turned around, but the donkey was gone.

"**Delia!**" I cried out in sudden fright. "What happened to the donkey?"

Startled by my cry, a flock of birds rose in raucous flight.

The birds circled around us, then flew east toward that fragile crack in the sky that marked the end of the night and the start of the day.

"Where is the donkey?" I asked again in a barely audible whisper.

"Right here in front of you," she said softly, pointing to a gnarled, leafless tree.

"I can't see it."

"You need glasses."

"There is nothing wrong with my eyes," I said tartly. "I can even see the lovely flowers on the tree."

Astonished at the beauty of the glowing, snow-white morning glory-shaped blossoms, I moved closer. "What kind of a tree is it?"

"**Palo Santo.**"

For one bewildering second I thought that the donkey, which was emerging from behind the satiny, silver-gray trunk, had spoken.

I turned to look at **Delia**.

"**Palo Santo!**" she laughed.

Then the thought crossed my mind that **Delia** was playing a joke on me. The donkey probably belonged to the healer, who, no doubt, lived nearby.

"What's so funny?" **Delia** asked, catching the all-knowing smirk on my face.

"I've got a most horrible cramp," I lied.

Holding my hands against my stomach I squatted, and said, "Please wait for me in the car."

The instant she turned to go, I took off my scarf and tied it around the donkey's neck. I enjoyed anticipating **Delia**'s surprise upon discovering, once we were at the healer's place, that I had known about her joke all along.

However, any hope of seeing the donkey or my scarf again were soon dashed. It took us almost two more hours to reach the healer's house.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 2

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 2

It was around eight o'clock in the morning when we arrived at the healer's house in the outskirts of **Ciudad Obregon**.

It was a massive old house with whitewashed walls and a tile roof, gray with age. It had wrought-iron windows and an arched doorway.

The heavy door to the street was wide open.

With the confidence of someone familiar with her surroundings, **Delia Flores** led me across the dark hall, down a long corridor, toward the back, to a sparsely furnished room with a narrow bed, a table, and several chairs.

What was most unusual about the room was that it had a door in each of the four walls: They were all closed.

"Wait here," **Delia** ordered me, and pointing with her chin toward the bed she said, "Take a little nap while I get the healer. It might take me some time," she added, closing the door behind her.

I waited for her footsteps to fade down the corridor before I inspected the most unlikely healing room I had ever seen.

The whitewashed walls were bare. The light brown tiles of the floor shone like a mirror.

There was no altar, no images or figurines of saints, the Virgin, or Jesus, which I had always assumed were customary in healing rooms.

I poked my head through all four doors. Two opened into dark corridors. The other two led to a yard enclosed by a high fence.

As I was tiptoeing down a dark corridor, toward another room, I heard a low, menacing snarl behind me.

Slowly, I turned around.

Barely two feet away there stood an enormous, ferocious-looking black dog.

It **didn't** attack me but stood its ground growling, showing its fangs.

Without directly meeting the animal's eyes, yet not letting it out of my sight, I walked backward to the healing room.

The dog followed me all the way to the door.

I closed the door softly, right on the beast's nose, and leaned against the wall until my heartbeat was back to normal.

Then I lay down on the bed, and after a few moments- without the slightest intention of doing so- I fell into a deep sleep.

I was roused by a soft touch on my shoulder.

I opened my eyes and looked up into an old woman's wrinkled pink face.

"You're dreaming," she said. "And I'm part of your dream."

Automatically, I nodded in agreement. However, I **wasn't** convinced that I was dreaming.

The woman was extraordinarily small. She **wasn't** a midget or a dwarf: Rather, she was the size of a child, with skinny arms and narrow, fragile-looking shoulders.

"Are you the healer?" I asked.

"I'm **Esperanza**," she said. "I'm the one who brings dreams."

Her voice was smooth and unusually low. It had a curious, exotic quality, as though Spanish- which she spoke fluently- was a language to which the muscles of her upper lip were not accustomed.

Gradually, the sound of her voice rose until it became a disembodied force filling the room. The sound made me think of running water in the depths of a cave.

"She's not a woman," I mumbled to myself. "She's the sound of darkness."

"I'll remove the cause of your nightmares now," she said, fixing me with an imperious gaze as her fingers closed lightly around my neck:

"I'll get them out, one by one," she promised.

Her hands moved across my chest like a soft wave.

She smiled triumphantly, then motioned me to examine her opened palms. "See? They came out so easily."

She was gazing at me with an expression of such accomplishment and wonder, I **couldn't** bring myself to tell her that I **didn't** see anything in her hands.

Certain that the healing session was over, I thanked her and sat up.

She shook her head in a gesture of reproach and gently pushed me back on the bed. "You're asleep," she reminded me. "I'm the one who brings dreams, remember?"

I would have loved to insist that I was wide awake, but all I managed to do was to grin foolishly as sleep pulled me into a comforting slumber.

Laughter and whispers crowded around me like shadows.

I fought to wake myself. It took a great effort to open my eyes and sit up, and look at the people gathered around the table.

The peculiar dimness in the room made it difficult to see them clearly.

Delia was among them.

I was about to call out her name when an insistent scratching sound behind me made me turn around.

A man, precariously squatting on a high stool, was noisily shelling peanuts.

At first sight he seemed to be a young man, but somehow I knew him to be old. He was slight of body, with a smooth, beardless face. His smile was a mixture of cunning and innocence.

"Want some?" he asked.

Before I could so much as nod, my mouth dropped open.

All I could do was stare at him as he shifted his weight to one hand and effortlessly lifted his small, wiry body into a handstand.

From that position he threw a peanut at me, and it went straight into my gaping mouth.

I choked on it.

A sharp tap between my shoulder blades immediately restored my breathing.

Grateful, I turned, wondering who among the people, who were all standing by me now, had reacted so swiftly.

"I'm **Mariano Aureliano**," said the man who had tapped my back.

He shook my hand.

His gentle tone and the charming formality of his gesture mitigated the fierce expression in his eyes and the severity of his aquiline features: The upward slant of his dark brows made him look like a bird of prey.

His white hair and his weathered, **copperish** face bespoke age, but his muscular body exuded the vitality of youth.

There were six women in the group, including **Delia**.

All of them shook my hand in that same eloquent formality.

They **didn't** tell me their names: They simply said that they were glad to meet me.

Physically, they **didn't** resemble each other, and yet there was a striking likeness about them; a contradictory blend of youth and age, a blend of strength and delicacy that was most baffling to me, accustomed as I was to the roughness and directness of my male-oriented, patriarchal, German family.

Just as with **Mariano Aureliano** and the acrobat on the stool, I could not tell the women's ages. They could have been as much in their forties as in their sixties.

I experienced a fleeting anxiety as the women kept staring at me.

I had the distinct impression they could see inside me and were reflecting on what they saw.

The amused, contemplative smiles on their faces did little to reassure me.

Anxious to break that disturbing silence in any way I could, I turned away from them and faced the man on the stool. I asked him if he was an acrobat.

"I'm **Mr. Flores**," he said. He did a back flip from the stool and landed in a cross-legged position on the floor.

"I'm not an acrobat," he pronounced. "I'm a wizard."

There was a smile of unmistakable glee on his face as he reached into his pocket and pulled out my silk scarf; the one I had tied around the donkey's neck.

"I know who you are. You're her husband!" I exclaimed, pointing an accusing finger at **Delia**. "You two sure played a clever trick on me."

Mr. Flores didn't say a word. He simply gazed at me in polite silence. "I'm nobody's husband," he finally pronounced, then **cartwheeled** out of the room through one of the doors that led to the yard.

On an impulse, I jumped off the bed and went after him.

Blinded momentarily by the brightness outside, I stood for a few seconds dazed by the glare, then crossed the yard and ran down the side of a dirt road into a recently ploughed field partitioned off by tall eucalyptus trees.

It was hot. The sun bore down like flames. The furrows shimmered in the heat like effervescent giant snakes.

"**Mr. Flores**," I called out. There was no answer. Certain that he was hiding behind one of the trees, I crossed the field in a run.

"Watch those bare feet!" warned a voice coming from above me.

Startled, I looked up, straight into **Mr. Flores'** upside-down face. He was hanging from a branch, dangling from his legs.

"It's dangerous and utterly foolish to run about without shoes," he admonished sternly, swinging back and forth like a trapeze artist:

"This place is infested with rattlesnakes. You'd better join me up here. It's safe and cool."

Knowing that the branches were far too high to reach, I nonetheless held up my arms with childish trust.

Before I realized what he intended to do, **Mr. Flores** had grabbed my wrists and whisked me up into the tree with no more effort than if I had been a rag doll.

Dazzled, I sat beside him staring at the rustling leaves: They glimmered in the sunlight like slivers of gold.

"Do you hear what the wind is telling you?" **Mr. Flores** asked after a long silence.

He moved his head this way and that so I could fully appreciate the astounding manner in which he wiggled his ears.

"**Zamurito!**" I exclaimed in a whisper as memories flooded my mind. '**Zamurito**', little buzzard, was the nickname of a childhood friend from Venezuela. **Mr. Flores** had the same delicate, birdlike features, jet-black hair, and mustard-colored eyes. And most astounding, he, like **Zamurito**, could wiggle his ears one at a time or both together.

I told **Mr. Flores** about my friend, whom I had known since kindergarten.

In the second grade, we had shared a desk.

During the long midday recess, instead of eating our lunch at the school grounds, we used to sneak outside and climb to the top of a nearby hill to eat in the shade of what we believed was the largest mango tree in the world.

Its lowest branches touched the ground: Its highest swept the clouds. In the fruit season, we used to gorge ourselves on mangoes.

The hilltop was our favorite place until the day we found the body of the school janitor hanging from a high branch.

We **didn't** dare to move or to cry: Neither of us wanted to lose face in

front of the other.

We **didn't** climb up the branches that day but tried to eat our lunch on the ground, practically under the dead man, wondering which of us would break down first.

It was I who did.

Zamurito had asked me in a whisper, "Have you ever thought of dying?"

I had looked up at the hanged man. At that same instant the wind had rustled through the branches with an unfamiliar insistence.

In the rustle I had distinctly heard the dead man whispering to me that death was soothing.

It was so uncanny that I got up and ran away screaming, indifferent to what **Zamurito** might have thought of me.

"The wind made those branches and leaves speak to you," **Mr. Flores** said as I finished my story.

His voice was soft and low. His golden eyes shone with a feverish light as he went on to explain that at the moment of his death, in one instantaneous flash, the old janitor's memories, feelings, and emotions were released and absorbed by the mango tree.

"The wind made those branches and leaves speak to you," **Mr. Flores** repeated. "For the wind is yours by right."

Dreamily, he glanced through the leaves, his eyes searching beyond the field stretching away in the sun.

"Being a woman enables you to command the wind," he went on. "Women don't know it, but they can have a dialogue with the wind any time."

I shook my head uncomprehendingly. "I really don't know what you're talking about," I said, my tone betraying my mounting unease:

"This is like a dream. If it **wouldn't** be that it goes on and on, I'd swear it was one of my nightmares."

His prolonged silence annoyed me.

I could feel my face flush with irritation. What am I doing here, sitting in a tree with a crazy old man? I pondered.

And at the same time I was apprehensive that I may have offended him.

I opted for apologizing for my bluntness.

"I realize that my words don't make much sense to you," he admitted. "That's because there is too much crust on you. It prevents you from hearing what the wind has to say."

"Too much crust?" I asked, puzzled and suspicious. "Do you mean that I'm dirty?"

"That, too," he said, and made me blush.

He smiled and repeated that I was enveloped by too thick a crust and that this crust **couldn't** be washed away with soap and water, regardless of how many baths I took.

"You are filled with judgments," he explained. "They prevent you from understanding what I'm telling you and that the wind is yours to command."

He regarded me with narrowed, critical eyes.

"Well?" he demanded impatiently. Before I knew what was happening he had taken hold of my hands and in one swift, fluid motion had swung me around and gently dropped me to the ground.

I thought I saw his arms and legs stretch like rubber bands. It was a fleeting image, which I immediately explained to myself as a perceptual distortion caused by the heat.

I **didn't** dwell upon it, for at that precise moment I was distracted by the sight of **Delia Flores** and her friends spreading a large canvas cloth under the next tree.

"When did you get here?" I asked **Delia**, baffled that I had failed to see or hear the group approach.

"We are going to have a picnic in your honor," she said.

"Because you joined us today," one of the women added.

"How did I join you?" I asked, ill at ease.

I had failed to see who had spoken. I gazed from one to the other, expecting one of them to explain the statement.

Indifferent to my growing unease, the women busied themselves with the canvas cloth, making sure it was spread out smoothly.

The longer I watched them, the more concerned I became. It was all so strange to me.

I could easily explain why I had accepted **Delia's** invitation to see a healer, but I **couldn't** understand at all my subsequent actions.

It was as if someone else had taken over my rational faculties and was making me stay there and react and say things I **didn't** mean to.

And now they were going to have a celebration in my honor. It was disconcerting to say the least.

No matter how hard I thought about it, I **couldn't** figure out what I was doing there.

"I certainly haven't merited any of this," I mumbled, my Germanic upbringing getting the better of me. "People don't just do things for others for the hell of it."

Only upon hearing **Mariano Aureliano's** exuberant laughter did I realize that all of them were staring at me.

"There's no reason to ponder so heavily what's happening to you today," he said, tapping me softly on the shoulder. "We're having a picnic because we like to do things on the spur of the moment."

"And since you have been healed by **Esperanza** today, my friends here like to say the picnic is in your honor."

He spoke casually, almost indifferently, as if he were talking of some trifling matter.

But his eyes said something else: They were hard and serious as though it were vital I listen to him carefully.

"It's a joy for my friends to say that the picnic is in your honor," he continued. "Accept it, just as they say it, in simplicity and without premeditation."

His eyes became soft as he gazed at the women, then he turned to me and added, "The picnic is not in your honor at all, I assure you."

"And yet," he mused, "it is in your honor."

"It's a contradiction that will take you quite some time to understand."

"I **didn't** ask anyone to do anything for me," I said sullenly. I had become inordinately ponderous, the way I always have been when threatened:

"**Delia** brought me here, and I am thankful." I felt then compelled to add, "And I would like to pay for any services rendered to me."

I was certain I had offended them, and I knew that any minute now I would be asked to leave. Other than hurting my ego, it **wouldn't** have bothered me much. I was frightened, and I had had enough of them.

To my surprise and annoyance, they **didn't** take me seriously.

They laughed at me, and the angrier I became, the greater their mirth.

Their shiny, laughing eyes were fixed on me, as if I were an unknown organism.

Wrath made me forget my fear. I lashed out at them, accusing them of taking me for a fool.

I charged that **Delia** and her husband- I **didn't** know why I insisted on pairing them together- had played a disgusting joke on me.

"You brought me here," I said, turning to **Delia**, "so you and your friends can use me as your clown."

The more I ranted, the more they laughed.

I was about to weep with self-pity, anger, and frustration when **Mariano Aureliano** came to stand beside me.

He began to talk to me as if I were a child.

I wanted to tell him that I could take care of myself, that I **didn't** need his sympathy, and that I was going home, when something in his tone and in his eyes appeased me so thoroughly that I was certain he had hypnotized me. And yet, I knew he **hadn't**.

What was so unknown and disturbing to me was the suddenness and completeness of my change.

What would have ordinarily taken days had happened in an instant: All my life I had indulged in brooding over every indignity or affront- real or imagined- I had suffered. With systematic thoroughness, I would mull them over until every detail was explained to my satisfaction.

As I looked at **Mariano Aureliano**, I felt like laughing at my earlier outburst.

I could hardly remember what it was that had infuriated me to the point of tears.

Delia pulled me by the arm and asked me to help the other women unpack the china plates, crystal goblets, and ornate silverware from the various baskets they had brought.

The women **didn't** talk to me or to each other.

Only little sighs of pleasure escaped their lips as **Mariano Aureliano** opened the serving dishes: There were **tamales**, **enchiladas**, a hot chili stew, and hand-made **tortillas**- not flour **tortillas** as was customary in northern Mexico and which I **didn't** much care for, but corn **tortillas**.

Delia handed me a plate with a little bit of everything on it.

I ate so greedily I was finished before anyone else. "This is the most delicious food I've ever tasted," I gushed, hoping for seconds.

No one offered them. To hide my disappointment, I commented on the beauty of the antique lace trim around the canvas cloth we were sitting on.

"I did that," the woman sitting on **Mariano Aureliano's** left said.

She was old-looking, with disheveled gray hair that hid her face. In spite of the heat, she wore a long skirt, a blouse, and a sweater.

"It's authentic Belgian lace," she explained to me in a gentle, dreamy voice. Her long slender hands, glinting with exquisite jeweled rings, lingered lovingly on the broad trim.

In great detail, she told me about her handiwork, showing me the

kinds of stitches and threads she had used to sew on the trim.

Occasionally, I caught a fleeting glimpse of her face through all that mass of hair, but I **couldn't** tell what she looked like.

"It's authentic Belgian lace," she repeated. "It's part of my trousseau."

She picked up a crystal goblet, took a sip of water and added, "These, too, are part of my trousseau: They're **Baccarat**."

I **didn't** doubt that they were.

The lovely plates- each one was different- were of the finest porcelain.

I was wondering whether a discreet peek under mine would pass unnoticed, when the woman sitting to **Mariano Aureliano's** right encouraged me to do so:

"Don't be shy. Take a look," she urged me. "You're among friends."

Grinning, she lifted her own plate. "**Limoges**," she pronounced, then lifted mine briefly and noted that it was a **Rosenthal**.

The woman had childlike, delicate features. She was small, with round, thickly lashed black eyes. Her hair was black, except for the crown of her head, which had turned white, and was combed back into a tight little chignon.

There was a force, an edge to her that was quite chilling as she besieged me with direct, personal questions.

I **didn't** mind her inquisitor's tone. I was accustomed to being bombarded with questions by my father and brothers when I went on a date or embarked on any kind of activity on my own.

I had resented it, but it was the normal interaction at home: Thus, I never learned how to converse. Conversation for me was parrying verbal attacks, and defending myself at any cost.

I was surprised when this woman's coercive interrogation **didn't** immediately make me feel like defending myself.

"Are you married?" the woman asked.

"No," I said softly but firmly, wishing that she would change the subject.

"Do you have a man?" she insisted.

"No. I don't," I retorted, beginning to feel the stirring of my old defensive self.

"Is there a type of man you're partial to?" she went on. "Are there any personality traits you prefer in a man?"

For an instant I wondered whether she was making fun of me, but she seemed to be genuinely interested, as did her companions. Their curious, anticipating faces put me at ease.

Forgetting my belligerent nature and that these women might be old enough to be my grandmothers, I spoke to them as if they were friends my age and we were discussing men.

"He has to be tall and handsome," I began. "He has to have a sense of humor. He has to be sensitive without being wishy-washy. He has to be intelligent without being an intellectual."

I lowered my voice and in a confidential tone added, "My father used to say that intellectual men are weak to the core, and traitors- all of them. I think I agree with my father."

"That's all you want in a man?" the woman inquired.

"No," I hastened to say. "Above all, the man of my dreams has to be athletic."

"Like your father," one of the women interjected.

"Naturally," I said defensively. "My father was a great athlete; a fabulous skier and swimmer."

"Do you get along with him?" she asked.

"Marvelously," I enthused. "I adore him. Just the thought of him brings tears to my eyes."

"Why aren't you with him?"

"I'm too much like him," I explained. "There is something in me that I can't quite understand or control that pulls me away."

"What about your mother?"

"My mother." I sighed and paused for a moment to find the best words to describe her:

"She's very strong. She's the sober part in me. The part that is silent and doesn't need reinforcement."

"Are you very close to your parents?"

"In spirit, I am," I said softly. "In practice, I am a loner. I don't have many attachments."

Then, as if something inside me was pushing to come out, I revealed a personality flaw that not even in my most introspective moments would I have admitted to myself:

"I use people rather than nourish or cherish them," I said; then immediately made amends saying, "But I'm quite capable of feeling affection."

I gazed from one to the other with a mixture of relief and disappointment: None of them seemed to attach any importance to my confession.

The women went on to ask if I would describe myself as a courageous being or as a coward.

"I'm a confirmed coward," I stated. "But unfortunately my cowardice never stops me."

"Stops you from what?" the woman who had been questioning me inquired. Her black eyes were serious, and the wide span of her brows, like a line drawn with a piece of charcoal, was concentrated in a frown.

"From doing dangerous things," I said.

Pleased to notice that they seemed to be hanging on my every word, I explained that another one of my serious flaws was my great facility to get into trouble.

"What trouble have you gotten into that you can tell us about?" she asked. Her face, which had been grave all this time, broke into a brilliant, almost malicious smile.

"How about the trouble I'm in now?" I said half in jest, yet fearing that they might take my comment the wrong way.

To my surprise and relief they all laughed and yelled the way rural people are wont to do when something strikes them as daring or funny.

"How did you end up in the United States?" the woman asked when they had all calmed down.

I shrugged, not really knowing what to say. "I wanted to go to school," I finally mumbled. "I was in England first, but I didn't do much except have a good time.

"I really don't know what I want to study. I think I'm in search of something, although I don't know exactly what."

"That brings us back to my first question," the woman said.

Her thin, pert face and her dark eyes were animated and peering like an animal's. "Are you in search of a man?"

"I suppose I am," I admitted, then added impatiently, "What woman isn't?"

"And why do you ask me so insistently about it? Do you have someone in mind? Is this some kind of a test?"

"We do have someone in mind," Delia Flores interjected. "But he's not a man." She and the others laughed and shrieked with such abandon I could not help but giggle, too.

"This is definitely a test," the inquisitive woman assured me as soon as everyone was quiet.

She was silent for a moment, her eyes watchful and considering. "From what you told me, I can conclude that you are thoroughly middle class," she went on.

She flung her arms wide in a gesture of forced acceptance. "But then, what else can a German woman, born in the New World, be?"

She saw the anger in my face and, with a barely suppressed grin on her lips, added, "Middle-class people have middle-class dreams."

Seeing that I was about to explode, Mariano Aureliano explained that she was asking all these questions because they were simply curious about me. Only seldom did they have visitors and hardly ever any young ones.

"That doesn't mean that I have to be insulted," I complained.

As though I hadn't said anything, Mariano Aureliano continued to make excuses for the women.

His gentle tone and his reassuring pat on my back melted my anger, just as it had before.

His smile was so touchingly angelic I didn't for a moment doubt his sincerity when he began to flatter me: He said that I was one of the most extraordinary, one of the most remarkable persons they had ever met.

I was so moved that I encouraged him to ask anything he wanted to know about me.

"Do you feel important?" he inquired.

I nodded. "All of us are very important to ourselves," I stated. "Yes, I think I am important, not in a general sense, but specifically, just to myself."

At great length I talked about a positive self-image, self-worth, and how vital it was to reinforce our importance in order to be psychically healthy individuals.

"And what do you think about women?" he asked. "Do you think they are more or less important than men?"

"It's quite obvious that men are more important," I said. "Women don't have a choice. They have to be less important in order for family life to roll on smooth wheels, so to speak."

"But is it right?" Mariano Aureliano insisted.

"Well, of course, it's right," I declared. "Men are inherently superior. That's why they run the world.

"I've been brought up by an authoritarian father, who, although he raised me as freely as my brothers, nevertheless let me know that certain things are not so important for a woman.

"That's why I don't know what I'm doing in school or what I want in life." I looked at Mariano Aureliano, then in a helpless, defeated tone

added, "I suppose I'm looking for a man who is as sure of himself as my father."

"She's a simpleton!" one of the women interjected.

"No, no, she **isn't**," **Mariano Aureliano** assured everyone. "She's just confused, and as opinionated as her father."

"Her German father," **Mr. Flores** corrected him emphatically, stressing the word German: He had descended from the tree like a leaf, softly and without a sound. He served himself an immoderate amount of food.

"How right you are," **Mariano Aureliano** agreed and grinned. "Being as opinionated as her German father, she's simply repeating what she has heard all her life."

My anger, which rose and fell like some mysterious fever, was not only due to what they were saying about me, but also because they were talking about me as if I were not present.

"She's unredeemable," another woman said.

"She's fine for the purpose at hand," **Mariano Aureliano** defended me with conviction.

Mr. Flores backed **Mariano Aureliano**. And the only woman who had not spoken so far said in a deep, husky voice that she agreed with the men; that I was fine for the purposes at hand.

She was tall and slender. Her pale-complexioned face, gaunt and severe, was crowned by braided white hair and highlighted by large, luminous eyes.

In spite of her worn, drab clothes, there was something innately elegant about her.

"What are you all doing to me?" I shouted, unable to contain myself any longer. "Don't you realize how horrible it is for me to hear you talk about me as if I were not here?"

Mariano Aureliano fixed his fierce eyes on me. "You are not here," he said in a tone that was devoid of all feeling. "At least not yet."

"And most important, you don't count. Not now or ever."

I almost fainted with wrath. No one had ever spoken to me so harshly and with such indifference to my feelings. "I puke and piss and shit on all of you, goddamned, **cocksucking** farts!" I yelled.

"My God! A German hick!" **Mariano Aureliano** exclaimed, and they all laughed.

I was about to jump up and stomp away when **Mariano Aureliano** tapped me repeatedly on my back.

"There, there," he murmured as if burping a baby.

And as before, instead of resenting being treated like a child, my anger vanished. I felt light and happy.

Shaking my head uncomprehendingly, I looked at them and giggled. "I learned to speak Spanish," I said, "in the streets of **Caracas** with the riffraff. I can cuss horribly."

"**Didn't** you just love the sweet **tamales**?" **Delia** asked, closing her eyes in delicate appreciation.

Her question seemed to be a password: The interrogation ended.

"Of course she did!" **Mr. Flores** responded for me. "She only wishes she had been served more. She has an insatiable appetite."

He came to sit beside me. "**Mariano Aureliano** outdid himself and cooked a delight."

"You mean he cooked the food?" I asked in disbelief. "He has all these women, and he cooks?"

Mortified by how my words might be interpreted, I hastened to apologize. I explained that it surprised me to no end that a Mexican male would cook at home when there were women.

Their laughter made me realize that I **hadn't** meant to say that either.

"Especially if the women are his women. **Isn't** that what you meant?"

Mr. Flores asked, his words interspersed by everybody's laughter.

"You're quite right," he continued. "They are **Mariano's** women: Or to be more precise, **Mariano** belongs to them."

He slapped his knee gleefully, then turned to the tallest of the women—the one who had only spoken once—and said, "Why don't you tell her about us."

"Obviously, **Mr. Aureliano doesn't** have that many wives," I began, still mortified by my gaffe.

"Why not?" the woman retorted, and everyone laughed again. It was a joyful, youthful laughter, yet it **didn't** put me at ease.

"All of us here are bound together by our struggle, by our deep affection for one another, and by the realization that without one another nothing is possible," she said.

"You **aren't** part of a religious group, are you?" I asked in a voice that betrayed my growing apprehension. "You don't belong to some kind of a commune, do you?"

"We belong to power," the woman replied. "My companions and I are the inheritors of an ancient tradition. We are part of a myth."

I **didn't** understand what she was saying.

I glanced uneasily at the others: Their eyes were fixed on me. They were watching me with a mixture of expectation and amusement.

I shifted my attention back to the tall woman. She, too, was observing me with that same bemused expression. Her eyes were so shiny they sparkled.

She leaned over her crystal goblet and daintily sipped her water.

"We are essentially dreamers," she explained softly. "We are all dreaming now, and, by the fact that you were brought to us, you are also dreaming with us."

She said this so smoothly that I really **didn't** realize what she had said.

"You mean I am sleeping and having a dream with you?" I asked in mock incredulity. I bit my lip to suppress the laughter bubbling up within me.

"That's not exactly what you're doing, but it's close enough," she admitted.

Unperturbed by my nervous giggles, she went on to explain that what was happening to me was more like an extraordinary dream where all of them were helping me by dreaming my dream.

"But that's **idio--**," I started to say, but she silenced me with a wave of her hand.

"We are all dreaming the same dream," she assured me.

She seemed to be transported by a joy I was at a loss to understand.

"What about the delicious food I just ate?" I asked, looking for the chili sauce that had dribbled on my blouse.

I showed her the spots. "That can't be a dream. I ate that food!" I

insisted in a loud, agitated tone. "I did! I ate it myself."

She regarded me with a cool composure, as though she had been expecting just such an outburst. She asked equably, "But what about **Mr. Flores** lifting you up to the top of the eucalyptus tree?"

I was on the verge of telling her that he **hadn't** lifted me to the top of the tree but only to a branch when she whispered, "Have you thought about that?"

"No. I haven't," I said snappishly.

"Of course, you haven't," she agreed, nodding her head knowingly as if she were aware that I had that instant remembered that even the lowest branch of any of the trees around us was impossible to reach from the ground.

She said then that the reason I **hadn't** thought about it was because in dreams we are not rational. "In dreams we can only act," she stressed.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted her. "I may be a little dizzy, I admit. After all, you and your friends are the strangest people I have ever met.

"But I am as awake as I can be." Seeing that she was laughing at me, I yelled, "This is not a dream!"

With an imperceptible nod of her head she motioned to **Mr. Flores**, who in one swift movement reached for my hand and propelled himself, with me in tow, to a branch of the nearest eucalyptus tree.

We sat there for an instant, and before I could say anything, he pulled me back to the ground, to the same spot where we had been sitting.

"Do you see what I mean?" the tall woman asked.

"No, I don't," I screamed, knowing that I had had a hallucination.

My fear turned to rage, and I let out a stream of the foulest imprecations.

My rage spent, I was engulfed by a wave of self-pity, and I began to weep. "What have you people done to me?" I asked in between sobs.

"Have you put something in the food? In the water?"

"We have done nothing of the sort," the tall woman said kindly. You don't need anything..."

I could barely hear her. My tears were like some dark, gauzy veil: They blurred her face and also her words.

"Hold on," I heard her say, although I could no longer see her or her companions. "Hold on, don't wake up yet."

There was something so compelling about her tone, I knew that my very life depended on seeing her again.

With some unknown and totally unexpected force, I broke through the veil of my tears.

I heard a soft clapping sound, and then I saw them. They were smiling, and their eyes shone so intensely their pupils seemed to be lit by some inner fire.

I apologized first to the women and then to the two men for my silly outburst; but they **wouldn't** hear of it.

They said that I had performed exceptionally well.

"We are the living parts of a myth," **Mariano Aureliano** said.

He puckered his lips, and blew into the air. "I will blow you to the person who now holds the myth in his hands. He will help you clarify all this."

"And who might he be?" I asked flippantly.

I was going to ask whether he would be as opinionated as my father,

but I was distracted by **Mariano Aureliano**.

He was still blowing into the air. His white hair stood on end: His cheeks were red and distended.

As if in answer to his effort, a soft breeze began to rustle through the eucalyptus trees.

He nodded, apparently aware of my unspoken thought and confusion.

Gently, he turned me until I faced the **Bacatete** Mountains.

The breeze turned into a wind; a wind so harsh and cold it hurt to breathe.

With a seemingly boneless, uncoiling movement, the tall woman rose, grabbed my hand, and pulled me with her across the ploughed furrows.

We came to a sudden halt in the middle of the field.

I could have sworn that with her outstretched arms she was luring the spiral of dust and dead leaves spinning in the distance.

"In dreams, everything is possible," she whispered.

Laughing, I opened my arms to beckon the wind.

Dust and leaves danced around us with such force that everything blurred before my eyes.

The tall woman was suddenly far away. Her body seemed to be dissolving in a reddish light until it completely vanished from my field of vision.

And then blackness filled my head.

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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HTML EDITOR:

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"It **doesn't** matter how old you are: In their world, you are a child."

...

Esperanza claimed that originally the sorcerers she had told me about used to pass their knowledge on to their biological descendants or to people of their private choice, but the results had been catastrophic.

Instead of enhancing this knowledge, these new sorcerers, who had been selected by arbitrary favoritism, confabulated to enhance themselves.

They were finally destroyed, and their destruction nearly obliterated their knowledge.

The few sorcerers who were left then decided that their knowledge should never again be passed on to their descendants or to people of their choice but to those selected by an impersonal power, which they called the spirit.

END **HTML** EDITOR

It was impossible for me to determine, at that time, whether the picnic had been a dream or had actually taken place.

I was incapable of remembering, in a sequential order, all the events I had participated in from the moment I fell asleep on the bed in the healing room.

My next clear recollection was that I found myself talking with **Delia**

at the table, in that same room.

Familiar with such lapses of memory, which used to occur in my childhood, I **didn't** at first make much of this discrepancy. As a child, eager to play, I would often get out of my bed half asleep and sneak out of my house through the window grill. Many times, I did indeed wake up in the plaza, playing with other children who **weren't** put to bed as early as I was.

There was no doubt in my mind that the picnic had been real, although I **couldn't** immediately place it in a time sequence.

I tried to think, to reconstruct the events, but it frightened me to bring forth the idea of my childhood memory lapses.

Somehow, I was reluctant to ask **Delia** about her friends, and she **didn't** volunteer any information either.

However, I did ask about the healing session, which I knew had been a dream.

"I had such an elaborate dream about a healer," I began cautiously. "Not only did she tell me her name, but she also assured me that she had made all my nightmares vanish."

"It **wasn't** a dream," **Delia** stated, her tone clearly revealing her displeasure.

She stared at me with an intensity that made me want to fidget, to move away. "The healer did tell you her name," she went on. "And she certainly did cure you from your sleep maladies."

"But it was a dream," I insisted. "In my dream, the healer was the size of a child. She **couldn't** have been real."

Delia reached for the glass of water on the table, but she **didn't** drink. She turned it around, on and on, without spilling a drop.

Then she looked at me with glittering eyes. "The healer gave you the impression of being little, that's all," she said, nodding to herself, as though the words had just occurred to her, and she had found them satisfactory.

She sipped her water with slow, slurping noises, and her eyes grew soft and reflective. "She had to be little in order to cure you."

"She had to be little? You mean I only saw her as being little?"

Delia nodded repeatedly then, leaning toward me, whispered, "You see, you were dreaming. Yet it **wasn't** a dream."

"The healer really came to you and cured you, but you were not in the place in which you are now."

"Come on, **Delia**," I objected. "What are you talking about? I know it was a dream. I am always totally aware that I am dreaming, even though the dreams are completely real to me. That's my malady, remember?"

"Maybe now that she has cured you, it's no longer your malady but your talent," **Delia** proposed, smiling. "But going back to your question, the healer had to be small, like a child, because you were quite young when your nightmares first began."

Her statement was so outlandish, I **couldn't** even laugh. "And now I am cured?" I asked facetiously.

"You are," she assured me. "In dreaming, cures are accomplished with great ease, almost effortlessly. What's difficult is to make people dream."

"Difficult?" I asked, my voice harsher than I had intended. "Everybody has dreams. We all have to sleep, don't we?"

Delia rolled her eyes derisively to the ceiling then gazed at me and

said, "Those are not the dreams I am talking about."

"Those are ordinary dreams. Dreaming has purpose: Ordinary dreams don't have any."

"They certainly do!" I emphatically disagreed with her, then went into a lengthy diatribe about the psychological importance of dreams. I cited works on psychology, philosophy, and art.

Delia wasn't in the least impressed with my knowledge.

She agreed with me that ordinary dreams must indeed help maintain the mental health of individuals, but insisted that she **wasn't** concerned with that.

"Dreaming has a purpose: Ordinary dreams don't," she reiterated.

"What purpose, **Delia**?" I said condescendingly.

She turned her head sideways, as if she wanted to hide her face from me.

An instant later she looked back at me. Something cold and detached showed itself in her eyes, and the change of expression was altogether so ruthless that I was frightened.

"Dreaming always has a practical purpose," she declared. "It serves the dreamer in simple or intricate ways."

"It has served you to get rid of your sleeping maladies."

"It served the witches at the picnic to know your essence."

"It served me to screen myself out of the awareness of the immigration guard patrol asking to see your tourist card."

"I'm trying to understand what you are saying, **Delia**," I mumbled.

Then I asked forcefully, "Do you mean that you people can hypnotize others against their wills?"

"Call it that if you wish," she said.

On her face was a look of calm indifference that bore little sympathy. "What you can't see yet is that you, yourself, can enter quite effortlessly into what you would call a hypnotic state."

"We call it dreaming; a dream that's not a dream; a dream where we can do nearly anything our hearts desire."

Delia almost made sense to me, but I had no words with which to express my thoughts, my feelings.

I stared at her, baffled.

Suddenly, I remembered an event from my adolescence.

When I was finally allowed driving lessons in my father's jeep, I surprised my family by showing them that I already knew how to shift: I had been doing it for years in my dreams.

With an assurance that was even baffling to me, on my first venture I took the jeep on the old road from **Caracas** to **La Guayra**, the port by the sea.

I deliberated whether I should tell **Delia** about this episode, but instead asked her about the healer's size.

"She is not a tall woman, but neither is she as small as you saw her."

"In her healing dream, she projected her smallness for your benefit, and in doing so, she was small."

"That's the nature of magic. You have to be what you want to give the impression of."

"Is she a magician?" I asked expectantly.

The thought that they all worked in a circus; that they were part of some magic show had passed my mind at various times. It would explain

so many things about them, I believed.

"No. She's not a magician," **Delia** said. "She's a sorceress."

Delia gazed at me so scornfully I was ashamed of my question.

"Magicians are in a show," she explained, gazing at me pointedly:

"Sorcerers are in the world without being part of the world."

She was silent for a long time, then a sigh escaped her lips. "Would you like to see **Esperanza** now?" she asked.

"Yes," I said eagerly. "I would like that very much."

The possibility that the healer had been real and not a dream made my head spin.

I **didn't** quite believe **Delia**, and yet I wanted to believe her in the worst way. My thoughts ran wild.

Suddenly I realized that I **hadn't** mentioned to **Delia** that the healer of my dream had told me her name was **Esperanza**.

I was so absorbed in my thoughts I failed to notice that **Delia** as speaking.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

"The only way you can make sense of all this is to call back dreaming," she maintained.

Laughing softly, she waved her hand as she were signaling someone to come.

Her words were of no importance to me. I was already pondering another train of thought.

Esperanza was real, and I was certain she was going to clarify everything for me.

Besides, she had not been the picnic: She had not treated me as abominably as all the other women had.

I harbored the vague hope that **Esperanza** had liked me, and this thought somehow restored my confidence.

To disguise my feelings from **Delia**, I told her that I was anxious to see the healer. "I would like to thank her, and of course, pay her for all she did for me."

"It's already paid," **Delia** stated. The mocking glint in her eyes early revealed that she was privy to my thoughts.

"What do you mean it's already paid?" I asked in an involuntarily high-pitched voice. "Who paid for it?"

"It's hard to explain," **Delia** began with a distant kindness that put me momentarily at ease:

"It all began at your friend's party in **Nogales**. I noticed you instantly."

"You did?" I asked expectantly, eager to hear some compliment on my tasteful and carefully chosen wardrobe.

There was an uncomfortable silence. I **couldn't** see **Delia**'s eyes, veiled under her half-closed lids.

There was something quiet yet oddly disturbing about her voice as she said that what she had noticed about me was that every time I had to talk to my friend's grandmother, I seemed to be absentminded as if I were asleep.

"Absentminded is putting it mildly," I said. "You have no idea what I went through; what I had to do to convince that old lady that I **wasn't** the devil incarnate."

Delia seemed not to have heard me. "I knew in a flash that you had

great facility to dream," she went on:

"So I followed you around through the house and saw you in action.

"You were not fully aware of what you were doing or saying. And yet you were doing fine; talking and laughing, and lying your head off to be liked."

"Are you calling me a liar?" I asked in jest but betraying my hurt.

I felt an impulse to get angry.

I stared at the pitcher of water on the table until the threatening feeling had passed.

"I **wouldn't** dare call you a liar," **Delia** pronounced rather pompously. "I'd call you a dreamer."

There was a heavy solemnity in her voice, but her eyes sparkled with mirth, with genial malice, as she said, "The sorcerers who reared me told me that it **doesn't** matter what one may say as long as one has the power to say it."

Her voice conveyed such enthusiasm and approval, that I was sure someone was behind one of the doors listening to us.

"And the way to get that power," she said, "is from dreaming.

"You don't know this because you do it naturally, but when you are in a pinch, your mind goes instantly into dreaming."

In order to change the subject, I asked, "Were you reared by sorcerers, **Delia**?"

"Of course I was," she declared, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Were your parents sorcerers?"

"**Oh**, no," she said and chuckled:

"The sorcerers found me one day and reared me from then on."

"How old were you? Were you a child?"

Delia laughed, as if with my question I had reached the height of humor.

"No, I **wasn't** a child," she said. "I was perhaps your age when they found me, and began to rear me."

"What do you mean they began to rear you?"

Delia gazed at me but without focusing her eyes on me. For a moment I thought she **hadn't** heard me or, if she had, she **wasn't** going to answer me.

I repeated my question.

She shrugged and smiled. "They reared me as one rears a child," she finally said. "It **doesn't** matter how old you are: In their world, you are a child."

Suddenly afraid we might be overheard, I glanced over my shoulder, and whispered, "Who are these sorcerers, **Delia**?"

"That's a very tough question," she mused. "At the moment, I can't even begin to answer it.

"All I can tell you about them is that they are the ones who said to me that one should never lie to be believed."

"Why should one lie then?" I asked.

"For the sheer pleasure of it," **Delia** promptly retorted.

She then rose from the chair, and walked toward the door that led to the yard.

Before stepping outside, she turned and with a grin on her face asked, "Do you know the saying, 'If you are not lying to be believed, you can say

anything you want, regardless of what anybody thinks of you."

"I **ve** never heard such a saying."

I suspected she had made it up: It had her stamp.

"Besides, I don't understand what you're trying to say," I added primly.

"I'm sure you do," she said, looking sidelong at me through the strands of her black hair.

Gesturing with her chin, she motioned me to follow her. "Let's go and see **Esperanza** now."

I jumped up and dashed after her, only to come to an abrupt halt by the door.

Momentarily blinded by the brightness outside, I stood there, wondering what had happened.

It seemed that no time had elapsed since I had run after **Mr. Flores** across the field. The sun, as it had been then, was still at the zenith.

I caught a glimpse of **Delia**'s red skirt as she turned a corner.

I rushed after her across a stone archway that led to a most enchanting patio.

At first I saw nothing; so strong was the contrast between the dazzling sunlight and the intense shadows of the patio.

Breathlessly, I simply stood there, perfectly still, inhaling the humid air: It was fragrant with the scent of orange blossoms, honeysuckle, and sweet peas.

Climbing up strings that seemed to be suspended from the sky, the sweet peas hung like a brightly colored tapestry amidst the foliage of trees, shrubs, and ferns.

The healer I had seen before in my dream was sitting on a rocking chair in the middle of the patio.

She was much older than **Delia** and the women at the picnic; though how I knew this, I **couldn't** say.

She was rocking to and fro with an air of dreamy abandon.

I felt an anguishing pain that gripped my whole being, for I had the irrational certainty that her rocking movement was taking her farther and farther away from me.

A wave of agony, an indescribable loneliness engulfed me as I kept staring at her.

I wanted to cross the patio and hold her, but something about the patio's dark tiles, laid out in a most intricate pattern, held my feet in place.

"**Esperanza**," I finally managed to whisper in a voice so feeble it was barely audible even to myself.

She opened her eyes and smiled quite without surprise; as if she had been expecting me.

She rose and walked toward me.

She was not the size of a child, but about my height; five feet and two inches.

She was thin and fragile-looking, yet exuded a vitality that made me feel puny and shrunken.

"How happy I am to see you again." Her voice sounded sincere.

She motioned me to grab one of the rush chairs and sit beside her.

As I looked about me, I discovered the other women, including **Delia**.

They were sitting on rush chairs, half hidden by shrubs and trees:

They, too, were watching me curiously.

Some of them smiled, while the others kept on eating **tamales** from the plates on their laps.

In the shady, green light of the patio- in spite of the mundane task of eating- the women appeared insubstantial; imaginary.

Each one of them was unnaturally vivid without being distinct.

They seemed to have absorbed the patio's greenish light, which had settled all around us like a transparent fog.

The fleeting but awesome idea that I was in a house populated by ghosts crossed my mind.

"Would you like to eat something?" **Esperanza** asked me. "**Delia** has made the most delicious food you can imagine."

"No, thank you," I murmured in a voice that **didn't** sound like my own.

Seeing her questioning expression, I added feebly, "I'm not hungry."

I was so nervous and agitated that even if I had been starving I **wouldn't** have been able to swallow a bite.

Esperanza must have sensed my fear. She leaned toward me and patted my arm reassuringly. "What is it that you want to know?"

"I thought I had seen you in a dream," I blurted out, then, noticing the laughter in her eyes, added, "Am I dreaming now?"

"You are, but you are not asleep," she replied, enunciating her words slowly and precisely.

"How can I be dreaming and not be asleep?"

"Some women can do that with great ease," she maintained. "They can be dreaming and not be asleep."

"You are one of those women."

"Others have to work a lifetime to accomplish that."

I sensed a tinge of admiration in her voice, yet I **wasn't** in the least flattered.

On the contrary: I was more worried than ever. "But how is it possible to dream without sleeping?" I insisted.

"If I explain to you how it is possible, you won't understand it," she pronounced. "Take my word for this: It's much better to postpone the explanations for the time being."

Again she patted my arm and a gentle smile lit up her face. "For the moment it's enough for you to know that, for you, I am the one who brings dreams."

I **didn't** think it was enough, but I **didn't** dare to tell her so.

Instead, I asked her, "Was I awake when you cured me of my nightmares? And was I dreaming when I sat outside in the field with **Delia** and all the others?"

Esperanza regarded me for a long moment then nodded sagely, as if she had decided to reveal some monumental truth. "You're too dumb to see the mystery of what we do."

She said this so matter-of-factly; so **nonjudgmentally** that it **didn't** occur to me to take offense, or to attempt any kind of rebuttal.

"But you could make me see it, **couldn't** you?" I pleaded eagerly.

The other women giggled: It **wasn't** a mocking sound but a murmuring that echoed all around me like a muffled chorus.

The sound **didn't** seem to come from the women but from the shadows of the patio.

Rather than a giggle, it was a whisper; a delicate warning that not only made me lose my thrust, but erased my troubling doubts; my desire to know.

And then I knew, without a shadow of doubt, that I had been awake and dreaming both times.

It was a knowledge that I **couldn't** explain, however.

It was something beyond words.

Yet, after a few moments, I felt compelled to dissect my realization, to put it all into some kind of logical framework.

Esperanza regarded me with apparent pleasure.

Then she said, "I'm going to explain to you who we are and what we do."

She prefaced her elucidation with an admonition: She warned me that whatever she had to tell me **wasn't** easy to believe. Therefore, I had to suspend judgment and hear her out without interruptions; without questions:

"Can you do that?"

"Naturally," I shot back.

She was silent for a moment, her eyes appraising me thoughtfully.

She must have sensed my uncertainty and the question that was about to burst from my lips.

"It **isn't** that I don't want to answer your questions," she maintained. "It's rather that at this time it will be impossible for you to understand the answers."

I nodded, not in agreement, but afraid that if so much as a peep came out of me she would stop talking altogether.

In a voice that was but a soft murmur, she told me something that was both incredible and fascinating.

She said that she was the spiritual descendant of sorcerers who lived in the valley of **Oaxaca** millennia before the Spanish conquest.

Esperanza was silent for a long time.

Her eyes, fixed on the bright, multicolored, sweet peas, seemed to reach nostalgically into the past.

Esperanza continued, "As it is for me, the part of those sorcerers' activities pertinent to you is called dreaming."

"Those sorcerers were men and women who possessed extraordinary dreaming powers, and performed acts that defied the imagination."

Hugging my knees, I listened to her.

Esperanza was a brilliant **raconteuse** and a most gifted mimic: Her face changed with each turn of her explanation.

It was at times the face of a young woman, at other times an old woman's; or it was the face of a man, or that of an innocent and impish child.

She said that millennia ago, men and women were the possessors of a knowledge that allowed them to slip in and out of our normal world.

And thus they divided their lives into two areas: the day and the night.

During the day they conducted their activities like everyone else: They engaged in normal, expected, everyday behavior.

During the night, however, they became dreamers.

They systematically dreamed dreams that broke the boundaries of what we consider to be reality.

Again she paused, as though giving me time to let her words sink in.

"Using the darkness as a cloak," she went on, "they accomplished an inconceivable thing: They were able to dream while they were awake."

Anticipating the question I was about to voice, **Esperanza** explained that to be dreaming while they were awake meant that they could immerse themselves in a dream that gave them the energy necessary to perform feats that stagger the mind while they were perfectly conscious and awake.

Because of the aggressive mode of interaction at home, I never developed the ability to listen for very long. If I **couldn't** meddle with direct, belligerent questions, any verbal exchange, no matter how interesting, was meaningless to me.

Now, unable to argue, I became restless. I was dying to interrupt **Esperanza**.

I had questions, but to get answers; to have things explained to me was not the thrust of my urge to interrupt.

What I wanted to do was to give in to my compulsion to have a shouting match with her in order to feel normal again.

As if privy to my turmoil, **Esperanza** stared at me for an instant and then signaled me to speak. Or I thought she had given me such a command.

I opened my mouth to say- as usual- anything that came to my mind even if it **wasn't** related to the subject. But I **couldn't** say a word.

I struggled to speak and made gargling sounds to the delight of the women in the background.

Esperanza resumed talking, as if she **hadn't** noticed my futile efforts.

It surprised me to no end that she had my undivided attention.

She said that the origins of the sorcerers' knowledge could be understood only in terms of a legend:

A superior being commiserating with the terrible plight of man- to be driven as an animal by food and reproduction- gave man the power to dream and taught him how to use his dreams.

"Legends, of course, tell the truth in a concealed fashion," she elucidated:

"The legends' success in concealing the truth rests on man's conviction that they are simply stories.

"Legends of men changing into birds or angels are accounts of a concealed truth, which appears to be the fantasizing, or simply the delusions of primitive or deranged minds.

"So it's been the task of sorcerers for thousands of years to make new legends, and to discover the concealed truth of old ones.

"This is where dreamers come into the picture.

Women are best at dreaming. They have the facility to abandon themselves; the facility to let go.

"The woman who taught me to dream could maintain two hundred dreams."

Esperanza regarded me intently as if she were appraising my reaction which was complete stupefaction for I had no idea what she meant.

She explained that to maintain a dream meant that one could dream something specific about oneself and could enter into that dream at will. Her teacher, she said, could enter at will into two hundred specific

dreams about herself.

"Women are peerless dreamers," **Esperanza** assured me:

"Women are extremely practical. In order to sustain a dream, one must be practical, because the dream must pertain to practical aspects of oneself.

"My teacher's favorite dream was to dream of herself as a hawk. Another was to dream of herself as an owl.

"So depending on the time of the day, she could dream about being either one, and since she was dreaming while she was awake, she was really and absolutely a hawk or an owl."

There was such sincerity and conviction in her tone and in her eyes, I was entirely under her spell.

Not for a moment did I doubt her.

Nothing she could have said would have seemed outlandish to me at that moment.

She further explained that in order to accomplish a dream of that nature, women need to have an iron discipline.

She leaned toward me and in a confidential whisper, as though she **didn't** want the others to overhear her, said, "By iron discipline I don't mean any kind of strenuous routine, but rather that women have to break the routine of what is expected of them.

"And they have to do it in their youth," she stressed, "And most important, with their strength intact.

"Often, when women are old enough to be done with the business of being women, they decide it's time to concern themselves with **nonworldly** or other-worldly thoughts and activities.

"Little do they know or want to believe that hardly ever do such women succeed." She gently slapped my stomach, as if she were playing on a drum. "The secret of a woman's strength is her womb."

Esperanza nodded emphatically, as if she had actually heard the silly question that popped into my mind: "Her womb?"

"Women," she continued, "must begin by burning their matrix.

"They cannot be the fertile ground that has to be seeded by men following the command of God himself."

Still watching me closely, she smiled and asked, "Are you religious by any chance?"

I shook my head.

I **couldn't** speak. My throat was so constricted I could scarcely breathe.

I was dumbstruck with fear and amazement, not so much by what she was saying, but by her change: If asked, I **wouldn't** have been able to tell when she changed, but all of a sudden her face was young and radiant: Inner life seemed to have been fired up in her.

"That's good!" **Esperanza** exclaimed. "This way you don't have to struggle against beliefs," she pointed out. "They are very hard to overcome.

"I was reared a devout Catholic. I nearly died when I had to examine my attitude toward religion." She sighed.

Her voice, turning wistful, became soft as she added, "But that was nothing compared to the battle I had to wage before I became a **bona fide** dreamer."

I waited expectantly, hardly breathing, while a quite pleasurable

sensation spread like a mild electrical current through my entire body.

I anticipated a tale of a gruesome battle between herself and terrifying creatures.

I could barely disguise my disappointment when she revealed that she had to battle herself.

"In order to be a dreamer, I had to vanquish the self," **Esperanza** explained. "Nothing, but nothing, is as hard as that.

"We women are the most wretched prisoners of the self. The self is our cage.

"Our cage is made out of commands and expectations poured on us from the moment we are born.

"You know how it is. If the first born child is a boy, there is a celebration. If it's a girl, there is a shrug of the shoulders and the statement, 'It's all right. I still will love her and do anything for her.'"

Out of respect for the old woman, I **didn't** laugh out loud.

Never in my life had I heard statements of that sort. I considered myself an independent woman, but obviously, in light of what **Esperanza** was saying, I was no better off than any other woman.

And contrary to the manner in which I would have normally reacted to such an idea, I agreed with her.

I had always been made aware that the precondition of my being a woman was to be dependent. I was taught that a woman was indeed fortunate if she could be desirable so men would do things for her. I was told that it was demeaning to my womanhood to endeavor to do anything myself if that thing could be given to me. It was drilled into me that a woman's place is in the home with her husband and her children.

"Like you, I was reared by an authoritarian yet lenient father,"

Esperanza went on:

"I thought, like yourself, that I was free. For me to understand the sorcerers' way- that freedom **didn't** mean to be myself- nearly killed me. To be myself was to assert my womanhood. And to do that took all my time, effort, and energy.

"The sorcerers, on the contrary, understand freedom as the capacity to do the impossible, the unexpected- to dream a dream that has no basis, no reality in everyday life."

Her voice again became but a whisper as she added, "The knowledge of sorcerers is what is exciting and new.

"Imagination is what a woman needs to change the self and become a dreamer."

Esperanza said that if she had not succeeded in vanquishing the self, she would have only led a woman's normal life; the life her parents had designed for her; a life of defeat and humiliation; a life devoid of all mystery; a life that had been programmed by custom and tradition.

Esperanza pinched my arm.

I cried out in pain.

"You'd better pay attention," she reprimanded me.

"I am," I mumbled defensively, rubbing my arm: I had been certain that no one would notice my waning interest.

"You won't be tricked or enticed into the sorcerer's world," she warned me. "You have to choose, knowing what awaits you."

The fluctuations of my mood were astonishing to me because they were quite irrational. I should have been afraid. Yet I was calm, as if my

being there were the most natural thing in the world.

"The secret of a woman's strength is her womb," **Esperanza** said and slapped my stomach once more.

She said that women dream with their wombs, or rather, from their wombs. The fact that they have wombs makes them perfect dreamers.

Before I had even finished the thought 'why is the womb so important?' **Esperanza** answered me.

"The womb is the center of our creative energy," she explained, "to the point that, if there would be no more males in the world, women could continue to reproduce.

"And the world would then be populated by the female of the human species only."

She added that women reproducing unilaterally could only reproduce clones of themselves.

I was genuinely surprised at this specific piece of knowledge.

I **couldn't** help interrupting **Esperanza** to tell her that I had read about parthenogenetic and asexual reproduction in a biology class.

She shrugged her shoulders and went on with her explanation.

"Women, having then the ability and the organs for reproducing life, have also the ability to produce dreams with those same organs," she said.

Seeing the doubt in my eyes, she warned me, "Don't trouble yourself wondering how it is done. The explanation is very simple, and because it's simple, it's the most difficult thing to understand. I still have trouble myself.

"So in a true woman's fashion, I act: I dream and leave the explanations to men."

Esperanza claimed that originally the sorcerers she had told me about used to pass their knowledge on to their biological descendants or to people of their private choice, but the results had been catastrophic.

Instead of enhancing this knowledge, these new sorcerers, who had been selected by arbitrary favoritism, confabulated to enhance themselves.

They were finally destroyed, and their destruction nearly obliterated their knowledge.

The few sorcerers who were left then decided that their knowledge should never again be passed on to their descendants or to people of their choice but to those selected by an impersonal power, which they called the spirit.

"And now, all this brings us to you," **Esperanza** pronounced.

"The sorcerers of ancient times decided that only the ones who were pinpointed would qualify. You were pointed out to us. And here you are!

"You are a natural dreamer. It's up to the forces that rule us where you go from here.

"It's not up to you. Nor to us, of course.

"You can only acquiesce or refuse."

From the urgency in her voice, and the compelling light in her eyes, it was obvious that she had given this explanation in complete seriousness.

It was this earnestness that stopped me from laughing out loud. Also, I was too exhausted.

The mental concentration I had needed to follow her was too intense. I wanted to sleep.

She insisted I stretch my legs, lie down, and relax.

I did it so thoroughly that I dozed off.

When I opened my eyes, I had no idea how long I had slept.

I sought the reassuring presence of **Esperanza** or the other women.

There was no one with me on the patio. But I **didn't** feel alone:

Somehow their presence lingered amidst the green all around me, and I felt protected.

A breeze rustled the leaves. I felt it on my eyelids, warm and soft. It blew around me, then passed over me the same way it was passing over the desert, quickly and soundlessly.

With my gaze fixed on the tiles, I walked around the patio trying to figure out its intricate design. To my delight, the lines led me from one rush chair to the other. I tried to recall who had sat in which chair, but hard as I tried, I **couldn't** remember.

I was distracted by a delicious scent of food, spiced with onions and garlic.

Guided by that smell, I found my way to the kitchen, a large rectangular room.

It was as deserted as the patio. And the bright tile designs adorning the walls reminded me of the patterns in the patio.

I **didn't** pursue the similarities, for I had discovered the food left on the sturdy wooden table standing in the middle of the room.

Assuming that it was for me, I sat down and ate it all. It was the same spicy stew I had eaten at the picnic: Warmed over, it was even tastier.

As I gathered the dishes to take them to the sink, I discovered a note and a drawn map under my place mat.

It was from **Delia**. She suggested I return to **Los Angeles** by way of **Tucson**, where she would meet me at a certain coffee shop specified on the map.

Only there, she wrote, would she tell me more about herself and her friends.

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[Florinda Donner](#) - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 4

Version 2007.03.08

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

[Florinda Donner](#)

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Chapter 4

HTML EDITOR:

Without being in the least affected by my anger, he said that

Esperanza had made it very clear to me that they were committed to rear me from now on.

"Rear me!" I yelled. "You're crazy. I've had all the rearing I need!"

Ignoring my outburst, he went on to explain that their commitment was total; and whether or not I understood this was of no importance to them.

END **HTML** EDITOR

Eager to hear what **Delia** had to tell me about her friends, I went to

Tucson on my way to **Los Angeles**.

In **Tucson** I arrived at the coffee shop in the late afternoon.

An old man directed me to an empty space in the parking lot.

Only when he opened my door did I realize who it was.

"**Mariano Aureliano!**" I exclaimed. "What a surprise. I'm so glad to

see you. What are you doing here?"

"I was waiting for you," he said. "So my friend and I saved this space for you."

I caught a glimpse of a burly Indian driving an old red pickup truck: He had pulled out of the parking space as I drove into the lot.

"I'm afraid **Delia couldn't** make it," **Mariano Aureliano** said apologetically. "She had to leave for **Oaxaca** unexpectedly."

He smiled broadly and added, "I'm here on her behalf. I hope I fit the bill."

"You've no idea how delighted I am to see you," I said truthfully.

I was convinced that he, better than **Delia**, would help me make sense of all that had happened to me during the past few days.

"**Esperanza** explained to me that I was in some sort of a trance when I met all of you," I added.

"Did she say that?" he asked almost absentmindedly.

His voice, his attitude, and his whole demeanor was so different from what I remembered, that I kept staring at him hoping to discover what had changed.

His fiercely chiseled face had lost all its fierceness.

I was busy with my own turmoil, however, and **didn't** give his change any more thought.

"**Esperanza** left me alone in the house," I went on:

"She and all the women went away without even saying good-bye to me.

"But I **wasn't** disturbed," I hastened to point out:

"Although I'm usually very put out when people are not courteous."

"**Oh** really!" he exclaimed, as if I had said something extremely meaningful.

Afraid that he might take offense at what I was saying about his companions, I immediately started to explain that I **hadn't** really meant to say that **Esperanza** and the others had been unfriendly. "Quite the contrary, they were most gracious and kind," I assured him.

I was about to reveal what **Esperanza** had told me, but his steady gaze stopped me.

It **wasn't** an angry stare or a threatening one: It was a piercing look that cut through all my defenses.

I had the certainty he was seeing right into the mess that my mind was.

I glanced away to hide my nervousness then told him in a light, almost joking tone that it **hadn't** really mattered to me that I had been left alone in the house. "I was intrigued that I knew every corner of that place," I confided, then paused for a moment, wondering what impact my words were having on him.

But he kept staring at me.

"I went to the bathroom, and I realized that I had been in that bathroom before," I continued:

"There were no mirrors in it. I remembered that detail before I actually entered the room.

"Then I remembered that there were no mirrors in the whole house.

"So I went through every room, and sure enough, I **couldn't** find any."

Noticing that I was still getting no reaction from him, I went on to say that I had realized while listening to the radio on my way to **Tucson** that

it was one day later than I expected.

"I must have slept a whole day," I finished in a strained tone.

"You **didn't** quite sleep a whole day," **Mariano Aureliano** pointed out indifferently:

"You walked through the house and talked to us a great deal before falling asleep like a log."

I started laughing. My laughter was very near to hysteria, but he **didn't** seem to notice this.

He laughed too, and I relaxed.

"I don't sleep like a log, ever," I felt compelled to explain. "I'm an extremely light sleeper."

He was silent, and when he finally spoke his voice was serious; demanding:

"Don't you remember being curious about how the women dressed and did their hair without glancing into mirrors?"

I could think of no reply, and he went on to say, "Don't you remember how odd you found it that there were no pictures on the walls, and that there was no--"

"I have no recollection of having talked to anyone," I cut him off in **midsentence**.

Then I glanced at him guardedly, thinking that perhaps, just in order to mystify me, he was saying I had interacted with everybody in that house, when in reality nothing of that sort had happened.

"Having no recollection of it **doesn't** mean it **didn't** take place," he said curtly.

My stomach fluttered involuntarily: It **wasn't** his tone of voice I took exception to, but rather the fact that he had answered my unspoken thoughts.

Certain that if I kept on talking something would dispel my mounting apprehension, I went into a long and muddled recitation of how I felt.

I recounted what had happened. There were gaps in the order of events as I tried to reconstruct all that had taken place between the healing session and my drive to **Tucson** during which I knew that I had lost a whole day.

"You people are doing something to me; something strange and threatening," I finished, feeling momentarily righteous.

"Now you're being silly," **Mariano Aureliano** pronounced and he smiled for the first time:

"If something is strange and threatening, it is only because you're new at it.

"You're a tough woman. It'll make sense to you sooner or later."

I was annoyed at the sound of his word 'woman'.

I would have preferred if he had said girl: Accustomed as I was to being asked for my papers to prove that I was over sixteen, I suddenly felt old.

"Youth must be only in the eyes of the beholder," he said as if he were again reading my thoughts:

"Whoever looks at you must see your youth, your vigor; but for you to feel you're a kid is wrong.

"You must be innocent without being immature."

For some inexplicable reason, his words were more than I could bear. I wanted to weep; not out of hurt, but out of despondency.

At a loss for what to do, I suggested we have something to eat. "I'm famished," I said, trying to sound cheerful.

"No, you're not," he said with authority. "You're just trying to change the subject."

Startled by his tone and his words, I looked at him, appalled.

My surprise swiftly turned to anger. Not only was I hungry, but I was also exhausted and stiff from the long drive.

I wanted to yell and vent on him all my wrath and frustration, but his eyes didn't let me move.

There was something reptilian about those unblinking, burning eyes: for a moment I thought he might swallow me up, as a snake swallows a mesmerized, defenseless bird.

The mixture of fear and anger escalated to such heights I felt blood rushing to my face. And I knew by the slight curious lift of his brows that my face had turned purple.

Since very early childhood, I had indulged in horrid attacks of temper.

Other than trying to soothe me, no one had ever stopped me from indulging in these attacks, and I had indulged in them until I had refined them into king-sized temper tantrums.

These tantrums were never caused by being denied what I wanted to have or wanted to do but by indignities- real or imagined- inflicted on my person.

Somehow the circumstances of that moment, however, made me feel ashamed of my habit.

I made a conscious effort to control myself, which nearly consumed all my strength, but I calmed down.

"You were a whole day with us, a day which you can't remember now," Mariano Aureliano proceeded, seemingly unconcerned by my fluctuating mood. "During that time, you were very communicative and responsive; a thing which was extremely rewarding to us.

"When you are dreaming, you are a much better being, more appealing, more resourceful. You allowed us to know you in great depth."

His words threw me into a turmoil. Growing up asserting myself the way I did, I had become quite adept at detecting meaning hidden behind words.

"To know me in great depth' bothered me to no end, especially 'great depth.' It could only mean one thing, I thought, and immediately discarded it as being preposterous.

I became so absorbed in my own calculations that I no longer paid any attention to what he was saying.

He kept on explaining about the day I had lost, but I only caught bits and pieces. I must have been staring at him blankly, for all of a sudden he stopped talking.

"You're not listening," he reprimanded me sternly.

"What did you do to me when I was in a trance?" I shot back at him. More than a question, it was an accusation.

I was startled by my own words, for it was not a thought-out statement: The words had simply escaped me of their own accord.

Mariano Aureliano was even more surprised. He almost choked on the burst of laughter that followed his wide-eyed expression of shock.

"We don't go around taking advantage of little girls," he assured me. Not only did he sound sincere, but he seemed to be offended by my

accusation:

"Esperanza told you who we are. We are very serious people," he stressed, then in a mocking tone added, "And we mean business."

"What kind of business?" I demanded belligerently. "Esperanza didn't tell me what you want from me."

"She certainly did," he retorted with such assurance I wondered for an instant if he hadn't been concealed, listening to our conversation in the patio. I wouldn't have put it past him.

"Esperanza told you that you have been pointed out to us," he went on. "And now we are as driven by that as you are driven by fear."

"I'm not driven by anything or anybody," I shouted, quite forgetting that he hadn't told me what is was they wanted from me.

Without being in the least affected by my anger, he said that Esperanza had made it very clear to me that they were committed to rear me from now on.

"Rear me!" I yelled. "You're crazy. I've had all the rearing I need!"

Ignoring my outburst, he went on to explain that their commitment was total; and whether or not I understood this was of no importance to them.

I stared at him, unable to hide my dread. Never before had I heard someone express himself with such compelling indifference and such concern at the same time.

In an effort to conceal my alarm, I tried to imbue my voice with a spunkiness I was far from feeling when I asked, "What do you imply when you say you are going to rear me?"

"Just what you hear," he answered. "We're committed to guide you."

"But why?" I asked, frightened and curious at the same time. "Can't you see that I don't need any guidance, that I don't want any..."

My words were drowned by Mariano Aureliano's joyful laughter. "You certainly need guidance.

"Esperanza already showed you how meaningless your life is."

Anticipating my next question, he motioned me to be silent. "As to why you and not someone else, she explained to you that we let the spirit tell us who we should guide. The spirit showed us that you were the one."

"Wait a minute, Mr. Aureliano," I protested. "I really don't want to be rude or ungrateful, but you must understand that I'm not seeking help.

"I don't want anybody to guide me, even though I probably need guidance.

"The mere thought is abhorrent to me. Do you see what I mean? Do I make myself clear?"

"You do, and I do see what you mean," he echoed, moving back a step away from my pointed finger. "But precisely because you don't need anything, you are a most adequate candidate."

"Candidate?" I yelled, fed up with his insistence.

I looked around me, wondering if I had been overheard by the people going in and out of the coffee shop.

"What is this?" I went on yelling. "You and your companions are all a bunch of nuts. You leave me alone, you hear? I don't need you or anyone."

To my surprise and morbid delight, Mariano Aureliano finally lost his temper and began to berate me like my father and brothers used to.

In a tightly controlled voice that never rose to be heard beyond us, he insulted me.

He called me stupid and spoiled. And then, as if insulting me had given him impetus, he said something unforgivable.

He shouted that the only asset I ever had was to be born blond and blue-eyed in a land where blond hair and blue eyes were coveted and revered.

"You never had to struggle for anything," he asserted. "The colonial mentality of the **cholos** of your country made them regard you as if you really deserved special treatment.

"Privilege based merely on having blond hair and blue eyes is the dumbest privilege there is."

I was livid.

I've never been one to take insults sitting down. My years of training at shouting matches at home and the extraordinarily descriptive vulgarities I learned- and never forgot- in the streets of **Caracas** in my childhood paid off that afternoon.

I said things to **Mariano Aureliano** that embarrass me to this day.

I was so worked up I **didn't** notice that the burly Indian who was driving the pickup truck had joined us. I only realized he was there when I heard his loud laughter. He and **Mariano Aureliano** were practically on the ground, clasping their stomachs, shrieking with delight.

"What's so funny?" I yelled, turning to the burly Indian. I insulted him, too.

"What a foul-mouthed woman," he said in perfect English. "If I were your daddy I would wash your mouth with soap."

"Who asked you to butt in, you fat turd?" In blind fury, I kicked him in the shinbone.

He yelled out in pain, and cursed me.

I was about to reach for his arm, and bite him when **Mariano Aureliano** grabbed me from behind and tossed me in the air.

Time stopped.

My descent was so slow, so imperceptible, it seemed to me that I was suspended in the air forever.

I **didn't** land on the ground with my bones broken, as I expected, but in the arms of the burly Indian.

He **didn't** even stagger but held me as if I weighed no more than a pillow, a ninety-five pound pillow. Catching the wicked glint in his eyes, I was certain he was going to toss me again.

He must have sensed my fear, for he smiled and gently put me down.

My wrath and strength spent, I leaned against my car and sobbed.

Mariano Aureliano put his arm around me and stroked my hair and shoulders, the way my father used to do when I was a child.

In a soothing murmur, he assured me that he **wasn't** in the least upset at the barbarities I had yelled at him.

Guilt and self-pity only made me weep harder.

He shook his head in a sign of resignation, although his eyes shone with mirth.

Then in an obvious effort to make me laugh, too, he confessed that he still **couldn't** believe I would know, let alone use, such foul language.

"Well, I suppose language is there to be used," he mused, "and foul language should be used when the circumstances are called for."

I **wasn't** amused. And once the attack of self-pity had passed, I began, in my usual fashion, to mull over his assertion that all I had going for me

was blond hair and blue eyes.

I must have cued **Mariano Aureliano** about my feelings, for he assured me that he had said that only to upset me and that there **wasn't** a shred of truth in it.

I knew he was lying. For an instant I felt doubly insulted, and then I was appalled to realize that my defenses were shattered.

I agreed with him. He had been right on target about everything he had said.

With a single stroke, he had unmasked me; cut through my shield, so to speak.

No one, not even my worst enemy, could have hit me with such an accurately devastating blow.

And yet, whatever I might have thought about **Mariano Aureliano**, I knew he **wasn't** my enemy.

I felt quite dizzy with my realization.

It was as if an unseen force were crushing something within me; the idea of myself.

Something that had given me strength was now depleting me.

Mariano Aureliano took me by the arm, and walked me toward the coffee shop. "Let's sign a truce," he said jovially. "I need you to do me a favor."

"You need only to ask," I responded, trying to match his tone.

"Before you got here, I went into this coffee shop to have a sandwich, and they practically refused to serve me.

"When I complained, the cook threw me out." **Mariano Aureliano** looked at me dejectedly and added, "That happens when one is an Indian."

"Report that cook to the manager," I cried out in righteous indignation; my own turmoil totally and most mysteriously forgotten.

"That **wouldn't** help me in the least," **Mariano Aureliano** confided.

The only way I could help him, he assured me, was to go into the coffee shop by myself, sit at the counter, order an elaborate meal, and drop a dead fly in my food.

"And blame the cook," I finished for him. The whole scheme sounded so preposterous it made me laugh.

But when I caught sight of his genuine expectation, I promised to do what he asked of me.

"Wait here," **Mariano Aureliano** said, then together with the burly Indian- who had yet to be introduced to me- headed toward the old red pickup truck parked in the street. They returned within moments.

"By the way," **Mariano Aureliano** said, "this man here is John. He's a **Yuma** Indian from **Arizona**."

I wanted to ask him if he also was a sorcerer, but **Mariano Aureliano** beat me to the punch. "He is the youngest member of our group," he confided.

Giggling nervously, I extended my hand and said, "I'm glad to meet you."

"Likewise," John responded in a deep, resonant voice, and clasped my hand warmly in his. "I hope you and I never come to blows again," he grinned.

Although he **wasn't** very tall, he exuded the vitality and strength of a giant. Even his big, white teeth seemed indestructible.

In a joking manner, John felt my biceps. "I d bet you can knock a fellow out cold with one punch," he said.

Before I had a chance to apologize to him for my kicks and insults, **Mariano Aureliano** pressed a small box into my hand.

"The fly," he whispered. "John here suggests that you wear this," he added, retrieving a black, curly wig from a bag. "Don't worry, it's brand new," he assured me as he pulled the wig over my head.

Then, holding me at arm's length, he regarded me critically. "Not bad," he mused, making sure my long, blond braid was tucked in properly. "I don't want anyone to recognize you."

"There's no need to disguise myself," I asserted. "Take my word for it, I don't know anyone in **Tucson**."

I turned the side mirror of my car and looked at myself. "I can't go in looking like this," I protested. "I look like a poodle."

Mariano Aureliano gazed at me with an exasperating air of amusement as he arranged some stray curls. "Now, don't forget that you have to sit at the counter and yell bloody murder when you discover the fly in your food."

"Why?"

He regarded me as if I were dim-witted. "You have to attract attention and humiliate the cook," he pointed out.

The coffee shop was packed with the early dinner crowd. However, it wasn't long before I was seated at the counter and was waited on by a harrassed-looking but friendly old waitress.

Half-hidden behind the order rack was the cook. Like his two helpers, he appeared to be Mexican or Mexican-American.

He went about his job so cheerfully I was quite certain he was harmless; incapable of malice.

But when I thought of the old Indian waiting for me in the parking lot, I felt no guilt whatsoever as I emptied the little matchbox- with such stealth and speed not even the men on either side of me noticed it- over the perfectly cooked hamburger steak I had ordered.

My shriek of revulsion was genuine upon seeing a large, dead cockroach on my food.

"What is it, dear?" the waitress asked concernedly.

"How does the cook expect me to eat this?" I complained.

I didn't have to pretend anger. I was indignant; not at the cook but at **Mariano Aureliano**. "How can he do this to me?" I asked in a loud voice.

"It's all some dreadful accident," the waitress explained to the two curious and concerned customers on either side of me.

She showed the plate to the cook.

"Fascinating!" the cook said, his voice loud and clear.

Rubbing his chin thoughtfully, he studied the food. He wasn't in the least upset.

I had the vague suspicion he was laughing at me. "This cockroach must have either fallen from the ceiling," he deliberated, gazing at my head in fascinated interest, "or perhaps from her wig."

Before I could retort indignantly and put the cook in his place, he offered me anything that was on the menu. "It ll be on the house," he promised.

I asked for a steak and a baked potato, which was almost immediately brought to me. As I was pouring some salad dressing over my lettuce,

which I always ate last, I discovered a good-sized spider crawling from under a lettuce leaf.

I was so taken aback by this obvious evocation I couldn't even shriek.

I looked up. Waving from behind the order rack was the cook, a dazzling smile on his face.

Mariano Aureliano was waiting for me impatiently. "What happened?" he asked.

"You and your disgusting cockroach!" I spat out, then added resentfully, "Nothing happened."

"The cook didn't get upset. He enjoyed himself immensely, at my cost, of course. The only one who got upset was me."

At his urging, I gave **Mariano Aureliano** a detailed account of what took place. The more I talked, the more pleased he was.

Disconcerted by his reaction, I glowered at him. "What's so funny?" I demanded.

He tried to keep a serious face, but his lips twitched.

His soft chuckle exploded into a loud, delighted laughter. "You can't take yourself so seriously," he chided. "You re an excellent dreamer, but you re certainly no actress."

"I m not acting now. And I certainly wasn't acting in there there," I said defensively in a high, shrill voice.

"I meant that I was counting on your ability to be convincing," he said. "You had to make the cook believe something that wasn't true. I really thought you could."

"How dare you criticize me!" I shouted. "I made a fool of myself on your behalf, and all you can say is that I don't know how to act!"

I pulled off the wig and threw it at him. "I m sure I ve got lice now."

Ignoring my outburst, **Mariano Aureliano** went on to say that **Florinda** had already told him that I was incapable of pretending.

"We had to know it for sure, in order to put you in your proper slot," he added equably. "Sorcerers are either dreamers or stalkers. Some are both."

"What are you talking about? What's this nonsense of dreamers and stalkers?"

"Dreamers deal with dreams," he explained softly. "They get their power; their wisdom from dreams."

"Stalkers on the other hand deal with people; with the everyday world."

"They get their wisdom; their power from interacting with their fellow men."

"You obviously don't know me at all," I said derisively. "I interact very well with people."

"No, you don't t," he contradicted me. "You yourself said that you don't t know how to converse."

"You re a good liar, but you lie only to get what you want."

"Your lies are too specific, too personal. And do you know why?"

He paused for a moment, as if to give me time to respond. But before I could even think of what to say he added, "Because for you, things are either black or white with no shades of color in between."

"And I don't t mean it in terms of morality, but in terms of convenience. Your convenience, that is. A true authoritarian."

Mariano Aureliano and John exchanged glances, then both squared

their shoulders, clicked their heels and did something unforgivable to me.

They raised their arms in a fascist salute and said, "**Mein Fuehrer!**"

The more they laughed, the greater was my rage.

I felt my blood ringing in my ears, rushing to my face. And this time, I did nothing to calm myself.

I kicked my car and banged my arms against the roof.

The two men, instead of trying to soothe me- as my parents or my friends definitely would have done- stood there and laughed as I were providing them with the funniest spectacle possible.

Their indifference, their complete lack of concern for me was so shocking that my wrath slowed down of its own accord.

Never had I been so completely disregarded. I was lost.

I realized then that I had no more maneuvers left.

I had never known until that day that if the witnesses to my tantrums **didn't** show any concern, I **didn't** know what to do next.

"I think she's confused now," **Mariano Aureliano** said to John. "She **doesn't** know what to do."

He put his arm around the burly **idiot's** shoulders and added softly, yet still loud enough for me to hear, "Now she is going to cry, and when she does, she's going to cry her head off until we console her. Nothing is as tiresome as a spoiled **cunt.**"

That did it for me. Like an injured bull, I lowered my head and charged **Mariano Aureliano.**

He was so startled by my vicious, sudden attack, he almost lost his balance: It gave me enough time to sink my teeth in the fleshy part of his stomach.

He let out a yell, a mixture of pain and laughter.

John grabbed me by the waist and pulled me away. I **didn't** let go of my bite until my partial bridge came off. I had knocked two of my upper front teeth out when I was thirteen in a fight between the Venezuelan and the German students at the German high school in **Caracas.**

Both men howled with laughter. John bent over the trunk of my **Volkswagen**, holding his stomach and banging my car. "She's got a hole in her teeth, like a football player," he cried out in between shrieks.

My embarrassment was beyond words. I was so vexed that my knees gave in on me and I slid to the paved ground, like a rag doll, and actually passed out.

When I came to my senses, I was sitting inside the pickup truck.

Mariano Aureliano was pressing my back. Smiling, he stroked my head repeatedly and then embraced me.

I was surprised by my absence of emotion: I was neither embarrassed nor annoyed.

I was relaxed; at ease. It was a tranquility; a serenity I had never known before.

For the first time in my life, I realized that I had never been at peace with myself or with others.

"We like you immensely," **Mariano Aureliano** said. "But you have to cure yourself of your temper tantrums. If you don't, they will kill you.

"This time it was my fault. I must apologize to you. I did deliberately provoke you."

I was too calm to say anything. I got out of the truck to stretch my arms and legs. I had painful cramps in my calves.

After a few moments of silence, I apologized to the two men. I told them that my temper had gotten worse since I had started drinking colas compulsively.

"Stop drinking them," **Mariano Aureliano** suggested.

Then he completely changed the subject and went on talking as if nothing had happened. He said that he was extremely pleased that I had joined them.

"You are?" I asked uncomprehendingly. "Did I join you?"

"You did!" he emphasized. "One day it will all make sense to you."

He pointed to a flock of crows cawing above us. "The crows are a good omen.

"See how marvelous they look. They are like a painting in the sky. To see them now is a promise that we will see each other again."

I gazed at the birds until they flew out of sight.

When I turned to look at **Mariano Aureliano**, he was no longer there. The pickup truck had rolled away without a sound.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 5

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Florinda Donner

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Disregarding the scratchy bushes, I dashed after the dog, who was scurrying through the sagebrush with reckless speed.

I soon lost sight of its golden fur shimmering amidst the fragrant wild shrubs and followed the sound of its barks, growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

Uneasily, I glanced at the thick fog advancing on me.

It closed in around the spot where I stood and within moments there was no sight of the sky. The late afternoon sun, like a subdued ball of fire, was scarcely discernible. And the magnificent view of the Santa **Monica** Bay, now more imagined than seen from the Santa **Susana** Mountains, had disappeared with incredible speed.

I **wasn't** worried about the dog getting lost.

I, however, had no idea where to find the secluded spot my friends had chosen for our picnic. Or where the hiking path was that I had taken to chase after the dog.

I took a few hesitant steps in the same general direction the dog had followed, when something made me stop.

Emerging from above, through some crack in the fog, I saw a tiny point of light descending toward me. Another one followed, then another, like little flames tied to a string.

The lights trembled and vibrated in the air, then just before they reached me, they vanished, as though the fog around me had swallowed them up.

Since they had disappeared only a few feet in front of me, I moved on, closer to the spot, eager to examine that extraordinary sight.

As I peered intently into the fog, I saw dark, human shapes glide through the air, two or three feet off the ground, moving as though they were tiptoeing on clouds.

One after the other, the human shapes squatted, forming a circle.

I took a few more vacillating steps, then stopped as the fog thickened and absorbed them.

I remained still, not knowing what to do.

I felt a most unusual fright. Not the fright I am familiar with, but one in my body, in my belly; the kind of fright animals must have.

I don't know how long I stood there.

When the fog cleared enough for me to see, I saw to my left, about fifty feet away, two men sitting cross-legged on the ground.

They were whispering to each other, and the sound of their voices seemed to be all around me, captured in small patches of fog that were like tufts of cotton.

I **didn't** understand what they were saying, but I felt reassured as I caught a word here and there: They were speaking in Spanish.

"I'm lost!" I shouted in Spanish.

Both men slowly turned around, hesitant, disbelieving, as though they were seeing an apparition.

I spun around, wondering if there was someone behind me that was causing their dramatic reaction; but there was no one.

Grinning, one of the men rose, stretched his limbs until his joints cracked, then covered the distance between us in quick strides.

He was young, short, and powerfully built, with massive shoulders and a big head. His dark eyes radiated amusement and curiosity.

I told him that I had been hiking with friends and had gotten lost chasing after their dog. "I've no idea how to get back to them," I finished.

"You can't go any further this way," the man warned me. "We are standing on a cliff."

He took me confidently by the arm and led me to the very edge of the precipice, no more than ten feet away from where I had been standing.

"This friend of mine," he said, pointing to the other man, who had remained seated, staring at me, "had just finished telling me that there is an ancient Indian burial ground down below when you showed up and nearly scared us to death."

He studied my face, my long blond braid, and asked, "Are you Swedish?"

Still bewildered by what the young man had said about the burial ground, I stared into the fog.

Under normal circumstances, as a student of anthropology, I would have been thrilled to find out about an ancient Indian burial ground.

At the moment, however, I **couldn't** care less if there was indeed one in that foggy emptiness below me.

All I could think of was that if I **hadn't** been distracted by those lights I might have ended up buried myself.

"Are you Swedish?" the young man asked again.

"I am," I lied and immediately regretted it. I **couldn't** think of any way to correct it, though, without losing face.

"You speak Spanish perfectly," the man commented. "Swedish people have a marvelous ear for languages."

Although I felt terribly guilty, I **couldn't** help adding that more than a gift, it was a necessity for Scandinavians to learn various languages if they wanted to communicate with the rest of the world.

"Besides," I confessed, "I grew up in South America."

For some strange reason this piece of information seemed to baffle

the young man.

He shook his head, as if in disbelief, and then remained silent for a long while, deep in thought.

Then, as if he had arrived at some kind of a decision, he took me briskly by the hand, and guided me to where the other man was sitting.

I had no intention of socializing; I wanted to get back to my friends as soon as possible, but the young man made me feel so at ease that instead of asking them to lead me back to the hiking path, I gave them a detailed account of the lights and human shapes I had just seen.

"How strange that the spirit would spare her," the seated man muttered as if to himself, his dark brows drawn together in a frown.

But obviously he was talking to his companion, who mumbled something in return that I **didn't** catch.

They exchanged conspiratorial glances, intensifying my feelings of unease.

"I beg your pardon?" I said, turning to the man who was sitting. I **didn't** get what you were saying."

He stared at me aggressively and morosely.

"You were warned of the danger," he stated in a voice that was deep and resonant. "The emissaries of death came to your help."

"The who?" I felt compelled to ask, even though I had understood him perfectly well.

I examined him closely. For an instant, I had the certainty I knew him, but as I kept staring at him, I realized I had never seen him before. Yet I **couldn't** completely discard the feeling of knowing him.

He was not as young as the other man, but he **wasn't** old either.

He was definitely an Indian. His skin was dark brown. His hair was blue-black, straight and thick as a brush.

But it **wasn't** only his outward appearance that was almost familiar to me: He was morose, as only I could be morose.

Seemingly uncomfortable under my scrutiny, he rose abruptly. "I'll take you to your friends," he mumbled:

"Follow me, and don't you dare fall down. You'll fall on top of me and kill us both," he added in a gruff tone.

Before I had the opportunity to say that I **wasn't** a clumsy oaf, he led the way down a very steep side of a mountain in the opposite direction of the cliff.

"Do you know where you are going?" I shouted after him, my voice sharp with nervousness.

I **couldn't** orient myself- not that I am normally good at it- but I had not been aware of climbing up a hill as I chased the dog.

The man turned around.

An amused little grin quickly lit his face, though his eyes did not smile.

He looked at me with a black, stony look. "I'm going to take you to your friends," was all he said.

I **didn't** like him, yet I believed him.

He **wasn't** too tall- about five feet ten- and he was small boned, yet his body projected the massiveness and compactness of a stocky person.

He moved in the fog with extraordinary confidence, stepping with ease and grace down what I thought was a vertical drop.

The younger man climbed down behind me, helping me every time I

got stuck. He had the solicitous manner of an old-fashioned gentleman.

His hands were strong and beautiful, and incredibly soft to the touch. His strength was tremendous.

He easily lifted me up and over his head several times; perhaps not an extraordinary feat considering my puny weight, but quite impressive taking into account that he was standing on shale ledges, and was no more than two or three inches taller than I.

"You have to thank the emissaries of death," the man who had led the way insisted as soon as we had reached level ground.

"I do?" I asked mockingly.

The thought of saying thank you to the 'emissaries of death' seemed ridiculous to me.

"Do I have to get down on my knees?" I asked in between a fit of giggles.

The man **didn't** think I was being funny.

He rested his hands on his hips and looked me full in the eye, his narrow, gaunt face unsmiling.

There was something menacing about his stance; about his slanted dark eyes under the bristly eyebrows running together over the bridge of his chiseled nose.

Abruptly, he turned his back to me, and moved away to sit on a nearby rock.

"We can't leave this spot until you thank the emissaries of death," he pronounced.

Suddenly, the realization that I was alone in a **godforsaken** place hit me.

I was fogged in with two strange men; one of them perhaps dangerous.

I knew he **wouldn't** budge from the spot until I **fulfilled** his ludicrous request.

To my amazement, instead of feeling frightened, I felt like laughing.

The all-knowing smile on the younger man's face clearly revealed that he knew how I felt, and he was quite delighted by it.

"You don't have to go as far as kneeling," he told me, and then, no longer able to hold back his mirth, he began to laugh.

It was a bright, raspy sound; it rolled like pebbles all around me. His teeth were snow-white and perfectly even, like a child's.

His face had a look at once mischievous and gentle.

"It's enough to say thank you," he prompted me. "Say it. What do you have to lose?"

"I feel stupid," I confided, deliberately trying to win him over. I won't do it."

"Why?" he asked in a **nonjudgmental** tone. "It'll only take a second, and," he stressed, smiling, "it won't hurt a bit."

In spite of myself, I had to giggle.

"I'm sorry, but I can't do it," I repeated:

"I'm like that. The moment someone insists that I do something I don't want to do, I get all tense and angry."

Eyes on the ground, his chin resting on his knuckles, the young man nodded his head thoughtfully.

After a long pause he said, "It's a fact that something prevented you from getting hurt, perhaps even killed. Something inexplicable."

I agreed with him. I even admitted that it was all very baffling to me.

I tried to make a point about phenomena happening coincidentally at the right time; in the right place.

"That's all very appropriate," he said.

Then he grinned and daringly nudged me on the chin. "But it **doesn't** explain your particular case," he said:

"You have been the recipient of a gift.

"Call the giver coincidence, circumstances, chain of events, or whatever: The fact remains that you were spared pain; injury."

"Perhaps you're right," I conceded. "I should be more grateful."

"Not more grateful. More pliable, more fluid," he said and laughed.

Seeing that I was getting angry, he opened his arms wide as if to encompass the sagebrush around us.

"My friend believes that what you saw has to do with the Indian burial ground, which happens to be right here."

"I don't see a burial ground," I said defensively.

"It's hard to recognize it," he explained, squinting at me as if he had trouble with his eyes. "And it **isn't** the fog that prevents one from seeing it. Even on a sunny day, one sees nothing but a patch of sagebrush."

He went down on his knees and, grinning, looked up at me. "However, for the knowing eye, it's an unusually shaped patch of sagebrush." He lay flat on the ground, on his stomach, his head tilted to the left, and motioned me to do the same.

"This is the only way to see it clearly," he explained as I lay down beside him on the ground. "I **wouldn't** have known this but for my friend here who knows all kinds of interesting and exciting things."

At first I saw nothing, then one by one I discovered the rocks in the thick underbrush. Dark and shiny, as though they had been washed by the mist, they sat hunched in a circle, more like creatures than stones.

I stifled a scream as I realized that the circle of rocks was exactly like the circle of human figures I had seen earlier in the fog.

"Now I am truly frightened," I mumbled, shifting uncomfortably. "I told you that I saw human figures sitting in a circle."

I looked at him to see if his face betrayed any disapproval or mockery before I added, "It's too preposterous, but I could almost swear those rocks were the people I saw."

"I know," he whispered, so softly I had to move closer to him.

"It's all very mysterious," he went on:

"My friend, who you must have noticed is an Indian, says that certain Indian burial grounds such as this one have a row or a circle of boulders.

"The boulders are the emissaries of death."

He looked at me closely, and then as if he wanted to make sure he had my full attention, he confided, "They are the emissaries, mind you, and not the representation of the emissaries."

I kept staring at the man, not only because I **didn't** know what to make of his statements, but because his face kept changing as he talked and smiled. It **wasn't** that his features changed, but his face was at moments that of a six-year-old child, a seventeen-year-old boy, and that of an old man, too.

"These are strange beliefs," he continued, seemingly oblivious to my scrutiny:

"I **didn't** put too much stock in them until the moment you came out

of the blue, as my friend was telling me about the emissaries of death, and then you told us that you had just seen them.

"If I were given to distrust," he went on, his tone suddenly menacing, "I would believe that you and he are in cahoots."

"I don't know him!" I defended myself, indignant at the mere suggestion, then whispered softly, so only he could hear, "To be quite frank, your friend gives me the creeps."

"If I were given to distrust," the young man repeated, ignoring my interruption, "I would believe that you two are actually trying to scare me. But I'm not distrustful."

"So the only thing I can do is suspend judgment and wonder about you."

"Well, don't wonder about me," I said irritably. "And I don't now what the hell you're talking about anyway."

I glared at him angrily. I had no sympathy for his dilemma. He too was giving me the creeps.

"He's talking about thanking the emissaries of death," the older man said.

He had walked to where I was lying and was peering down at me in a most peculiar manner.

Eager to get away from that place and those two crazy people, I stood up and shouted my thanks.

My voice echoed, as if the under-brush had turned into rocks.

I listened until the sound died away.

Then, as if possessed, and quite against my better judgment, I cried out my thanks again and again.

"I'm sure the emissaries are more than satisfied," the younger man said, nudging my calf. Laughing, he rolled on his back.

There was a wonderful strength in his eyes, in the delighted power of his laugh.

I didn't doubt for an instant, despite the levity, that indeed I had thanked the emissaries of death. And most oddly, I felt myself protected by them.

"Who are you two?" I directed my question at the younger man.

In one agile, smooth motion he sprang to his feet. "I'm Jose Luis Cortez; my friends call me Joe," he said, holding out his hand to clasp mine. "And this here is my friend Gumersindo Evans-Pritchard."

Afraid I would laugh out loud at the name, I bit my lip and bent to scratch an imaginary bite on my knee. "A flea, I think," I said, gazing from one man to the other.

Both stared back at me, defying me to make fun of the name. There was such a serious expression on their faces that my laughter vanished.

Gumersindo Evans-Pritchard reached for my hand- hanging limply at my side- and shook it vigorously. "I'm delighted to make your acquaintance," he said in perfect English with an upper-class British accent. "For a moment I thought you were one of those stuck-up cunts."

Simultaneously, my eyes widened and my mouth opened. Although something in me registered that his words were meant as a compliment rather than an insult, my shock was nevertheless so intense that I just stood there as if paralyzed.

I wasn't prudish- under the proper circumstances I could outswear anyone- but to me there was something so appallingly offensive about

the sound of the word cunt, it rendered me speechless.

Joe came to my rescue. He apologized for his friend, explaining that Gumersindo was an extreme social iconoclast.

Before I had a chance to say that Gumersindo had definitely shattered my sense of propriety, Joe added that Gumersindo's compulsion to be an iconoclast had to do with the fact that his last name was Evans-Pritchard.

"It shouldn't surprise anyone," Joe noted. "His father is an Englishman who abandoned his mother, an Indian woman from Jalisco before Gumersindo was born."

"Evans-Pritchard?" I repeated guardedly, then turned to Gumersindo and asked him if it was all right for Joe to reveal to a stranger his family's skeletons in the closet.

"There aren't skeletons in the closet," Joe answered for his friend. "And do you know why?"

He fixed me with his shiny, dark eyes that were neither brown nor black but the color of ripe cherries.

Helplessly, I shook my head to say no, my attention held by his compelling gaze.

His one eye seemed to be laughing at me: The other one was dead serious, ominous and menacing.

"Because what you call skeletons in the closet are Gumersindo's source of strength," Joe went on. "Do you know that his father is now a famous English anthropologist? Gumersindo hates his guts."

Gumersindo nodded his head almost imperceptibly, as if he were proud of his hatred.

I could hardly believe my good fortune. They were referring to none other than E. E. Evans-Pritchard, one of the most important social anthropologists of the twentieth century. And it was precisely during this term at UCLA that I was researching a paper on the history of social anthropology and the most eminent proponents in the field.

What a scoop! I had to restrain myself from shouting out loud and jumping up and down with excitement. To be able to come with some awful secret like that. A great anthropologist seducing and abandoning an Indian woman.

I was not in the least concerned that Evans-Pritchard hadn't done any fieldwork in Mexico- he was mainly known for his research in Africa- for I was certain I would discover that during one of his visits to the United States he had gone into Mexico. I had the very proof standing before me.

Smiling sweetly, I gazed at Gumersindo and made the silent promise that, of course, I wouldn't reveal anything without his permission. Well, perhaps I would just say something to one of my professors, I thought. After all, one didn't come across this kind of information every day.

My mind was spinning with possibilities. Perhaps a small lecture with only a few selected students at the home of one of my professors. In my mind, I had already selected the professor. I didn't particularly like him, but I appreciated the rather childish manner in which he tried to impress his students. Periodically, we met at his home. Every time I had been there, I had discovered on his desk a note, left there as if by mistake, written to him by a famous anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss.

"You didn't tell us your name," Joe said politely, gently pulling me by

my sleeve.

"Carmen **Gebauer**," I said without hesitation, giving the name of one of my childhood friends. To ease my discomfort and guilt at having lied again with such facility, I asked **Joe** if he was from Argentina.

Seeing his puzzled frown, I hastened to add that his inflection was definitely **Argentinian**. "Even though you don't look like an **Argentinian**," I noted.

"I'm Mexican," he said. "And judging by your accent, you grew up either in **Cuba** or in Venezuela."

I **didn't** want to continue on that line of conversation and swiftly changed the subject. "Do you know how to get back to the hiking path?" I asked, suddenly concerned that my friends might be worried by now.

"No, I don't," **Joe** confessed with childish candor. "But **Gumersindo Evans-Pritchard** does."

Gumersindo led the way across the chaparral, up a narrow trail on the other side of the mountain. It **wasn't** long before we heard my friends' voices and the barking of their dog.

I felt intense relief, and at the same time I was disappointed and puzzled that neither man tried to find out how to get in touch with me.

"I'm sure we'll meet again," **Joe** said perfunctorily by way of farewell.

Gumersindo Evans-Pritchard surprised me by gallantly kissing my hand. He did this so naturally and gracefully that it **didn't** occur to me to laugh at him.

"It's in his genes," **Joe** explained. "Even though he's only half English, his refinement is beyond reproach. He's totally gallant!"

Without another word or backward glance, both of them disappeared in the mist.

I doubted very much that I would ever see them again.

Overcome with guilt for having lied about my name, I was on the verge of running after them when my friends' dog almost knocked me to the ground as it jumped on me and tried to lick my face.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 6

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by
Florinda Donner

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Chapter 6

HTML EDITOR:

He explained that he had been as careless and undisciplined as one could be, but that he never knew the difference because he was imprisoned by the mood of the time.

END **HTML** EDITOR

Dumbfounded, I stared at the guest speaker. In his three-piece suit, short, curly hair, and clean-shaven face, **Joe Cortez** looked like someone from another time amidst the long-haired, bearded and beaded, casually dressed students in one of the large lecture auditoriums at the University of California in **Los Angeles**.

Hastily, I slipped into the empty seat in the back row of the packed auditorium, a seat saved for me by the same friend I had gone hiking with in the Santa **Susana** Mountains.

"Who is he?" I asked her.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she regarded me impatiently, then scribbled **Carlos Castaneda** on a piece of paper.

"Who in the dickens is **Carlos Castaneda**?" I asked and giggled involuntarily.

"I gave you his book," she hissed, then added that he was a well-known anthropologist who had done extensive fieldwork in Mexico.

I was about to confide to my friend that the guest speaker was the same man I had met in the mountains the day I had gotten lost.

However, for some very good reason, I **didn't** say anything.

That man was responsible for almost destroying our friendship, which I treasured immensely.

My friend had been adamant in her opinion that the story about **Evans-Pritchard**'s son was hogwash.

I had insisted that the two men had nothing to gain by telling me a tall tale. I just knew that they had candidly spoken the truth.

My friend, mad at me for believing them, had called me a gullible fool.

Since neither of us had been willing to yield, our argument had become quite heated.

Her husband, hoping to bring us out of our frenzy, had suggested that perhaps I had been told the truth.

Irrked by his lack of solidarity with her, my friend had yelled at him to shut up.

We had driven home in a morose state, our friendship strained.

It took a couple of weeks to wash away the bad feeling.

In the meantime, I had tried my information on **Evans-Pritchard**'s son on several people more versed in anthropological matters and in anthropologists than I or my friend. Needless to say, I was made to feel like an idiot.

Out of stubbornness, I held on to my blind belief that I alone knew the truth.

I had been reared to be practical; if one lies, it has to be to gain something that can't be gained otherwise. And I was at a loss to figure out what those men could have had to gain.

I paid little attention to **Carlos Castaneda**'s lecture. I was too absorbed with wondering about his reason for lying to me about his name. Given as I was to deducing other people's motives from a simple statement or an observation, I had a field day trying to search for a clue to his. But then I remembered that I, too, had given him a false name. And I **couldn't** determine why I had done so.

After long mental deliberation, I decided that I had lied because automatically I **hadn't** trusted him. He was too self-confident, too cocky to inspire my trust. My mother had reared me to distrust Latin men, especially if they were not somewhat subservient. She used to say that Latin machos were like bantam cocks, interested only in fighting, eating, and having sex, in that order. And I suppose I had believed her without even thinking about it.

I finally looked at **Carlos Castaneda**. I **couldn't** make heads or tails of what he was talking about. But I became fascinated by his movements.

He seemed to speak with his whole body, and his words, rather than emerging from his mouth, seemed to flow from his hands, which he moved with the gracefulness and agility of a magician.

Boldly, I walked up to him after the lecture.

He was surrounded by students. He was so solicitous and engaging with the women that I automatically despised him.

"You ve lied to me about your name, Joe Cortez," I said in Spanish, pointing an accusing finger at him.

Holding his hand over his stomach, as if he had received a blow, he gazed at me with that same hesitant, disbelieving expression he had had when he first saw me in the mountains.

"It is also a lie that your friend Gumersindo is the son of Evans-Pritchard," I added before he recovered from his surprise at seeing me. "Isn't it?"

He made a pleading gesture for me not to say any more.

He didn't seem to be in the least embarrassed.

There was such plain and simple wonder in his eyes that my righteous wrath was stopped short.

Gently, he held me by the wrist, as if afraid I would leave.

After he finished talking with the students, he silently led me to a secluded bench, shaded by a gigantic pine tree, in the north campus.

"All this is so strange that I am truthfully speechless," he said in English as we sat down.

He gazed at me as if he still couldn't believe I was sitting beside him.

"I never thought I would find you again," he mused:

"After we left, my friend- his name, by the way is Nestor- and I discussed you at great length.

We concluded that you were a semiapparition."

He abruptly changed to Spanish and said that they even went back to the place where they had left me in the hope of finding me.

"Why did you want to find me?" I asked in English; confident that he would respond in English that he went there because he liked me.

In Spanish, there is no way to say that one just likes someone else. The response has to be more florid and at the same time more precise. In Spanish, one can either happen to evoke a good feeling- me caes bien- or arouse total passion- me gustos.

My candid question plunged him into a long silence. He seemed to be fighting whether he ought to speak or not.

At last, he said that finding me in the fog that afternoon had caused him a profound upheaval.

His face was enraptured as he revealed all this, and his voice betrayed the deepest awe as he added that finding me in the lecture room had been nearly the end of him.

"Why?" I asked, my vanity pricked.

I instantly regretted it because I was convinced he was going to tell me he was head over heels in love with me, and that would have been too disturbing. I wouldn't have known how to respond.

"It's a very long story," he said, still in a pensive mood.

He puckered his lips, as if he were talking to himself, rehearsing what he was going to say next.

I knew the signs of a man who is preparing to make his pitch. "I haven't read your work," I said in order to head him off in a different direction. "What is it about?"

"I've written a couple of books about sorcery," he replied.

"What kind of sorcery? Voodoo, spiritualism, or what?"

"Do you know anything about sorcery?" he asked with a note

expectation in his voice.

"Of course I do. I grew up with it.

"I've spent a great deal of time in the coastal region of Venezuela: It's an area that is famous for its sorcerers.

"Most summers of my childhood were spent with a family of witches."

"Witches?"

"Yes," I said, pleased with his reaction. "I had a nanny who is a witch.

"She was a black woman from Puerto Cabello. She took care of me until I was an adolescent. Both my parents worked, and when I was a child, they were quite happy to leave me in her care.

"She could handle me much better than either of my parents. She would let me do as I pleased.

"My parents, of course, let her take me everywhere. During the school holidays she would take me with her to visit her family.

"It was not her biological family but her witch family. Although I wasn't allowed to participate in any of their rituals and trance sessions, I did manage to see a great deal."

He regarded me curiously, as if he didn't believe me.

Then he asked with a bemused smile, "What made her a witch?"

"All sorts of things. She killed chickens and offered them to the Gods in exchange for favors. She and her fellow witches- men and women- would dance until they would go into a trance. She recited secret incantations that had the power to heal her friends and injure her enemies. Her specialty was love potions. She prepared them with medicinal plants and all sorts of bodily refuse, such as menstrual blood, nail clippings, and hair, preferably pubic hair. She made amulets for good luck in gambling or in matters of love."

"And your parents allowed all this?" he asked in disbelief.

"At home, no one knew about it, except myself and my nanny's clients, of course," I explained. "She made house calls, as any doctor would.

"All she ever did at home was to burn candles behind the toilet bowl whenever I had nightmares. Since it seemed to help me and there was no danger of anything catching fire amidst the tiles, my mother openly allowed her to do this."

He suddenly stood up and began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" I asked, wondering whether he thought I had made it all up. "It's the truth, I assure you."

"You assert something to yourself, and as far as you are concerned, once you make the assertion it turns into the truth," he said with a serious face.

"But I told you the truth," I insisted, certain that he was referring to my nanny.

"I can see through people," he said calmly. "For instance, I see you're convinced that I am going to make a pass at you. You've convinced yourself about it and now it is the truth. That's what I am talking about."

I tried to say something, but indignation took my breath away. I would have liked to run away. But that would have been too humiliating.

He frowned slightly, and I had the unpleasant impression that he knew what I was feeling.

My face got red. I trembled with suppressed anger.

Nonetheless, within moments I felt extraordinarily calm. It wasn't

due to any conscious effort on my part; yet I had the distinct sensation that something in me had shifted.

I had the vague recollection that I had gone through a similar experience before, but my memory faded away as fast as it came.

"What are you doing to me?" I muttered.

"I just happen to see through people," he said in a contrite tone. "Not all the time and certainly not with everybody, but only with the people I am intimately associated with.

"I don't know why I can see through you."

His sincerity was apparent. He seemed much more baffled than I was.

He sat down again and moved closer to me on the bench.

We remained in total silence for a while. It was a most pleasant experience to be able to drop all effort at making conversation and not feel that I was being stupid.

I looked up at the sky. It was cloudless and transparent like blue glass.

A soft breeze blew through the pine branches, and the needles fell on us like a gentle rain.

Then the breeze turned into a wind, and the dry, yellow, fallen leaves of the nearby sycamore blew toward us.

They swirled around us with a soft, rhythmic sound. In one abrupt swoop, the wind carried the leaves high up into the air.

"That was a fine display of the spirit," he murmured. "And it was for you; the wind, the leaves spinning in the air in front of us.

"The sorcerer I work with would say that that was an omen.

Something pointed you out to me, at the precise moment I was thinking that I'd better leave. I cannot leave now."

Thinking only about his last statement, I felt inexplicably happy. It wasn't a triumphant happiness, the kind of glee one feels when getting one's way. It was rather a feeling of profound well-being that didn't last long.

My ponderous self took over suddenly and demanded that I be rid of those thoughts and feelings. I had no business being there. I had cut a class, missed lunch with my real friends, missed my daily laps at the pool in the women's gym.

"Perhaps it'll be better if I leave," I said. I intended it as a statement of relief, but when I said it, it sounded as if I were feeling sorry for myself-which somehow I was.

But instead of leaving, I asked him, as casually as I could, whether he had always been able to see through people.

"No, not always." His kind tone clearly betrayed that he was conscious of my inner turmoil. "The old sorcerer I work with has recently taught me how."

"Do you think that he could teach me, too?"

"Yes, I think he would." He seemed amazed at his own statement. "If he feels about you the way I do, he'll certainly try to."

"Did you know about sorcery before?" I asked timidly, slowly coming out of my agitation.

"In Latin America everybody thinks that they know, and I believed I did.

"In that sense, you remind me of myself. Like you, I was convinced that I knew what sorcery was.

"But then, when I really encountered it, it wasn't like I thought it was."

"How was it?"

"Simple. So simple that it's scary," he confided:

"We think that sorcery is scary because of its malignancy.

"The sorcery I encountered is not malignant at all, and because of that, it's the scariest thing there is."

I interrupted him and commented that he must be referring to white as opposed to black sorcery.

"Don't talk nonsense, damn it!" he impatiently snapped at me.

The shock of hearing him speak to me in that manner was so great that I gasped for breath. I was instantly thrown back into turmoil.

He turned his face to avoid my gaze.

He had dared to yell at me. I became so angry I thought I was going to have a fit. My ears were buzzing. I saw dark spots in front of my eyes.

"I would have hit him, if he hadn't jumped out of my reach so swiftly.

"You're very undisciplined," he said and sat down again. "And quite violent.

"Your nanny must have indulged your every whim and treated you as if you were made of precious glass."

Seeing my scowling frown, he went on to say that he hadn't really yelled at me out of impatience or anger. "It doesn't matter to me personally whether you listen or not," he explained. "But it matters to someone else on whose behalf I shouted at you. Someone who is watching us."

I was perplexed at first, then uneasy. I looked all around me, wondering whether his sorcerer teacher might be watching us.

He ignored me and went on to say, "My father never mentioned to me that we have a constant witness. And he never mentioned it because he didn't know it. Just like you, yourself, don't know it."

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" My raspy, angry voice reflected my feelings at the moment.

He had yelled at me, he had insulted me. I resented that he was talking his head off as if nothing had happened. If he believed that I was going to overlook his actions, he was in for a surprise. "You won't get away with it," I thought, smiling at him maliciously. "Not with me, buddy."

"I'm talking about a force, an entity, a presence which is neither a force nor an entity nor a presence," he explained with an angelic smile.

He seemed totally oblivious to my belligerent mood. "Sounds like gibberish, but it isn't.

"I am referring to something that only sorcerers know about. They call it the spirit. Our personal watcher, our perennial witness."

I don't know exactly how or what precise word triggered it, but suddenly he had my full attention.

He went on talking about this force, which he said wasn't God or anything to do with religion or morality, but an impersonal force, a power that was there for us to use if we only learned to reduce ourselves to nothing.

He even held my hand, and I didn't mind it. In fact, I liked the feel of his strong, soft touch. I became morbidly fascinated with the strange power he had over me. I was aghast that I longed to sit with him on that

bench indefinitely with my hand in his.

He went on talking. And I went on listening to every word he said. But at the same time I perversely wondered when he was going to grab my leg, for I knew that he **wasn't** going to have enough with my hand, and I **couldn't** do anything to stop him. Or was it that I **didn't** want to do anything to stop him?

He explained that he had been as careless and undisciplined as one could be, but that he never knew the difference because he was imprisoned by the mood of the time.

"What's the mood of the time?" I asked in a rough, unfriendly voice, lest he think I was enjoying being with him.

"Sorcerers call it the modality of the time," he said. "In our day, it's the concern of the middle class. I am a middle-class man, just like you're a middle-class woman--"

"Classifications of that nature don't hold any validity," I interrupted him rudely, yanking my hand out of his. "They are simply generalizations."

I scowled at him suspiciously. There was something startlingly familiar about his words, but I **couldn't** think where I had heard them before or what significance I was attaching to them.

Yet I was sure those words had a very vital significance for me if I could only recall what I already knew about them.

"Don't give me this social scientist gaff," he said jovially. "I'm as aware of it as you are."

Giving in to a wave of total frustration, I took his hand and bit it.

"I'm truly sorry about that," I instantly mumbled, before he recovered from his surprise. "I don't know why I did it. I haven't bitten anyone since I was a child."

I sidled to the far edge of the bench, in readiness for his retaliation. It **didn't** come.

"You're absolutely primitive" was all he said, rubbing his hand in a dazed sort of way.

I let out a deep sigh of relief.

His power over me was shattered. And I remembered that I had an old score to settle with him.

He had turned me into the laughingstock of my anthropology student friends. "Let's go back to our original problem," I said, trying to arouse my anger. "Why did you tell me all that nonsense about **Evans-Pritchard's** son? You must have realized that I was going to make a fool of myself."

I watched him carefully, certain that confronting him like this after the bite would finally break his self-control or at least rattle him. I expected him to yell, to lose his confidence and impudence.

But he remained unperturbed. He took a deep breath and adopted a serious expression.

"I know that it looks like a simple case of people telling tall tales for their amusement," he began in a light, casual tone. "But it's more complex than that."

He chuckled softly, then reminded me that he **hadn't** known at that time that I was a student of anthropology and that I would make a fool of myself.

He paused for a moment, as if searching for the proper words, then he

shrugged helplessly and added, "I really can't explain to you now why I introduced my friend to you as **Evans-Pritchard's** son, unless I tell you much more about myself and my aims; and that's not practical."

"Why not?"

"Because the more you know about me, the more entangled you'll become."

He regarded me thoughtfully, and I could see in his eyes that he was sincere. "And I don't mean a mental entanglement. I mean you'll become personally entangled with me."

This was such a blatant display of gall that I regained all my confidence.

I fell back on my well-tried sarcastic laughter and said in a cutting tone, "You are perfectly disgusting. I know your kind. You are the typical example of the conceited Latin macho I have battled with all my life."

Seeing the expression of surprise on his face, I pressed on in my most haughty tone, "How dare you to think that I'll be entangled with you?"

He **didn't** become red in the face as I expected. He slapped his knee and laughed uproariously, as if that was the funniest thing he had ever heard. And to my utter dismay, he began to tickle me in the ribs as if I were a child.

Afraid to laugh- I was ticklish- I screeched with indignation. "How dare you to touch me!" I stood up to leave. I was shaking.

And then I shocked myself even further by sitting down again.

Seeing that he was about to tickle me again, I curled my hands into fists and held them before me. "I'll smash your nose if you touch me again," I warned him.

Thoroughly unconcerned by my threat, he reclined his head against the back of the bench and closed his eyes.

He laughed gaily, a deep chortling laugh that made him shiver all over. "You're a typical German girl who grew up surrounded by brown people," he said, turning sideways toward me.

How do you know I am German? I never told you that," I said in a faltering voice I intended to be softly menacing.

I knew that you were German when I first met you," he said. "You confirmed it the moment you lied that you were Swedish. Only Germans born in the New World after the Second World War lie like that. That is, of course, if they live in the United States."

Although I **wasn't** going to admit this to him, he was right.

I often felt people's hostility as soon as they learned that my parents were Germans; in their eyes it automatically made us Nazis.

It **didn't** make any difference when I told them that my parents were idealists.

Of course, I had to admit to myself that, like good Germans, they believed that their kind were inherently better; but basically they were gentle souls who had been **apolitical** all lives.

"All I did was to agree with you," I pointed out acidly. "You saw blond hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones, and all you could think of was a Swede. You are not very imaginative, are you?"

I pushed my advantage. "You had no business lying yourself, unless you're a fucking liar by nature," I went on, my voice rising against my will. Tapping his chest with my index finger I added derisively, "**Joe Cortez, eh?**"

Is your name really **Cristina Gebauer**?" he shot back, imitating my odious, loud voice.

"Carmen **Gebauer**!" I shouted, offended that he **hadn't** remembered the name correctly.

Then, suddenly ashamed of my outburst, I went into a chaotic defense of myself.

After a few moments, realizing that I **didn't** know what I was saying, I abruptly stopped and confessed that I was indeed German, and that Carmen **Gebauer** was the name of a childhood friend.

"I like that," he said softly, a barely suppressed grin on his lips. Whether he was referring to my lying or to my confession I **couldn't** tell.

His eyes were brimming with kindness and with amusement. In a tender, wistful voice he proceeded to tell me the story of his childhood girlfriend, **Fabiola Kunze**.

Confused by his reaction, I turned away and gazed at the nearby sycamore and the pine trees beyond.

Then, eager to hide my interest in his story, I began to play with my fingernails: I pushed back the cuticles and peeled off the nail polish, methodically and thoughtfully.

The story of **Fabiola Kunze** resembled my own life so closely that after a few moments I forgot all about my pretense at indifference and listened to him attentively.

I suspected that he was fabricating the story, and yet I had to give him credit for coming up with details that only a daughter of a German family in the New World would know.

Fabiola allegedly was mortally afraid of dark Latin boys, but she was equally afraid of the Germans. The **Latins** scared her because of their irresponsibility; the Germans, because they were so predictable.

I had to restrain myself from laughing out loud when he described scenes of **Fabiola's** home on a Sunday afternoon when two dozen Germans would sit around a beautifully set table- with the best china, silver, and crystal- and she would have to listen to two dozen monologues that passed for conversation.

As he went on giving specific details of those Sunday afternoons, I began to feel more and more uncomfortable: there was **Fabiola's** father prohibiting political debates in his house but compulsively aiming at starting one, seeking devious ways to tell dirty jokes about Catholic priests.

Or her mother's mortal dread: her fine china was in the hands of these clumsy **oafs**.

His words were **cues** to which I unconsciously responded. I began to see scenes of my Sunday afternoons like pictures flashed on the wall for my observation.

I was a veritable bundle of nerves. I wanted to stomp and carry on as only I knew how. I wanted to hate this man, but I **couldn't**. I wanted vindication, apologies, but I **couldn't** get any from him. I wanted to dominate him. I wanted him to fall in love with me so I could reject him.

Ashamed of my immature feelings, I made a great effort to pull myself together. Pretending to be bored, I leaned toward him and asked, "Why did you lie about your name?"

"I **didn't** lie," he pronounced. "That's my name. I have several names. Sorcerers have different names for different occasions."

"How convenient!" I exclaimed sarcastically.

"Very convenient," he echoed and gave a slight wink, which infuriated me beyond measure.

And then he did something completely outlandish and unexpected. He put his arms around me.

There was no sexual overtone in his embrace. It was the spontaneous, sweet, and simple gesture of a child who wants to comfort a friend. His touch soothed me instantly and so completely that I began to sob uncontrollably.

"I **m** such a shit," I confessed. "I want to beat you, and look at me. I am in your arms." I was about to add that I was enjoying it when a surge of energy rushed through me.

As if I had awakened from a dream, I pushed him away. "Let go of me," I hissed and stomped away.

I heard him choking with laughter. I **wasn't** in the least concerned about his chuckles: my outburst had dissipated instantly.

I stood rooted to the spot, trembling all over, unable to walk away. And then, as if I had a giant rubber band attached to me, I returned to the bench.

"Don't feel bad," he said kindly.

He seemed to know exactly what it was that was pulling me back to the bench. He patted my back as one does a baby's after a meal.

"It **isn't** what you or I do," he continued. "It's something outside the two of us which is acting upon us.

"It's been acting upon me for a long time. Now I am accustomed to it.

"But I can't understand why it acts upon you.

"Don't ask me what it is," he said, anticipating my question. "I can't yet explain it to you."

I **wasn't** going to ask him anything anyway: My mind had stopped functioning.

I felt exactly as if I were asleep, dreaming that I was talking.

Moments later, my numbness passed. I felt more animated yet not quite like my usual self. "What's happening to me?" I asked.

"You are being focused and pushed by something that **doesn't** come from you," he said. "Something is pushing you, using me as a tool. Something is superimposing another criterion on your middle-class convictions."

"Don't start on that middle-class idiocy," I said feebly. It was more like I was pleading with him.

I smiled helplessly, thinking that I had lost my usual gall.

"These, by the way, are not my own opinions or ideas," he said:

"I **m** like you, strictly a product of middle-class ideology.

"Imagine my horror when I came face to face with a different and more prevailing ideology. It ripped me apart."

"What ideology is that?" I asked meekly, my voice so low it as barely audible.

"A man brought that ideology to me," he explained. "Or rather, the spirit spoke and acted on me through him.

"That man is a sorcerer. I **ve** written about him. His name is **Juan Matus**. He's the one **ho** made me face my middle-class mentality.

"**Juan Matus** once asked me a grand question: 'What do you think university is?'

"I, of course, answered him like a social scientist: 'A center of higher learning.'

"He corrected me and declared that a uniersity should be called a 'Middle-Class Institute' because it is the stitution we attend to further perfect our middle-class values.

"We attend the institute to become professionists, he said. The ideology of our social class tells us that we must prepare ourselves for occupying managerial positions.

"Juan Matus said that men go to the middle-class institute to become engineers, lawyers, doctors, etc., and women go there to get a suitable husband, provider, and father of their children. Suitable is naturally defined by middle-class values."

I wanted to contradict him. I wanted to shout at him that I knew people who weren't necessarily interested in a career or looking for a spouse; that I knew people who were interested in ideas, in learning for its own sake.

But I didn't know such people.

I felt a terrible pressure in my chest and had an attack of dry coughing.

It wasn't the cough or the physical discomfort that made me wriggle in my seat and prevented me from arguing with him. It was the certainty that he was speaking about me: I was going to a university precisely to find a suitable man.

Again I stood up, ready to leave: I had even extended my hand to shake his in farewell when I felt a powerful tug on my back.

It was so strong I had to sit down, lest I fall. I knew he hadn't touched me: I had been looking at him all the time.

Thoughts of people I didn't quite remember; of dreams I hadn't quite forgotten came crowding into my mind forming an intricate pattern from which I couldn't extricate myself.

Unknown faces, half-heard sentences, dark images of places, and blurred images of people threw me momentarily into some kind of limbo.

I was close to remembering something about all this kaleidoscope of visualizations and sounds; but the knowledge flittered away, and a feeling of calm and ease overtook me; a tranquility so deep that it screened out all my desire to assert myself.

I stretched my legs in front of me as if I didn't have a care in the world- and at the moment I didn't- and began to talk.

I couldn't remember ever talking about myself so frankly before, and I couldn't fathom why I was suddenly so unguarded with him.

I told him about Venezuela, my parents, my childhood, my restlessness, my meaningless life.

I told him of things I wouldn't even admit to myself.

"I've been studying anthropology since last year. And I really don't know why," I said.

I was beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable by my own revelations.

I shifted restlessly on the bench, but I couldn't stop myself from adding, "Two subjects that interest me more are Spanish and German literature. To be in the anthropology department defies all I know about myself."

"That detail intrigues me to no end," he said. "I can't get into it now, but it seems as if I had been placed here for you to find me, or vice versa."

"What does all this mean?" I asked, then blushed, realizing that I was interpreting and centering everything on my womanhood.

He seemed to be thoroughly aware of my state of mind.

He reached for my hand and pressed it against his heart. "Me gustas nibelunga," he exclaimed dramatically, and for good measure he translated the words into English, "I'm passionately attracted to you, Nibelung."

He looked at me with the eyes of a Latin lover and then burst into raucous laughter. "You're convinced I have to say this to you sooner or later, so it might as well be now."

Instead of getting angry at being teased, I laughed: His humor gave me great pleasure.

The only Nibelungen I knew were from my father's German mythology books. Siegfried and the Nibelungen. As far as I could remember, they were underground, magical, dwarfish beings.

"Are you calling me a dwarf?" I asked in jest.

"God forbid!" he protested. "I'm calling you a German mythical being."

Shortly afterwards, as if it were the only thing we could have done, we drove to the Santa Susana Mountains, to the place we had met.

Neither of us said a single word as we sat on the cliff overlooking the Indian burial ground.

Moved by a pure impulse of companionship, we sat there in silence, oblivious to the afternoon turning into night.

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Version 2007.03.11

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by [Florinda Donner](#)

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[HTML](#) EDITOR:

...As most people do, you associate sorcery with bizarre behavior, rituals, drugs, incantations."...

"True sorcery," [Mr. Flores](#) interjected, "does not allow for human interference."

END [HTML](#) EDITOR

[Joe Cortez](#) parked his van at the bottom of a hill.

He came around to open my door and with a gallant flair helped me alight from the car.

I felt relieved that we had finally stopped, although I couldn't imagine why: We were in the middle of nowhere.

We had been driving since early morning.

The day's heat, the flat desert, the merciless sun, and the dust of the road were but a vague memory as I breathed in the cold, heavy night air.

Agitated by the wind, the air swirled about us like something palpable, something alive.

There was no moon. And the stars, incredible in number and brilliance, only seemed to intensify our isolation. Under that uneasy splendor, the hills and the desert stretched all around us, nearly invisible, full of shadows and murmuring sounds.

I tried to orient myself by looking at the sky, but I didn't know how to identify the constellations.

"We're facing east," **Joe Cortez** whispered, as if I had spoken out loud; then patiently he tried to teach me the major constellations in the summer sky.

I could only remember the star **Vega**, because the name reminded me of a seventeenth-century Spanish writer, Lope **de Vega**.

While we sat in silence on the top of his van looking at the sky, my mind wandered through the events of our journey.

Less than twenty-four hours ago, while we were eating in a Japanese restaurant in downtown **Los Angeles**, he had asked me, out of the blue, if I would accompany him to **Sonora** for a few days.

"I would love to go," I said impulsively. "The school term is over. I'm free. When do you plan to leave?"

"Tonight!" he said. "In fact, right after we finish our meal."

I laughed, certain that his invitation had been a joke. "I can't leave on such short notice," I pointed out. "What about tomorrow?"

"Tonight," he insisted softly, then held out his hand to clasp mine in a formal handshake.

Only when I saw the delight and mischief in his eyes did I realize that he **wasn't** saying good-bye but sealing an agreement.

"When decisions are made, they have to be acted upon immediately," he pronounced, leaving the words hanging in midair in front of me. Both of us stared at them as though we could indeed see their size and shape.

I nodded, hardly aware of having made the decision. The chance had been there, outside of me, ready, inevitable. I **didn't** have to do anything to bring it about.

Suddenly, with shattering vividness, I remembered my other trip to **Sonora** a year before.

My body stiffened with fear and shock as images- disconnected in their sequence- stirred deep within me.

The events of that odd trip had faded from my conscious mind so totally and absolutely that, only until a moment before, it was as if they had never taken place. But now the events were as clear in my mind as they were the day they happened.

Shivering not with cold but with an undefinable dread, I turned to face **Joe Cortez**; ready to tell him about that trip.

He was staring at me with an odd intensity: His eyes were like tunnels, deep and dark: They absorbed my dismay. But they also made the images of that trip recede.

Once the images had lost their impulse, all that was left in my mind was a trite, empty thought.

I believed at that instant, in my usual assertive manner, that I **couldn't** tell anything to **Joe Cortez**, because a true adventure always dictates its own course and the most memorable, exciting events in my life had always been those whose course I had not interfered with.

"What do you want me to call you? **Joe Cortez** or **Carlos Castaneda**?" I asked with nauseating feminine joviality.

His copper-colored face crinkled up in a smile. "I'm your childhood companion. Give me a name. I call you **nibelunga**."

I **couldn't** come up with a suitable name. I asked him, "Is there any order to your names?"

"Well," he mused, "**Joe Cortez** is a cook, a gardener, a handy-man; a solicitous and thoughtful man. **Carlos Castaneda** is a man from the

academic world, but I don't think you have met him yet."

He looked at me fixedly and smiled: There was something childlike and intensely trusting about that smile.

I decided to call him **Joe Cortez**.

We spent the night- in separate rooms- in a motel in **Yuma, Arizona**.

After leaving **Los Angeles**, all through the long drive I had worried myself sick about the sleeping arrangements.

I had at moments feared he would pounce on me before we got to the motel.

After all, he was a strong young man, too self-confident and aggressive. I **wouldn't** have been so worried if he had been American or European. But because he was Latin, I simply knew what his assumptions were. Accepting his invitation to spend a few days with him meant that I was willing to share his bed.

His thoughtfulness and considerate behavior toward me throughout the long drive was a detail that fit perfectly with what I thought and expected of him: He was preparing the ground.

It was late when we got to the motel. He went to the manager's office to see about our rooms.

I stayed in the car, imagining scenario upon lurid scenario.

I had been so absorbed with my fantasies, I failed to notice his return from the office.

Hearing him dangle a set of keys before me, I jumped in my seat and dropped the brown paper sack I had been holding, unconsciously clutched against my breast. It contained all my toiletries, which we had bought on the way.

"I got you a room at the back of the motel," he said. "It's away from the highway."

He pointed to the door a few steps away from us and added, "I'll sleep in this one, close to the street. I'm used to sleeping through any kind of noise." He chuckled to himself. "These were the only two rooms they had left."

Disappointed, I took the key from his hand.

All my scenarios fell apart. I **wasn't** going to have the opportunity to refuse him. Not that I really wanted to do so. Yet my very soul clamored for a victory, no matter how small.

"I don't see why we have to rent two rooms," I said with studied casualness.

My hand was shaking as I retrieved the toiletries on the floor and stuffed them into the paper sack.

What I had said next sounded incredible to me, yet I **couldn't** stop myself. "The traffic won't let you rest, and you need your sleep as much as I do."

I **didn't** for a moment believe that anyone could sleep through the noise coming from the highway.

Without looking at him, I got out of the car, and then I heard myself propose, "We could sleep in the same room- in two beds, that is."

I stood there for a moment, numbed and appalled. Never before had I done such a thing, nor had I had such a schizoid reaction.

I was saying things that I **didn't** mean. Or did I mean them but **didn't** know what I felt?

His mirth put an end to my confusion. He laughed so hard people

turned on the light in one of the rooms and yelled at us to shut up.

"Stay in the same room and have you take advantage of me in the middle of the night," he said in between waves of hilarity. "Right after my shower. No way!"

I blushed so intensely my ears were burning. I wanted to die of shame.

This was not one of my scenarios.

I went back inside the car and slammed the door. "Take me to the Greyhound bus," I hissed at him with suppressed wrath. "Why in the hell did I come with you? I should have my head examined!"

Still laughing, he opened the door and gently pulled me out. "Let's sleep not only in the same room but in the same bed."

He looked at me sheepishly. "Please, let me make love to you!" he pleaded as if he really meant it.

Aghast, I tore myself loose from his hold and yelled, "Not in your fucking life!"

"There," he said. "This is such a fierce refusal that I dare not insist."

He reached for my hand and kissed it. "You have refused me and put me in my place. No more problems. You're vindicated."

I turned away from him, ready to weep.

My chagrin was not due to his unwillingness to spend the night with me- had he expected to do so, I truly wouldn't have known what to do- but to the fact that he knew me even better than I knew myself.

I had refused to give credence to what I thought was his way of flattering himself. He was able to see through me. Suddenly, it frightened me.

He moved closer and hugged me. It was a sweet, simple embrace.

As had happened before, my turmoil vanished completely, as though it had never existed.

I hugged him back and said yet the most incredible thing, "This is the most exciting adventure of my life."

I immediately wanted to retract my statement. The words that had escaped were not mine. I didn't even know what I meant. This was not the most exciting adventure of my life. I had taken many exciting trips. I had been around the world.

My irritation reached its peak when he kissed me goodnight, swiftly and softly, as one kisses a child, and I liked it against my will. I had no will.

He pushed me down the corridor toward my room.

Cursing myself, I sat down on my bed and wept in frustration, in anger and self-pity.

Since as far back in life as I could remember, I had always had my way. I was accustomed to it. To be confused and not know what I wanted was a brand-new sensation for me and a most unwelcome one.

I slept restlessly with my clothes on until he banged on the door, early in the morning, to wake me up.

We drove all day, meandering along out-of-the-way roads.

As he had told me, Joe Cortez was indeed a solicitous man. Throughout the long drive, he was the kindest, the most considerate and entertaining companion one could wish for. He pampered me with food and songs and stories. He had an astonishingly deep yet clear baritone voice.

And he knew all my favorite songs. Corny love songs from every South American country, all their national anthems, old ballads, and even nursery rhymes.

His stories made me laugh until my abdominal muscles hurt. As a storyteller, he kept me enraptured with every turn of his tale.

He seemed to be a born mimic. His uncanny imitation of every conceivable South American accent- including the distinctive Portuguese of Brazil- was more than mimicry, it was magic.

"We'd better climb down from the car's roof." Joe Cortez's voice broke into my reveries. "It gets cold at night in the desert."

"It's a tough environment," I said, wishing we would get back into the van and drive off.

Ill at ease, I watched him retrieve some bags from the car. He had bought all kinds of presents for the people we were going to visit.

"Why did you park here in the middle of nowhere?"

"You ask the dumbest questions, nibelunga," he replied. "I parked here because it is here where our car journey ends."

"Have we arrived at our mysterious destination that you can't talk about?" I asked in a sarcastic tone.

The only thing that had marred the enchanting drive had been his refusal to tell me where exactly we were going.

In a matter of milliseconds, I became so angry with him that I was ready to punch him in the nose.

The thought that my sudden irritability was simply the result of a long, exhausting day, brought me a needed sense of relief.

"I'm getting nasty now, but I don't mean to," I said in a jovial tone that sounded phony even to me.

My voice was so strained it revealed just how much it cost me to hold back my temper. It worried me that I could get mad at him so easily and so quickly.

"You really don't know how to converse," he said with a big smile.

"You only know how to coerce."

"Oh! I see, Joe Cortez has left. Are you going to start insulting me again, Carlos Castaneda?"

He chortled gaily at my remark, which by then wasn't meant to be funny. "This place is not in the middle of nowhere," he said. The city of Arizpe is nearby."

"And the U.S. border is to the north," I recited. "And Chihuahua to the east. And Los Angeles is somewhere northwest of here."

He shook his head disparagingly and took the lead.

Silently, we walked through the chaparral, which I could feel more than see, along a winding narrow trail.

The path grew wider as we approached a vast clearing fenced in by short mesquite trees.

The silhouettes of two houses could be discerned in the darkness. The bigger of the two had lights inside. The small dark house stood some distance away.

We walked up to the large house. Pale moths fluttered in the light slanting through the windowpanes.

"I have to warn you that the people you're going to meet are a bit strange," he said in a whisper. "Don't say anything. Let me do the talking."

"I always say whatever I please," I asserted. "And I don't like to be

told how to behave.

"I'm not a child. Besides, my social manners are impeccable. I can assure you that I won't embarrass you."

"Get off your high horse, goddamn it!" he hissed in a tightly controlled voice.

"Don't treat me like I am your wife, Carlos Castaneda," I yelled at the top of my voice, pronouncing his last name the way I felt it ought to be pronounced: with a tilde on the n, which I knew he much disliked.

But he didn't get angry: It made him laugh as he so often did when I expected him to explode with wrath.

He never does, I thought, and sighed despondently.

He had the most extraordinary equanimity. Nothing ever seemed to ruffle him or cause him to lose his temper. Even when he shouted, it somehow always sounded phony.

Just as he was about to knock, the door opened.

A thin man formed a black shadow in the rectangle of light. With an impatient gesture of his arm, he bade us in.

We entered a plant-filled vestibule. Swiftly, as though afraid to show his face, the man moved ahead of us and, without a word of greeting, opened an inner door with rattly glass panes.

We followed him along a dark corridor and across an inside patio, where a young man sitting on a rush chair was playing a guitar and singing in a soft, grief-stricken voice.

He paused the instant he noticed us. He didn't return my greeting and resumed his playing as we turned a corner and went down another equally dark corridor.

"Why is everyone so impolite?" I whispered into Joe Cortez's ear. "Are you sure this is the right house?"

He chuckled softly. "I've told you, they are eccentric," he nurmured.

"Are you sure you know these people?" I insisted.

"What kind of a question is that?" he snapped in a quiet yet nenacing tone. "Of course I know them."

We had reached a lighted doorway. His pupils gleamed. "Are we going to stay here overnight?" I asked uneasily.

"I've no idea," he whispered in my ear and then kissed my cheek.

"And please, don't ask any more questions. I'm trying my best to accomplish a nearly impossible maneuver."

"What maneuver is that?" I whispered back.

A sudden realization made me feel anxious and uncomfortable but also excited. The word maneuver had been the clue.

Seemingly aware of my innermost feelings, he shifted the bags he was carrying into one arm and gently took my hand and kissed it- his touch sent pleasurable shivers throughout my body- and led me across the threshold.

We entered a large, dimly lit, sparsely furnished living room.

It was not what I expected a provincial Mexican living room to look like. The walls and the low ceiling were immaculately white: There wasn't a picture or a wall decoration to mar that whiteness.

Against the wall opposite the door stood a large couch.

On it sat three elderly, elegantly dressed women. I couldn't quite see their faces, but in the dim light they looked peculiarly alike- without actually resembling one another- and vaguely familiar.

I was so baffled by this I barely noticed the two people sitting on the spacious armchairs nearby.

In my eagerness to reach the three women, I took an involuntary giant leap. I had failed to notice that the room had a split-level brick floor. As I steadied myself, I noticed the beautiful oriental rug and the woman sitting in one of the armchairs.

"Delia Flores!" I exclaimed. "My God! I can't believe this!"

I touched her, for I needed to make sure she was not a figment of my imagination.

"What is going on?" I asked instead of greeting her.

At that same instant I realized that the women on the couch were the same women I had met the previous year at the healer's house.

I stood gaping, frozen, my mind dazed with shock.

A quick, faint smile twitched the corners of their mouths as they turned toward the white-haired old man sitting in the other armchair.

"Mariano Aureliano." My voice was but a soft, shaky whisper.

All the energy was gone from me.

I turned to face Joe Cortez and in that same feeble voice accused him of tricking me.

I wanted to scream at him, insult him, do him bodily harm, but I had no strength left in me, not even to lift my arm.

I barely realized that, like me, he stood rooted to the floor, his face ashen with shock and bewilderment.

Mariano Aureliano rose from his chair and moved toward me, arms extended to embrace me. "How happy I am to see you again."

His voice was soft and his eyes shone brightly with excitement and joy.

He lifted me off the ground in a bear's hug.

My body was limp. I had no strength- or desire- to reciprocate his warm embrace. I could not say a word.

He put me down, and went over to greet Joe Cortez with that same effusive warmth.

Delia Flores and her friends came over to where I stood.

One by one they embraced me and whispered something in my ear.

I felt comforted by their affectionate touches and by their soft voices, but I didn't understand a thing they said. My mind wasn't there with me.

I could feel and hear but I couldn't make sense of what I felt and heard.

Mariano Aureliano gazed at me and said in a clear voice that pierced the fog of my mind, "You haven't been tricked. I told you from the beginning that I would blow you to him."

"So you're..." I shook my head, unable to finish my sentence as it finally dawned on me that Mariano Aureliano was the man Joe Cortez had told me so much about: Juan Matus, the sorcerer who had changed the course of his life.

I opened my mouth to say something but shut it again.

I had the sensation of being cut loose from my own body.

My mind couldn't accommodate any further astonishment; and then I saw Mr. Flores emerge from the shadows. Upon realizing that he was the man who had let us in, I simply passed out.

When I regained consciousness, I was lying on the couch.

I felt extraordinarily well rested and free of anxiety. Wondering how

long I had been out, I sat up and lifted my arm to look at my wristwatch.

"You have been out for exactly two minutes and twenty seconds," **Mr. Flores** announced, studying his watchless wrist.

He was sitting on a leather ottoman near the couch. In a sitting position he appeared much taller than he did standing up, for his legs were short and his torso long.

"How terribly dramatic to swoon away," he said, coming to sit beside me on the couch:

"I'm truly sorry we have frightened you."

His yellow-amber eyes, shiny with laughter, belied the genuinely concerned tone of his voice. "And I do apologize for not greeting you at the door."

His face reflected a bemusement bordering on fascination as he pulled my braid. "With your hair hidden under the hat and with that heavy leather jacket I thought you were a boy."

I stood up and had to hold on to the couch.

I was still a bit dizzy. Uncertainly, I looked around me.

The women were no longer in the room, and neither was **Joe Cortez**. **Mariano Aureliano** was sitting in one of the armchairs, staring fixedly ahead of him. Perhaps he was asleep with his eyes open.

"When I first saw the two of you holding hands," **Mr. Flores** went on, "I was afraid that Charlie Spider had turned queer."

He said the whole sentence in English. He pronounced his words beautifully and precisely and with genuine relish.

"Charlie Spider?" I laughed at the name and at his formal English pronunciation. "Who is he?"

"Don't you know?" he asked, his eyes wide with genuine puzzlement.

"No, I don't. Should I know?"

He scratched his head, perplexed by my denial, then asked, "With whom have you been holding hands?"

"**Carlos** held my hand as we stepped into this room."

"There you are," **Mr. Flores** said, gazing at me with rapt approval, as if I had resolved a particularly difficult riddle.

Then seeing my still-mystified expression he added, "**Carlos Castaneda** is not only **Joe Cortez**, but he's also Charlie Spider."

"Charlie Spider," I mumbled softly. "That's a very catchy name."

Of all the three names, it was the one I liked best, no doubt because I was exceedingly fond of spiders. They didn't frighten me in the least, not even big, tropical spiders. The corners of my apartment were always spotted with spider webs. Whenever I cleaned, I could not bring myself to destroy those gauzy webs.

"Why does he call himself Charlie Spider?" I asked curiously.

"Different names for different situations." **Mr. Flores** recited the answer as if it were a slogan. "The one who should explain all this to you is **Mariano Aureliano**."

"Is **Mr. Aureliano**'s name also **Juan Matus**?"

Mr. Flores nodded emphatically. "It most certainly is," he said, with a broad, gleeful smile. "He also has different names for different situations."

"How about yourself, **Mr. Flores**? Do you also have different names?"

"**Flores** is my only name. **Genaro Flores**." His tone was flirtatious.

He leaned toward me and in an insinuating whisper proposed, "You

can call me **Genarito**."

I shook my head involuntarily.

There was something about him that scared me more than **Mariano Aureliano** did.

On a rational level, I couldn't decide what it was that made me feel this way.

Outwardly, **Mr. Flores** seemed much more approachable than the other man. He was childlike, playful, and easygoing. And yet, I didn't feel at ease with him.

"The reason I only have one name," **Mr. Flores** broke into my reveries, "is that I am not a nagual."

"And what is a nagual?"

"**Ah**, that's a terribly difficult thing to explain." He smiled disarmingly. "Only **Mariano Aureliano** or **Isidore Baltazar** can explain that."

"Who is **Isidore Baltazar**?"

"**Isidore Baltazar** is the new nagual."

"Don't tell me any more, please," I said fretfully.

Holding my hand to my forehead I sat down again on the couch.

"You're confusing me, **Mr. Flores**, and I'm still kind of weak."

I looked at him pleadingly and asked, "Where is **Carlos**?"

"Charlie Spider is spinning some spiderish dream." **Mr. Flores** said the whole sentence in his extravagantly pronounced English then chuckled contentedly as though he were savoring a particularly clever joke.

He glanced gleefully at **Mariano Aureliano**- still staring fixedly at the wall- then back at me and back at his friend.

He must have sensed my growing apprehension, for he shrugged helplessly, held up his hands in a resigned gesture, and said, "**Carlos**, also known as **Isidore Baltazar**, went to visit..."

"He left?" My shriek made **Mariano Aureliano** turn to look at me.

I was more distraught at being left alone with the two old men than I was about learning that **Carlos Castaneda** was known by yet another name, and that he was the new nagual, whatever that meant.

Mariano Aureliano rose from his chair, bowed deeply, and, holding out his hand to help me up, said, "What could possibly be more delightful and rewarding for two old men than to guard you until you awoke from your dreams?"

His engaging smile and his old-fashioned courtesies were irresistible.

I relaxed instantly. "I can't think of anything more delightful," I cheerfully agreed and let him lead me to a brightly lit dining room across the corridor, to an oval-shaped mahogany table at the far end of the room.

Gallantly, he held out a chair for me, waited until I was comfortably seated, then said that it was not too late for supper and that he would go himself to the kitchen and bring me something delicious to eat.

My offer to help him was graciously rejected.

Mr. Flores, instead of walking to the table, cartwheeled across the room, calculating the distance with such precision he landed a few inches away from the table.

Grinning, he sat beside me. His face showed no trace of exertion: He wasn't even out of breath.

"In spite of your denial that you aren't an acrobat, I believe that you

and your friends are part of some magic show," I said.

Mr. Flores sprang from his chair, his face crinkling with mischief. "You're absolutely right. We are part of some magic show!" he exclaimed, reaching for one of the two earthenware jugs standing on the long sideboard.

He poured me a cup of hot chocolate. "I make a meal of it by eating a piece of cheese with it." He cut me a slice of **Manchego** cheese.

Together they were superb.

I wanted seconds, but he **didn't** offer me any.

I thought that a cup- and it had only been half full- was not enough. I had always been partial to chocolate and could eat inordinate amounts of it without ill effects.

I was certain that if I concentrated on my desire to have more of it, he would be obliged to pour me another cup without my having to ask. I was able to do this as a child when I wanted something badly enough.

Greedily, I watched him remove two extra cups and two saucers from the tall china closet.

I noticed that between the crystal, the china, and the silverware on the shelves stood an odd assortment of **prehispanic** clay figurines and plastic prehistoric monsters.

"This is the witches' house," **Mr. Flores** said in a conspiratorial tone, as if to explain the incongruity of the decor in the china closet.

"**Mariano Aureliano's** wives?" I asked daringly.

He **didn't** answer but gestured for me to turn around. **Mariano Aureliano** was standing right behind me.

"The same ones," **Mariano Aureliano** said cheerfully, placing a porcelain tureen on the table. "The same witches who made this delicious oxtail soup."

With a silver ladle he served me a plateful and urged me to add to it a wedge of lime and a slice of avocado.

I did so, then devoured it all in a few gulps.

I ate several platefuls, until I felt physically satisfied, almost stuffed.

We sat around the table for a long time. The **oxail** soup had the most soothing effect on me.

I was at ease. Something that was usually very nasty in me had been turned off.

My whole being, body and spirit, was thankful that I **didn't** have to use up energy to defend myself.

Nodding his head, as though silently confirming each of my thoughts, **Mariano Aureliano** watched me with keen, amused eyes.

I was about to address him as **Juan Matus**, when he anticipated my intent and said, "I'm **Juan Matus** for **Isidore Baltazar**."

"For you, I am the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**."

Smiling, he leaned closer and whispered in a confidential tone, "The man who drove you here is the new **nagual**, the **nagual Isidore Baltazar**. That's the name you should use when you talk to him or about him.

"You're not quite asleep but not quite awake either," **Mariano Aureliano** went on explaining, "so you'll be able to understand and remember everything we say to you."

Seeing that I was about to interrupt him, he added sternly, "And tonight, you're not going to ask stupid questions."

It **wasn't** so much his tone, but a force, an edge to him that was chilling. It paralyzed my tongue; my head, however, of its own accord, made a nodding gesture of affirmation.

"You have to test her," **Mr. Flores** reminded his friend.

A definite wicked gleam appeared in **Mr. Flores'** eyes as he added, "Or better yet, let me test her myself."

Mariano Aureliano paused, a long, deliberate moment charged with ominous possibilities, and regarded me critically, as if my features would give him a clue to some important secret.

Mesmerized by his keen, piercing eyes, I **didn't** so much as blink.

He nodded thoughtfully, and **Mr. Flores** asked me in a deep, grave tone, "Are you in love with **Isidore Baltazar**?"

And I'll be damned if I **didn't** say yes in a mechanical, unanimated voice.

Mr. Flores moved closer, until our heads almost touched, and in a whisper that shook with suppressed laughter asked, "Are you really madly, madly in love with him?"

I said yes again, and both men burst into loud, elated guffaws.

The sound of their laughter, bouncing around the room like ping-pong balls, finally broke my trance-like state. I hooked onto the sound and pulled myself out of the spell.

"What in the name of hell is this," I shouted at the top of **my** voice.

Startled, both men jumped out of their chairs.

They looked at me, then at each other, and burst out laughing again with ecstatic abandon.

The more eloquent my insults, the greater their mirth. There was something so infectious about their laughter, I **couldn't** help but giggle, too.

As soon as we had all calmed down, **Mariano Aureliano** and **Mr. Flores** bombarded me with questions.

They were particularly interested in how and when I first met **Isidore Baltazar**.

Every absurd little detail overjoyed them.

By the time I had gone over the events for the fourth and fifth time, I had either improved and enlarged my story with each telling, or I had remembered details I **wouldn't** have dreamed I could remember.

"**Isidore Baltazar** saw through you and through the whole thing," **Mariano Aureliano** judged when I finally finished with my various accounts. "But he **doesn't** see well enough yet.

"He **couldn't** even conceive that I had sent you to him."

He regarded me wickedly and corrected himself. "It **wasn't** really I who sent you to him. It was the spirit.

"The spirit chose me to do its bidding, though, and I blew you to him when you were most powerful, in the midst of your dreaming-awake."

He spoke lightly, almost listlessly: Only his eyes conveyed the urgency of his knowledge. "Perhaps your dreaming-awake power was the reason **Isidore Baltazar didn't** realize who you were, even though he was seeing; even though the spirit let him know the very first time he set eyes on you.

"A display of lights in the fog is the ultimate giveaway. How stupid of **Isidore Baltazar** not to see the obvious."

He chuckled softly, and I nodded in agreement, without knowing

what I was agreeing to.

"That'll show you that to be a sorcerer is no big deal," he continued.

"Isidore Baltazar is a sorcerer.

"To be a man of knowledge is something else. For that, sorcerers have to wait sometimes a lifetime."

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"A man of knowledge is a leader," he explained, his voice low, subtly mysterious:

"Sorcerers need leaders to lead us into and through the unknown.

"A leader is revealed through his actions.

"Leaders have no price tag on their heads, meaning that there is no way to buy them or bribe them or cajole them or mystify them."

He settled more comfortably in his chair and went on to say that all the people in his group had made it a point to study leaders throughout the ages in order to see if any of them fulfilled the requirements.

"Have you found any?"

"Some," he admitted. "Those we have found could have been **naguals**."

He pressed his finger against my lips and added, "**Naguals** are, then, natural leaders; men of tremendous energy who become sorcerers by adding one more track to their repertoire: the unknown.

"If those sorcerers succeed in becoming men of knowledge, then there is practically no limit to what they can do."

"Can women--" He **didn't** let me finish.

"Women, as you will learn someday, can do infinitely more complex things than that," he affirmed.

"Did **Isidore Baltazar** remind you of someone you met before?" **Mr. Flores** interrupted.

"Well," I began expansively, "I felt thoroughly at ease with him.

"I felt as if I had known him all my life. He reminded me of someone perhaps in my childhood; a forgotten childhood friend perhaps."

"So you really don't remember meeting him before?" **Mr. Flores** interjected.

"You mean at **Esperanza's** house?" I asked, wondering whether I had seen him at the healer's place and **didn't** recall it.

He shook his head disappointedly.

Then, apparently no longer interested in my response, he went on to ask if I had seen someone waving at us on our way to the house.

"No," I said. "I **didn't** see anyone waving at us."

"Think hard," he insisted.

I told the two men that after **Yuma**, instead of going east to **Nogales** on Highway 8- the most logical route- **Isidore Baltazar** headed south into Mexico, then east through "**El Gran Desierto**," then north again into the United States through **Sonoyta**, to **Ajo, Arizona**, and back into Mexico to **Caborca**, where we had a most delicious lunch of beef tongue in a green chili sauce.

"After getting into the car with a full stomach, I hardly paid any attention to the road," I admitted. "I know we passed through Santa **Ana**, and then we headed north again to **Cananea**, and then south again. A veritable mess, if you ask me."

"Can't you remember seeing anyone on the road?" **Mr. Flores** insisted. "Anyone waving at you?"

I shut my eyes tightly in an effort to visualize anyone waving at us, but my memory of the trip was one of stories and songs and of physical exhaustion.

And then as I was about to open my eyes, the image of a man flashed before me.

I told them that I vaguely recalled there had been a young man in the outskirts of one of those towns who I thought was trying to catch a ride.

"He might have waved at us," I said. "But I'm not sure."

Both men chuckled like children trying hard not to give away a secret.

"Isidore Baltazar wasn't too sure of finding us," **Mariano Aureliano** remarked gleefully. "That's why he followed this outlandish route.

"He followed the sorcerers' path; the coyote trail."

"Why **wouldn't** he be sure of finding you?" I interrupted.

"He **didn't** know whether he would find us until he saw the young man waving at him," **Mariano Aureliano** explained. "That young man is a sentry from the other world.

"His waving was a sign it was all right to continue. **Isidore Baltazar** should have known then who you really were, but he is very much like you; extremely cautious: And when he's not cautious, he's extremely reckless."

He paused for a moment to let the words sink in then added meaningfully, "Moving between those two points is the surest way to miss the boat. Cautiousness blinds as surely as recklessness."

"I can't understand the logic of all this," I murmured wearily.

Mariano Aureliano elucidated, "Whenever **Isidore Baltazar** brings a guest, he has to heed the sentry's signal before he can continue on his journey."

"Once he brought a girl he was in love with." **Mr. Flores** chuckled, closing his eyes as if transported by his own memory of the girl:

"A tall, dark-haired girl. Strong girl. Big feet. Nice face.

"He drove all over **Baja** California, and the sentry never let him through."

"Do you mean he brings his girlfriends?" I asked with morbid curiosity. "How many has he brought?"

"Quite a few," **Mr. Flores** said candidly:

"He did that, of course, entirely on his own.

"Your case is different," he pointed out.

"You're **re** not his girlfriend: You were just coming back.

"Isidore Baltazar nearly croaked when he found out he was so stupid to miss all the indications of the spirit. He was merely your chauffeur. We were waiting for you."

What would have happened if the sentry **hadn't** been there?"

What always occurs when **Isidore Baltazar** comes accompanied," **Mariano Aureliano** replied:

"He **wouldn't** have found us, because it's not up to him to choose whom to bring into the sorcerers' world."

His voice was enticingly soft as he added, "Only those the spirit has pointed out may knock on our door, after they have been ushered into it by one of us."

I was about to interrupt, then remembering his admonition that I **wasn't** to ask stupid questions, I quickly pressed my hand against my mouth.

Grinning appreciatively, **Mariano Aureliano** went on to say that in my case **Delia** had brought me into their world. "She's one of the two columns, so to speak, that make the door of our door.

"The other one is **Clara**. You'll meet her soon."

There was genuine admiration in his eyes and in his voice as he went on to say, "**Delia** crossed the border just to bring you home.

"The border is an actual fact, but sorcerers use it symbolically.

"You were on the other side and had to be brought here, to this side.

"Over on the other side is the daily world, here on this side is the world of sorcerers.

"**Delia** ushered you in smoothly; a real professional job. It was in impeccable maneuver that you will appreciate more and more as time passes."

Mariano Aureliano half-rose from his chair and reached for the porcelain compote on the sideboard.

He placed it in front of me. "Help yourself. They're delicious."

Enraptured, I gazed at the pulpy dry apricots on the hand-painted dish then tried one.

They were more than wonderful. I put three in my mouth.

Mr. Flores winked at me. "Go ahead," he urged me. "Put all of them in your mouth before we take the plate away."

I blushed and tried to apologize with a mouth full of apricots.

"Don't apologize!" **Mariano Aureliano** exclaimed. "Be yourself, but be yourself in control.

"If you want to finish the apricots, then finish them, and that should be all there is to it.

"What you should never do is finish them, and then feel sorry you did."

"Well, I'll finish them," I said. And that made them laugh.

"Do you know that you met **Isidore Baltazar** last year?" **Mr. Flores** said.

He was balancing so precariously on his tilted chair, I feared he would fall backwards and crash into the china closet.

A wicked glint of delight dawned in **Mr. Flores'** eyes as he began to hum a well-known **ranchera** song. Instead of the words that went with it, he made up a little ditty that told the story of **Isidore Baltazar**, a famous cook in **Tucson**: A cook who never lost his cool, not even when he was accused of putting dead cockroaches in the food.

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "The cook! The cook in the coffee shop was **Isidore Baltazar**! But that can't be true," I mumbled. "I don't think he would..." I stopped myself in **midsentence**.

I kept staring at **Mariano Aureliano**, hoping to discover something in his face, in that aquiline nose, in those piercing eyes.

I shook involuntarily, as if I were suddenly chilled. There was something savage in his cold eyes.

"Yes?" he prompted me. "You don't think he would...?" he urged me with a movement of his head to finish my sentence.

I was going to say, inane, that I **didn't** think **Isidore Baltazar** could lie to me so despicably. I **couldn't** quite bring myself to say it, though.

Mariano Aureliano's eyes became even harder, but I was too upset; too sorry for myself to feel frightened.

"So, I was tricked after all," I finally blurted out, glowering at him.

"**Isidore Baltazar** knew all along who I was. It's all a game."

"It's all a game," **Mariano Aureliano** readily agreed. "A marvelous game, though. The only game worth playing."

He paused as if to give me time to complain some more.

But before I had a chance to do so, he reminded me of the wig he had pulled over my hair.

"If you **didn't** recognize **Isidore Baltazar**- who **wasn't** disguised- what makes you think that he recognized you in your poodle outfit?"

Mariano Aureliano kept watching me. His eyes had lost their hardness: Now they were sad, weary.

"You **weren't** tricked. You **weren't** even enticed. Not that I **wouldn't** do so if I deemed it necessary," he noted in a light, soft tone:

"I told you what was what from the beginning.

"You have witnessed stupendous events; still you haven't noticed them.

"As most people do, you associate sorcery with bizarre behavior, rituals, drugs, incantations."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a mere whisper, then added that true sorcery was a most subtle and exquisite manipulation of perception.

"True sorcery," **Mr. Flores** interjected, "does not allow for human interference."

"But **Mr. Aureliano** claims that he blew me to **Isidore Baltazar**," I pointed out with immature impertinence. "**Isn't** that interfering?"

"I'm a **nagual**," **Mariano Aureliano** said simply. "I'm the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**, and the fact that I am the **nagual** enables me to manipulate perception."

I had paid close attention to his words, but I **didn't** have the vaguest idea what he meant by manipulating perception. Out of sheer nervousness, I reached for the last dry apricot on the plate.

"You're going to get sick," **Mr. Flores** said. "You're so tiny, and you're such a super pain in the... eye."

Mariano Aureliano came to stand behind me, then pressed my back in such a way it made me cough up the last apricot I had had in my mouth.

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[Florinda Donner](#) - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 8

Version 2007.03.11

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

[Florinda Donner](#)

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Chapter 8

[HTML](#) EDITOR:

[Florinda](#) said, "Never mind, child, where you get these thoughts. Obviously you're plugging into the source itself.

"Everybody does that- plugs into the source itself- but it takes a sorcerer to be aware of it."

END [HTML](#) EDITOR

[HTML](#) EDITOR:

..among those women no one was more, and no one was less than the other. That one woman in each group was the leader was in no way a matter of power, of prestige, or of accomplishment; but simply a matter

of efficiency.

END **HTML** EDITOR

At this point, the sequence of events, as I remember it, becomes blurry. I don't know what happened next. Perhaps I fell asleep and **wasn't** aware of it, or perhaps the pressure **Mariano Aureliano** exerted on my back was so great that I passed out.

When I came to my senses again, I was lying on a mat on the floor.

I opened my eyes and instantly became conscious of the intense brightness around me. There seemed to be sunlight in the room.

I blinked repeatedly, wondering whether there was something wrong with my eyes. I **couldn't** focus them.

"**Mr. Aureliano**," I called out. "There seems to be something wrong with my eyes."

I tried to sit up but **couldn't**.

It **wasn't** **Mr. Aureliano** or **Mr. Flores** who was standing by my side: A woman was there.

She was leaning over me blotting out the brightness, so to speak.

Her black hair hung loosely down her sides and shoulders: She had a round face and an imposing bust.

Again I tried to sit up. She **didn't** touch me, yet I knew that somehow she was holding me down.

"Don't call him **Mr. Aureliano**," she said. "Or **Mariano** either. That's very disrespectful of you:

"Call him **nagual**, and when you talk about him, call him the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**. He likes his full name." Her voice was melodious. I liked her.

I felt feisty. I wanted to ask her why all the nonsense about being disrespectful. I had heard **Delia** and all the other women call him the most ridiculous pet names and fuss over him as if he were their favorite doll.

He certainly had enjoyed every minute of it.

But I **couldn't** remember when and where I had witnessed that.

"Do you understand?" the woman asked.

I wanted to say yes, but I **didn't** have a voice. I tried, to no avail, to open my mouth and say something.

When she insisted on knowing if I had understood, all I could do was nod.

She offered me her hand to help me up. Before she touched me I was up, as if my desire to rise had superseded the actual contact with her hand and had pulled me into a sitting position before she did.

Astonished by this occurrence, I wanted to ask her about it, but I could barely keep myself upright. And as for talking, words simply refused to come out of my mouth.

She stroked my hair repeatedly. Obviously, she was thoroughly aware of my plight. She smiled kindly and said, "You're dreaming."

I **didn't** hear her say that, but I knew that her words had moved directly from her mind into mine.

She nodded and told me that, indeed, I could hear her thoughts and that she could hear mine. She assured me that she was like a figment of my imagination, yet she could act with me or upon me.

"Pay attention!" she commanded me. "I'm not moving my lips, and yet I am talking to you. Do the same."

Her mouth **didn't** move at all. Wondering whether I could feel a movement in her lips when she silently enunciated her words, I wanted to press my fingers against her mouth.

She was actually very good-looking but menacing. She reached for my hand and pressed it against her smiling lips. I **didn't** feel a thing.

"How can I talk without my lips?" I thought.

"You have a hole between your legs," she said directly into my mind. "Focus your attention on it. The pussy talks."

That remark hit a funny chord in me. I laughed so hard I lost my breath and blacked out again.

The woman shook me awake.

I was still on the same mat on the floor, but I was propped up with a thick cushion behind my back.

I blinked and shuddered, then drew a long breath and looked at her: She was sitting on the floor beside me.

"I'm not given to fainting," I said and surprised myself by being able to utter the words.

The sound of my own voice was so reassuring that I laughed out loud and repeated the same sentence several times.

"I know, I know," she appeased me. "Don't worry, you're not quite awake anyway. I am **Clara**. We have already met at **Esperanza's**."

I should have protested or asked her what she meant. Instead, without doubting for an instant, I accepted that I was still asleep and that we had met at **Esperanza's**.

Memories, foggy thoughts, visions of people, of places, began to emerge slowly.

A clear thought popped into my mind: I had dreamt once that I met her. It was a dream. Thus, I never had thought about it in terms of real events. The moment I hooked onto that realization, I remembered **Clara**.

"Of course, we've met," I said triumphantly. "But we met in a dream, so you are not real. I must be dreaming now, therefore I can remember you."

I sighed, content that it could all be explained so easily, and relaxed against the thick pillow.

Another clear memory of a dream popped into my mind. I **couldn't** recall exactly when I had dreamt this dream, but I remembered it as clearly as if the event had actually taken place: In it, **Delia** had introduced me to **Clara**.

Delia had described **Clara** as the most gregarious of the women dreamers. "She actually has friends who adore her," **Delia** had confided in me.

The **Clara** of that dream was quite tall, strong, and rotund.

She had observed me insistently as one observes a member of an unknown species, with careful eyes and nervous smiles.

And yet, in spite of her demanding scrutiny, I had liked her immensely. Her eyes were speculating and smiling and green. What I remembered best about her intense watchfulness was that she had looked at me with the unblinking stare of a cat.

"I know this is just a dream, **Clara**," I repeated, as if I needed to reassure myself.

"No. This is not just a dream, it's a special dream," **Clara** contradicted me forcefully:

"You're wrong to entertain such thoughts. Thoughts have power: Be watchful of them."

"You're not real, **Clara**," I insisted, in a strained, high-pitched voice. "You're a dream. That's why I can't remember you when I am awake."

My stubborn persistence made **Clara** chuckle. "You have never tried to remember me," she finally explained. "There was no point in it, no reason for it."

"We women are excruciatingly practical. Our great flaw or our great asset."

I was about to ask her what the practical aspect of remembering her now was, when she anticipated my question.

"Since I am in front of you, you need to remember me. And you do." She bent lower and, fixing me with her catlike stare, added, "And you won't forget me anymore."

"The sorcerers who reared me told me that women need two of anything in order to solidify it. Two sights of something, two readings, two frights, etc."

"You and I have now met twice. Now I am solid and real."

To prove how real she was, she pushed up the sleeves of her blouse and flexed her biceps. "Touch them," she urged me.

Giggling, I did. She indeed had hard, powerfully defined muscles. They felt as real as anything. She also made me touch the muscles of her thigh and calf.

"If this is a special dream," I said cautiously, "what do I do in this dream?"

"Anything your heart desires," she said. "You're doing fine so far."

"I cannot guide you, though, for I am not your dreaming teacher. I am simply a fat witch who actually takes care of the other witches."

"It was my partner, **Delia**, who delivered you into the sorcerers' world, just like a midwife."

"But she was not the one who first found you. **Florinda** did."

"Who is **Florinda**?" I giggled uncontrollably. "And when did she find me?"

"**Florinda** is another witch," **Clara** said matter-of-factly, then began to giggle too. "You met her."

"She's the one who took you into her dream in **Esperanza's** house. Do you remember the picnic?"

"Ah," I sighed appreciatively. "You mean the tall woman with the husky voice?" A radiance filled me. I had always admired tall women.

"The tall woman with the husky voice," **Clara** confirmed:

"She found you a couple of years ago at a party you attended with your boyfriend; a plush dinner in **Houston**, Texas, at the house of an oilman."

"What would a witch be doing at a party in an oilman's house?" I asked.

Then the full impact of her claim hit me.

I was dumbstruck. Although I **didn't** remember seeing **Florinda**, I certainly did recall the party.

I had gone with a friend who flew in his private jet from **Los Angeles** just to attend that party and flew back the next day. I was his translator. There had been several Mexican businessmen at that party who **didn't** speak English.

"Jesus!" I exclaimed under my breath. "What a weird turn of events!"

In great detail I described the party to **Clara**. It was the first time I had been to Texas. Like some star-struck movie fan, I ogled the men, not because they were handsome but because they looked so outlandish to me in their Stetson hats, pastel-colored suits, and cowboy boots. The oilman had hired entertainers. They had staged a variety show, worthy of **Las Vegas**, in a nightclub grotto built especially for the occasion. It throbbled with loud music and strobe lights. And the food had been superb.

"But why would **Florinda** attend such a party?" I asked.

"The world of sorcerers is the strangest thing there is," **Clara** said by way of an answer.

She jumped up, like an acrobat, from a sitting position to a standing one, without using her arms.

She paced about the room, back and forth in front of my mat. She looked formidable in her full, dark skirt, her cowboy denim jacket-colorfully embroidered in the back- and her sturdy cowboy boots. An Australian hat, pulled low over her brow as if to protect her from the noonday sun, added the last touch to her eccentric, outlandish appearance.

"How do you like my outfit?" she asked, pausing in front of me. Her face was radiant.

"It's great," I gushed. She certainly had the flair, the confidence to carry off any kind of outfit. "It's really cool."

She knelt beside me on the mat and in a confidential whisper said, "**Delia** is green with envy."

"We are always in competition to see who comes up with the nuttiest getup. It has to be crazy without being stupid."

She was silent for a moment, and her eyes watched me, considering. "You're welcome to compete," she offered. "Do you want to join us in our game?"

I nodded emphatically, and she spelled out the rules for me.

"Originality, practicality, low price, and no self-importance," she rattled off.

Then she rose again and twirled a few more times around the room.

Laughing, she collapsed beside me and said, "**Florinda** thinks I should encourage you to participate. She says that in that party, she found out that you had a touch for thoroughly practical outfits."

She could barely finish the sentence: She was overcome by a great burst of giggles.

"Did **Florinda** talk to me there?" I asked and gazed at her slyly, wondering whether she would tell me what I had omitted from my account; information that I **wasn't** going to volunteer.

Clara shook her head then gave me a distracted smile, meant to deflect further questions about the party.

"How did **Delia** happen to be at the baptism in **Nogales, Arizona**?" I asked, shifting the conversation to the events of the other party.

"**Florinda** sent her there," **Clara** admitted, tucking all her loose hair into her Australian hat. "She crashed the party by telling everyone that she had come with you."

"Wait a minute!" I interrupted her. "This is no dream. What are you trying to do to me?"

"I'm trying to instruct you," **Clara** insisted, without altering her air of indifference.

Her tone was even, almost casual. She **didn't** seem to be interested in the effect her words were having on me. Yet she watched me carefully as she added, "This is a dream, and we are certainly talking in your dream, because I am also dreaming your dream."

That her outlandish statements were enough to appease me was proof that I was dreaming.

My mind became calm, sleepy, and capable of accepting the situation.

I heard myself speak, a voice detached from my volition. "There is no way **Florinda** could have known about my driving to **Nogales**," I said. "My girlfriend's invitation was accepted on the spur of the moment."

"I knew that this would be incomprehensible to you," **Clara** sighed.

Then, looking into my eyes and weighing her words carefully, she declared, "**Florinda** is your mother more than any mother you ever had."

I found her statement preposterous, but I **couldn't** say a word.

"**Florinda** feels you," **Clara** continued. She had a devilish glint in her eyes as she added, "There is a homing device she uses. She knows wherever you are."

"What homing device?" I asked, my mind suddenly completely in control. The thought that someone might know at all times what I was up to filled me with dread.

"Her feelings for you are a homing device," **Clara** said with beautiful simplicity and in a tone so soft and harmonious that it made my apprehension vanish.

"What feelings for me, **Clara**?"

"Who knows, child?" she said wistfully. She drew her legs up, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. "I've never had a daughter like this."

My mood changed abruptly from amusement back to apprehension. In the rational, thought-out manner that was my style, I began to worry about the subtle implications of **Clara's** statement.

And it was precisely my rational deliberations that again turned on my doubts.

This **couldn't** possibly be a dream. I was awake: My concentration was too keen for me to be otherwise.

Sliding down the cushion propped against my back, I half closed my eyes.

I kept watching **Clara** through my lashes, wondering whether she would slowly fade away as people and scenes fade away in dreams.

She **didn't**. I felt momentarily reassured that I was awake and so was **Clara**.

"No, we're not awake," she contradicted me, again intruding into my thoughts.

"I can speak," I said by way of validating my state of total consciousness.

"Big deal!" she cackled. "Now I am going to do something that will wake you up, so that you can continue the conversation while you are really awake." She enunciated the last word with great care, drawing it out in an exaggerated fashion.

"Wait. Wait, **Clara**," I pleaded. "Give me time to adjust to all his." I preferred my uncertainty to what she might do to me.

Impervious to my pleading, **Clara** rose and reached for the pitcher of water standing on a low table nearby.

Still giggling, she hovered over me, holding the pitcher over my head.

I tried to roll to the side, but I was not able to do so. My body **wouldn't** obey me; it seemed to be glued to the mat.

Before she actually poured the water over me, I felt a cold, soft sprinkle on my face.

The coldness rather than the wetness produced a most peculiar sensation. It first blurred **Clara's** face looming over me the way ripples distort the surface of water.

Then the coldness centered itself on my stomach and pulled me inward, like a sleeve that's pulled inside out.

My last thought was that I was going to drown in a pitcher of water. Bubbles upon bubbles of darkness spun me around until everything went black.

When I came to myself again, I was no longer lying on the mat on the floor but on the couch in the living room.

Two women were standing at the foot of the couch, staring at me with wide, curious eyes.

Florinda, the tall, white-haired woman with the husky voice, was sitting beside me, humming an old lullaby- or so it seemed to me- and caressing my hair, my face, my arms, with great tenderness.

Her touch and the sound of her voice held me down.

I just lay there, my unblinking eyes fixed on hers, certain I was having one of my vivid dreams, which always began as dreams and ended up as nightmares.

Florinda was speaking to me. She was telling me to look into her eyes.

Her words moved soundlessly, like the wings of butterflies.

But whatever I saw in her eyes filled me with a familiar feeling- the irrational, abject terror I experienced in my nightmares.

I jumped up and bolted straight for the door. It was the automatic, animal's reaction I had always had in a nightmare.

"Don't be frightened, my darling," the tall woman said, coming after me. "Relax."

"We are all here to help you. There is no need to be so upset. You'll hurt your little body by subjecting it to unnecessary fright."

I had stopped by the door, not because she had persuaded me to stay but because I **couldn't** open the damn thing.

Frantically, I pulled and pushed the door. It **didn't** budge.

The tall woman was just behind me.

My trembling increased. I shook so hard that my body ached, and my heart beat so loudly and erratically I knew it would burst through my chest.

"**Nagual!**" the tall woman called out, turning her head over her shoulder. "You'd better do something. She's going to die of fright."

I **didn't** see to whom she was talking, but in my wild search for an escape, I saw a second door at the other end of the room.

I was certain I had enough energy left in me to make a dash for it, but my legs gave in on me.

As if life had already abandoned my body, I sank to the floor. My last breath escaped from me.

The woman's long arms swooped down on me like a great eagle's wings. She held me, put her mouth to mine, and breathed air into me.

Slowly, my body relaxed: My heartbeat returned to normal.

I was filled with a strange peace that quickly turned into a wild excitement.

It **wasn't** fear that filled me with wildness but her breath. It was hot: It scorched my throat, my lungs, my stomach, my groin; moving all the way to my hands and my feet.

In a flash, I knew that the woman was exactly like me only taller, as tall as I would have liked to be.

I felt such love for her that I did something outlandish: I kissed her passionately.

I felt her lips widen into a smile. Then she threw her head back and laughed. "This little rat kissed me," she said, turning to the others.

"I **m** dreaming!" I exclaimed, and they all laughed with childlike abandon.

At first I **couldn't** help but laugh, too. Within moments, however, I was my usual self-embarrassed after one of my impulsive acts and angry at having been caught.

The tall woman embraced me. "I **m Florinda**," she said, and she lifted me up and cradled me in her arms as if I were a baby:

"You and I are the same," she went on. "You're as petite as I would have liked to be. It's a great disadvantage to be tall. No one can ever cradle you. I **m** five ten."

"I **m** five two," I confessed, and we both laughed because we understood each other to perfection. I was short on the second inch but always rounded it up. I was certain **Florinda** was closer to five eleven but rounded it down to ten.

I kissed her cheeks and her eyes. I loved her with a love that was incomprehensible to me: It was a feeling untainted by doubt or dread or expectation: It was the love one feels in dreams.

Seemingly in complete agreement with me, **Florinda** chuckled softly.

The elusive light in her eyes, the ghostly whiteness of her hair, was like some forgotten memory.

I felt as if I had known her from the day I was born.

It occurred to me that children who liked their mothers must be lost children. Filial love coupled with admiration for the mother's physical being must result in a sense of total love, like the love I felt for this tall, mysterious woman.

She put me down. "This is **Carmela**," she said, turning me toward a beautiful, dark-eyed, dark-haired woman. Her features delicate, and her skin was flawless: She had the smooth, creamy pallor of someone who stays much indoors.

"I only take moon baths," she whispered in my ear as she embraced me. "You ought to do the same. You're too fair to be out in the sun: You're ruining your skin."

It was her voice, more than anything else, that I recognized. She was the same woman who had asked me all those direct, personal questions at the picnic.

I remembered her in a sitting position: she had seemed small and frail. To my surprise, she was three or four inches taller than I. Her powerful, muscular body made me feel insignificant in comparison.

With her arm draped around my shoulder, **Florinda** guided me toward the second woman who had been standing beside the couch when I awoke.

She was muscular and tall but not as tall as **Florinda**. She **wasn't** conventionally beautiful- her features were too strong for that- yet there was something striking, thoroughly attractive about her, including the faint shadow of fine hair on her upper lip, which she obviously **didn't** bother to wax or bleach. I sensed a tremendous force in her, an agitation that was completely under control yet still there.

"This is **Zoila**," **Florinda** said to me.

Zoila made no motion to either shake my hand or to embrace me.

Carmela laughed and spoke for **Zoila**: "I **m** very happy to see you again."

Zoila's mouth curved in the loveliest of smiles, showing white, large, even teeth. As her long, slender hand, glinting with jeweled rings, brushed my cheek, I realized she was the one whose face had been hidden under a mass of scraggly hair. She was the one who had sewn the Belgian lace around the canvas cloth we had sat on during the picnic.

The three women surrounded me and made me sit on the couch.

"The first time we met you, you were dreaming," **Florinda** said. "So we really **didn't** have time to interact."

"This time, however, you're awake, so tell us about yourself."

I was about to interrupt her and say that this was a dream and that during the picnic, whether asleep or awake, I had told them everything worth knowing about myself.

"No, no. You're wrong," **Florinda** said, as if I had spoken my thoughts out loud. "You're completely awake now."

"And what we want to know is what you've done since our last meeting. Tell us specifically about **Isidore Baltazar**."

"You mean this is not a dream?" I asked timidly.

"No. This is not a dream," she assured me. "You were dreaming a few minutes ago, but this is different."

"I don't see the difference."

"That's because you're a good dreamer," she explained. "Your nightmares are real: You said that yourself."

My whole body tensed up; and then, as though it knew that it **couldn't** withstand another attack of fright, it gave up. My body abandoned itself to the moment.

I repeated to them what I had already told and retold **Mariano Aureliano** and **Mr. Flores** earlier.

This time, however, I remembered details I had altogether overlooked before such as the two sides of **Isidore Baltazar's** face; the two simultaneous moods he showed that were plainly revealed in his eyes.

The left one was sinister, menacing: The right one was friendly, open.

"He's a dangerous man," I maintained, carried away by my observations. "He has a peculiar power to move events in whatever direction he pleases, while he remains outside, watching you **quirm**."

The women were enthralled by what I was saying.

Florinda signaled me to continue.

"What makes people so vulnerable to his charm is that he is a generous man," I went on. "And generosity is perhaps the only virtue that

none of us can resist, because we are dispossessed, [* dispossessed- physically or spiritually homeless or deprived of security] regardless of our background."

Realizing what I had said, I stopped abruptly and gazed at them, aghast.

"I don't know what has come upon me," I muttered in an attempt to apologize. "I truly don't know why I said that when I haven't thought about **Isidore Baltazar** in those terms myself.

"It's not me talking. I'm not even capable of making those kinds of judgments."

Florinda said, "Never mind, child, where you get these thoughts. Obviously you're plugging into the source itself.

"Everybody does that- plugs into the source itself- but it takes a sorcerer to be aware of it."

I **didn't** understand what she was trying to tell me. I restated that I had no intention of shooting off my big mouth.

Florinda giggled and regarded me for a few moments thoughtfully. "Act as if you were in a dream.

"Be daring and don't apologize," she said.

I felt stupid, incapable of analyzing what I felt.

Florinda nodded, as if in agreement, then turned to her companions and said, "Tell her about us."

Carmela cleared her throat and without looking at me said, "The three of us and **Delia** make a unit. We deal with the daily world."

I hung on her every word, but I **didn't** understand her at all.

"We're the unit of sorceresses who deal with people," **Carmela** clarified:

"There is another unit of four women who don't deal with people at all."

She took my hand in hers and examined my palm- as if she were to read my fortune- then closed it gently into a fist and added, "You're just like us in general. That is, you can deal with people.

"And you're like **Florinda** in particular."

Again she paused, and with a dreamy look on her face she repeated what **Clara** had already told me.

"It was **Florinda** who found you," she said. "Therefore, while you remain in the world of sorcerers, you belong to her.

"She'll guide you and look after you."

Her tone carried such a great certainty that it threw me into genuine worry.

"I don't belong to anyone," I said. "And I don't need anyone to look after me." My voice was strained, unnatural, uncertain.

Silently, the women watched me, bemused smiles on their faces.

"Do you think I need guidance?" I asked defiantly, gazing from one to the other.

Their eyes were half closed, their lips parted in those same contemplative smiles. The imperceptible nods of their chins clearly indicated that they were waiting for me to finish what I had to say.

"I think I do very well in life on my own," I finished lamely.

"Do you remember what you did at the party where I found you?"

Florinda asked me.

As I stared at her in amazement, **Carmela** whispered in my ear,

"Don't worry, you can always find a way to explain anything."

Florinda waved a finger at me, not in the slightest disturbed.

Panic crept over me at the thought that they might know that I had walked naked in that party in front of dozens of people.

Until that moment, I had been, if not proud of my outlandish behavior, at least acceptant of it. To my way of thinking, what I did at that party was a manifestation of my spontaneous personality.

First, I had taken a long horseback ride with the host, in my evening gown without a saddle, to show him- after he dared me and bet I **couldn't** do it- that I was as good on horseback as any cowboy. I had an uncle in Venezuela who had a stud farm, and I had been on a horse since I was a toddler.

Upon winning the bet, dizzy from the exertion and alcohol, I took a plunge in his giant pool- in the nude.

"I was there by the pool when you went in naked," **Florinda** said, obviously privy to my recollection. "You brushed me with your naked buttocks.

"You shocked everyone, including me. I liked your **daring**. Above all, I liked that you walked naked all the way from the other side of the pool just to brush against me.

"I took that as an indication that the spirit was pointing you out to me."

"It can't be true," I mumbled. "If you had been at that party, I would have remembered you. You're too tall and striking-looking to be overlooked."

It **wasn't** meant as a compliment: I wanted to convince myself that I was being tricked, manipulated.

"I liked the fact that you were killing yourself just to show off,"

Florinda went on:

"You were a clown, eager to draw attention to yourself at any cost, especially when you jumped on a table and danced for a moment, shaking your buttocks shamelessly, while the host yelled his head off."

Instead of embarrassing me, her remarks filled me with an incredible sense of ease and delight.

I felt liberated. The secret was out, the secret I had never dared to admit, that I was a show-off who would do anything to get attention.

A new mood overtook me, definitely more humble, less defensive.

I feared, however, that such a mood **wouldn't** last. I knew that any insights and realizations I had arrived at in dreams had never survived.

But perhaps **Florinda** was right and this was no dream, and my new frame of mind would endure.

Seemingly cognizant of my thoughts, the three women nodded emphatically.

Instead of feeling encouraged by their agreement, it only revived my uncertainties.

As I had feared, my insightful mood was short-lived. Within moments I was burning with doubts; and I wanted a respite.

"Where is **Delia**?" I asked.

"She's in **Oaxaca**," **Florinda** said, then added pointedly, "She was here just to greet you."

I had thought that if I changed the subject, I would get a respite and have a chance to recuperate my strength.

Now I was facing something I had no resources to deal with.

I **couldn't** accuse **Florinda** outright- as I would normally have done with anybody- of telling lies in order to manipulate me.

I **couldn't** tell her that I suspected they had made me groggy and had taken me from room to room while I was unconscious.

"What you say is really preposterous, **Florinda**," I chided. "I can't believe that you expect me to take you seriously."

Chewing the inside of my lip, I stared at her long and hard. "I know that **Delia** is hiding in one of the rooms."

Florinda's eyes seemed to tell me she understood my quandary.

"You have no other option except to take me seriously," she said.

Though her tone was mild, it was final.

I turned to the other two women, hoping for some kind of an answer, anything that would ease my growing apprehension.

"If someone else guides you, it's actually very easy to dream,"

Carmela confided:

"The only drawback is that someone else has to be a **nagual**."

"I've been hearing all along about a **nagual**," I said. "What is a **nagual**?"

"A **nagual** is a sorcerer of great power who can lead other sorcerers through and out of the darkness," **Carmela** explained:

"But the **nagual** himself told you all that a while ago. Don't you remember?"

Florinda interceded as my body contorted in an effort to remember. "Events we live in everyday life are easy to recall. We have plenty of practice in doing that.

"But events lived in dreams are another story. We have to struggle very hard to bring them back, simply because the body stores them in different places.

"With women who don't have your somnambulist brain," she pointed out, "dreaming instructions begin by making them draw a map of their bodies- a painstaking job that reveals where the visions of dreams are stored in their bodies."

"How do you draw this map, **Florinda**?" I asked, genuinely intrigued.

"By systematically tapping every inch of your body," she said:

"But I can't tell you more. I'm your mother, not your dreaming teacher. Now, she recommends a small wooden mallet for the actual tapping. And she also recommends to tap only the legs and hips. Very rarely, the body stores those memories in the chest or belly. What's stored in the chest, back, and belly are the memories of everyday life. But that's another matter.

"All that concerns you now is that remembering dreams has to do with physical pressure on the specific spot where that vision is stored.

"For instance, if you push your vagina by putting pressure on your clitoris, you'll remember what **Mariano Aureliano** told you," she finished with a kind of simple cheerfulness.

I stared at her aghast, then burst into nervous, fitful giggles. I **wasn't** going to push anything.

Florinda laughed, too, gleefully, seemingly enjoying my embarrassment. "If you won't do it," she threatened, "then I will simply have **Carmela** do it for you."

I turned to **Carmela**. With a half smile about to break into a laugh, she

assured me that indeed she would push my vagina for me.

"There is no need to!" I cried out in dismay. "I remember everything!"

And indeed I did. And not only what **Mariano Aureliano** had said but also other events.

"Is **Mr. Aureliano**..."

"**Clara** told you to call him the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**," **Carmela** cut me off in **midsentence**.

"Dreams are doors into the unknown," **Florinda** said, stroking my head:

"**Naguals** lead by means of dreams. And the act of dreaming with purpose is the art of sorcerers. The **nagual Mariano Aureliano** has helped you to get into dreams that all of us dreamed."

I blinked repeatedly. I shook my head, then fell back against the cushions of the couch, shocked by the absurdity of all I was remembering.

I remembered that I had dreamed of them a year ago in **Sonora**, a dream that had lasted, I thought, forever.

In that dream, I met **Clara**, **Nelida**, and **Hermelinda**; the other team, the dreamers. They told me that the leader of that team was **Zuleica** but that I **couldn't** dream of her yet.

As the memory of that dream became clear in my mind, it also became clear that among those women no one was more, and no one was less than the other.

That one woman in each group was the leader was in no way a matter of power, of prestige, or of accomplishment; but simply a matter of efficiency.

I **didn't** know why, but I was convinced that all that mattered to them was the deep affection they had for each other.

In that dream everyone had said to me that **Zuleica** was my dreaming teacher. That was all I could remember.

Just as **Clara** had told me, I needed to see them or dream of them one more time in order to solidify my knowledge of them. As it was, they were but disembodied memories.

I vaguely heard **Florinda** say that after a few more tries I would fare much better in shifting from my memory of dreams, to the dream I was dreaming, and then to the normal state of **awakeness**.

I heard **Florinda** giggle, but I was no longer in the room.

I was outside, walking across the chaparral. I walked slowly along an invisible path, a little uneasy, for there was no light, no moon, no stars in the sky.

Pulled by some invisible force, I stepped into a large room.

It was dark inside except for the lines of light crisscrossing from wall to wall over the faces of the people sitting in two circles- an inner and an outer circle.

The light got bright and then became dim, as if someone in the circle were playing with the electric switch, turning it on and off.

I recognized **Mariano Aureliano** and **Isidore Baltazar** sitting, back to back, in the middle of the inner circle.

It **wasn't** so much that I recognized their faces but rather their energy. It **wasn't** that their energy was brighter than or different from anyone else's.

There was simply more of it. It was massive. It was one splendid, great lump of inexhaustible brilliance.

The room shone white. There was a vividness to things, a hardness to every edge and corner.

There was such a clarity in that room that everything stood out separately, by itself, especially those lines of light that were tied to the people sitting in the circle- or that emanated from them.

The people were all connected by lines of light, and they looked as if they were the suspension points of a giant spider web. They all communicated wordlessly, through the light.

I was pulled to that silent, electric tension until I, too, was a point in that web of luminosity.

I was stretched out on the couch; my head resting in **Florinda's** lap. "What's going to happen?" I asked, looking up at her.

She **didn't** answer; neither did **Carmela** or **Zoila**, who were sitting by her with their eyes closed.

I repeated my question several times, but all I heard was the gentle breathing of the three women.

I was certain they were asleep, yet I felt their quiet, keen eyes on me.

The darkness and the silence moved about the house like something alive, bringing with them an icy wind and the scent of the desert.

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Version 2007.03.11

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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HTML EDITOR:

I was living in another reality that **didn't** yet fully belong to me, but to which I had access through these people.

END **HTML** EDITOR

Shivering with cold, I wrapped the blanket tightly around me and sat up.

I was in a strange bed, in a strange room furnished only with the bed and a night table, yet everything around me exuded familiarity. However, I **couldn't** decide why it was all so well known to me.

Perhaps I am still asleep, I thought. How do I know this **isn't** a dream?

I sank back into my pillows. I lay there with my arms behind my head and let the bizarre events I had witnessed and lived- half dream, half memory- run through my mind.

It had all begun, of course, the year before, when I drove with **Delia Flores** to the healer's house.

Delia had claimed that the picnic I had had with everyone there had been a dream. I had laughed at her, and discarded her statements as preposterous.

She had been right, though.

I knew now that the picnic had been a dream.

Not my dream, but a dream dreamt by others and to which I had been invited; I was a participating guest.

My mistake all along had been to try doggedly to deny it; to discard it as a fake without knowing what I meant by fake.

All I succeeded in doing was to block that event from my mind so completely that I was never aware of it.

What I needed to do was to accept that we have a track for dreams; a groove where only dreams run.

Had I set up myself to remember the dream I had had in **Sonora**, as nothing else but a dream, I would have succeeded in retaining the wonder of what had occurred while the dream was being dreamt.

The more I speculated about it, and about all the things that were happening to me now, the greater my discomfort.

But what surprised me the most was that I **wasn't** really scared of all these people who, although supportive, were a scary bunch by any count.

And it suddenly dawned on me that the reason why I **wasn't** scared was that I knew them very well. The proof to me was that they themselves had voiced the strange yet comforting feeling I had had: that I was coming home.

I discarded all these thoughts as soon as I had formulated them, and honestly wondered whether perhaps I was mentally unbalanced and they had found a way to focus on it and thus enhance it.

In a serious, systematic fashion I reviewed the history of my family in an effort to recall everything I might have heard about mental illness.

There was a story of a maternal great-uncle who, Bible in hand, would preach at street corners. Then both my great-grandfather and my grandfather, at the onset of the First and the Second World Wars, respectively, committed suicide upon realizing that everything was lost to them. One of my grandmothers blew her brains out when she realized that she had lost her beauty and sex appeal.

I liked to believe that I had inherited my feeling of detachment from being the true granddaughter of all those nuts. I had always believed that this feeling of detachment gave me my daring.

Those morbid thoughts caused me such anxiety that I jumped out of bed.

With nervous, jerky movements I pulled my body out of the blanket.

To my utter bafflement I found myself bundled in a heavy flannel nightshirt. I had on thick, knee-length wool socks, mittens, and a cardigan sweater.

"I must be ill," I mumbled to myself in dismay. "Why else would I be cold with all these clothes on?" Normally, I slept in the nude, regardless of the climate.

Only then did I notice the sunlight in the room: It came through the thick, semi-opaque window.

I was certain that the light shining in my eyes had awakened me.

And I really needed to find the bathroom.

Worried that the house **didn't** have inside plumbing, I stepped toward the sliding door at the other end of the room, which was open, and sure enough, it was a water closet with a lidded chamber pot in it.

"Damn it! I can't go to the bathroom in a water closet!" I yelled.

The door opened and **Florinda** walked in. "It's all right," she said, embracing me. "There's an outhouse. The water closet is a relic from the past."

"How fortunate it's already morning," I laughed. "No one will ever know that I'm too fainthearted to go to the outhouse in the dark."

Florinda gave me a strange look, then turned her gaze away, and at last said in a whisper, "What makes you think it's morning?"

"The sun woke me up a little while ago," I said, moving toward the

window.

Uncomprehendingly, I stared at the darkness outside.

Florinda's face brightened. She seemed to control herself, but then her shoulders shook with laughter as she pointed to the light bulb in the lamp standing behind the bed. I had mistaken the bright bulb for the sunlight.

"What makes you so sure you're awake?" she asked.

I turned to look at her and said, "My unbearable urge to go to the bathroom."

She took me by the arm and said, "Let me take you to the outhouse before you disgrace yourself."

"I'm not going anywhere until you tell me whether I'm awake or dreaming," I yelled.

"What a temper!" **Florinda** exclaimed, lowering her head until her forehead touched mine.

Her eyes were wide. "You're dreaming-awake," she added, enunciating each word carefully.

In spite of my growing apprehension, I began to laugh.

The sound of my laughter, which reverberated around the room like a distant echo, dispelled my anxiety.

At that moment I was no longer concerned about whether I was awake or dreaming. All my attention was focused on reaching the toilet.

"Where is the outhouse?" I growled.

"You know where it is," **Florinda** said, folding her arms over her chest. "And you'll never reach it in time, unless you will yourself be there.

"But don't bring the outhouse to your bed. That's called lazy dreaming; the surest way to soil your bed. Go to the outhouse yourself in a flick of an eyelid."

To my utter horror, I **couldn't** reach the door when I tried to. My feet lacked the confidence to walk. Slowly and uncertainly, as if they were unable to decide which way to go, they moved, one foot ahead of the other.

Resisting to accept that my feet were no longer under my command, I tried to speed up my movements by lifting, with my hands, one foot after the other.

Florinda didn't seem to care what was happening to me.

Tears of frustration and self-pity welled up in my eyes as I stood rooted to the spot. My lips shaped the word help, but no sound came out of my mouth.

What's the matter?" she asked as she took hold of one of my arms and gently pulled me down to the floor.

She removed my heavy **wollen** socks and examined my feet: She now seemed genuinely concerned.

I wanted to explain that my inability to move was due to my being emotionally exhausted. But hard as I tried, I **couldn't** formulate my thoughts into words.

As I struggled to utter a sound, I noticed that something was wrong with my vision: My eyes were no longer able to focus.

Florinda's face remained blurry and fuzzy no matter how hard I squeezed my eyes; regardless of how close I moved my face to hers.

"I know what's the matter with you," **Florinda** whispered in my ear. "You have to go to the outhouse.

"Do it! Will yourself there!"

I nodded emphatically. I knew that I was indeed dreaming-awake, or rather, that I was living in another reality that **didn't** yet fully belong to me, but to which I had access through these people.

Then I felt inexplicably at ease; and suddenly I was in the outhouse, not in a dreamed outhouse but in a real one.

It took me a long time to test my surroundings, to make sure this was the real thing. It was.

Then I was back in the room, but I **didn't** know how.

Florinda said something flattering about my dreaming capacity.

I paid little attention to her remarks, for I was distracted by the pile of blankets against the wall. I **hadn't** noticed them upon awakening, yet I was certain I had seen them before.

My feeling of ease vanished quickly as I tried to recall where I had seen those blankets.

My anguish grew. I **didn't** know any longer whether I was still in the same house I had arrived at earlier in the evening with **Isidore Baltazar** or whether I was someplace else.

"Whose room is this?" I asked. "And who bundled me up with all these clothes?"

It terrified me to hear my own voice.

Florinda stroked my hair and in a kind, soft voice said that for the time being this was my room; and that she had bundled me up so I **wouldn't** get cold.

She explained that the desert is deceiving; especially at night.

She regarded me with an enigmatic expression, as though she were hinting at something else.

It disturbed me because her words gave me no clues about what she might be referring to.

My thoughts reeled aimlessly. The key word, I decided, was desert.

I **hadn't** known the witches' place was in the desert: We had arrived at it in such a roundabout way, I had failed to ascertain where exactly the house was located.

"Whose house is this, **Florinda**?" I asked.

She seemed to be wrestling with some deep problem, her expression changing from thoughtful to worried several times. "You're home," she finally said, her voice deep with emotion.

Before I could remind her that she **hadn't** answered my question, she gestured for me to be silent and pointed a finger at the door.

Something whispered in the darkness outside. It could have been the wind and the leaves, but I knew it was neither.

It was a soothing, familiar sound: It brought back to me the memory of the picnic. In particular, it brought back **Mariano Aureliano**'s words: "I will blow you, as I blew the others, to the one person who now holds the myth in his hands."

The words rang in my ears: I turned to look, wondering if **Mariano Aureliano** had perhaps come into the room and was repeating them out loud this very instant.

Florinda nodded. She had read my mind. And her eyes, fixed on mine, were forcing me to acknowledge my understanding of his claim.

At the picnic I **hadn't** given much thought to his statement. It had simply been too preposterous.

Now I was so curious to find out who "the others" really were that I **couldn't** afford to let the topic of the conversation slip by.

"**Isidore Baltazar** talked about some people who work with him," I began cautiously:

"He said that they had been entrusted to him and that it was his sacred duty to help them. Are they the ones who... blew to him?" I asked hesitantly.

Florinda nodded her head affirmatively, a faint smile curling her lips as if she found my reluctance to mention the word blew amusing. "Those are the ones the old **nagual** blew to the new **nagual**: They are women, and they are like you."

"Like me?" I asked uncertainly.

I wished I **hadn't** been so absorbed with my own puzzling changes of moods and feelings toward **Isidore Baltazar** during the trip, and had paid closer attention to all he had revealed about his world.

"In what way are those women like me?" I asked and then added, "Do you know them?"

"I've seen them," she said noncommittally.

"How many women have been blown to **Isidore Baltazar**?" I asked with ill-concealed displeasure; yet the mere thought of them was both exciting and alarming.

Florinda was positively gleeful at my reaction. "A few.

"And they don't resemble you physically, yet they are like you.

"What I mean is that they resemble one another the way my fellow sorceresses and I resemble one another," **Florinda** explained:

"**Weren't** you, yourself, surprised at how much alike we looked when you first met us?"

Acknowledging my nod, she went on to say that what made her and her cohorts so alike- in spite of the obvious physical differences- was their unbiased commitment to the sorcerers' world.

"We are drawn together by an affection that is as yet incomprehensible to you," she said.

"I bet it is," I stated as cynically as I could.

Then my curiosity and excitement about the women who had been blown to **Isidore Baltazar** got the better of me. "When will I meet them?"

"When you find them," **Florinda** said. Her voice, though low, had an extraordinary force that all but silenced me for a moment.

"How can I find them if I don't know them? It's impossible."

"Not for a witch," she remarked casually:

"As I already said, you don't resemble them physically, but the glow inside you is as bright as the glow inside them.

"You will recognize them by that glow."

Her eyes were fixed on me intently, as if she could indeed see the glow inside me.

Her face was grave and her voice unusually low as she said, "It's the glow of sorcerers."

I wanted to make some impudent remark, but something in her manner alarmed me. "Can I see that glow?" I asked.

"We need the **nagual** for that," **Florinda** said and pointed to the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**, who was standing in the shadowy corner of the room.

I **hadn't** noticed him at all, but I **didn't** find his sudden appearance in

any way alarming.

Florinda told him what I wanted.

He motioned me to follow him to the middle of the room. "I'll show you that glow," he said then squatted and, holding up both hands, gestured for me to get on his back.

I asked, "We are going for a piggyback ride?"

I made no effort to conceal my disappointment. "**Aren't** you going to show me the glow of sorcerers?"

Although I clearly remembered his words that true sorcery was not bizarre behavior, rituals, drugs, or incantations, I nevertheless expected a show; some demonstration of his power, such as mixing spells and simples over the fire.

Ignoring my disillusionment, **Mariano Aureliano** urged me to put my arms around his neck, lightly so as not to choke him.

"Don't you think I am a little too old to be carried around?" I cautioned him.

Mariano Aureliano's laughter gurgled up inside him, exploding with outrageous delight.

In one swift motion he sprang to his feet. Tucking his arms behind my knees, he shifted me into a comfortable position and stepped out into the hall, but my head **didn't** hit the door frame.

He walked so fast and effortlessly I had the distinct sensation of floating down the long dark corridor.

Curious, I glanced all around me. However, we moved too fast to catch any but brief glimpses of the house.

A soft yet persistent scent permeated everything: a fragrance of orange blossoms and the freshness of cold air.

Outside, the yard was blurred by mist. All I was able to see was a uniform mass of dark silhouettes. Swirls of fog transformed every space, revealing and then blotting out strange shapes of trees and stones.

We were not at the witches' house. I was sure of that.

I heard nothing except a rhythmical breathing. I **couldn't** tell if it was the **nagual Mariano Aureliano's** breathing or my own.

The sound spread all over the yard. It made the leaves tremble, as if a wind were rustling through the branches. The trembling seeped into my body with every breath I took.

It made me so dizzy I wrapped my arms tightly around his shoulders lest I lose consciousness. Before I had a chance to tell him what I was experiencing, the fog closed in around me, and I felt myself dissolve into nothingness.

"Rest your chin on the top of my head." The **nagual Mariano Aureliano's** voice came as if from a great distance.

The words jolted me, for I had quite forgotten that I was riding on his back.

"Whatever you do, don't let go of me," he added with great urgency as he pushed me up on his back so my head was above his.

"What could possibly happen if I let go?" I asked in a tone that betrayed my growing apprehension. "I would just fall onto the ground, **wouldn't** I?" My voice had gotten terribly screechy.

Mariano Aureliano laughed softly but **didn't** answer.

Leisurely, he walked up and down the extensive yard with light, soft steps, almost in a kind of dance.

And then, for an instant, I had the distinct impression that we rose in the air: We became weightless.

I felt that we actually traveled through the darkness for a fleeting moment, then I felt the solid ground through **Mariano Aureliano's** body.

Whether the fog had lifted or whether we were in a different yard, I **couldn't** determine, but something had changed.

Perhaps it was only the air: It was heavier, harder to breathe.

There was no moon, and the stars were faint, yet the sky shone as if it were lit from some faraway spot. Slowly, as if someone were outlining them in the air, the contours of trees became clear.

About five feet away, in front of a particularly tall and bushy **zapote** tree, **Mariano Aureliano** came to an abrupt halt.

At the foot of that tree stood a group of people, perhaps twelve or fourteen.

The long leaves, weighed down by the mist, shadowed their faces.

A strange green light emanating from the tree made each person unnaturally vivid. Their eyes, their noses, their lips, all of their features gleamed in that green light, yet I could make out nothing of their faces.

I **didn't** recognize any of them. I **couldn't** even determine whether they were males or females; they were simply people.

"What are they doing?" I whispered into **Mariano Aureliano's** ear. Who are they?"

"Keep your chin on the top of my head," he hissed.

I pressed my chin firmly against his head, fearing that if I pushed too hard my whole face would sink into his skull.

Hoping to recognize someone by his or her voice, I said good evening to them.

Fleeting smiles parted their lips. Instead of returning my greeting, they averted their faces.

An odd sound came from amidst them; a sound that energized them, for they, too, like the tree, began to glow. Not a green light, but a golden brilliance that coalesced and shimmered until they all fused into one big golden ball that just hovered there under the tree.

Then the golden ball dissolved into patches of luminosity. Like giant **glowworms** they appeared and disappeared among the trees, sowing light and shadow in their passing.

"Remember that glow," **Mariano Aureliano** murmured. His voice echoed in my head. "It's the glow... of the **surem**."

A sudden gust of wind scattered his words.

The wind was alive; it glowed against the darkness of the sky. It blew with great violence, with a strange ripping sound.

Then the wind turned against me; I was certain it meant to annihilate me. I cried out in pain as a **particularly** icy gust seared my lungs. A coldness spread through my body until I felt myself grow stiff.

Whether it was **Mariano Aureliano** who had spoken or the wind self, I **couldn't** tell. The wind roared in my ears, blotting out everything around me. Then it was inside my lungs. It wriggled like a living thing, eager to devour every cell in my body.

I could feel myself collapse, and I knew I was going to die.

But the roaring stopped.

The silence was so sudden I heard it. I laughed out loud, thankful that I was still alive.

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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HTML EDITOR:

..But now I knew for certain that they were indeed different from other human beings.

It frightened me that they were different in ways I **couldn't** understand; in ways I **couldn't** even conceive.

...

I confessed that I felt a freedom and an ease with her and her group that I had never encountered anywhere else before.

It was a strange feeling, I explained, part physical, part psychological, and wholly defiant of analysis.

I could describe it only as a sense of well-being or a certainty that I had finally found a place where I belonged.

END **HTML** EDITOR

The bed was big and comfortably soft. A golden radiance filled the room.

Hoping to prolong this moment of well-being a bit longer, I closed my eyes and buried myself in sleepy bliss amidst fragrant linen sheets and subtly scented lavender pillow cases.

I could feel every muscle and every bone in my body tense as I remembered the night's events; disconnected fragments of some god-awful dream.

There was no continuity, no linear sequence to all I had experienced during those interminable hours.

I had awoken twice during the night, in different beds, in different rooms, even in a different house.

As if they had a life of their own, these disconnected images piled up and expanded, all at once, into a labyrinth that somehow I was able to comprehend all at once.

That is, I perceived every event simultaneously.

The sensation of those images growing out of my skull into an enormous, fanciful headdress was so real I jumped out of bed and dashed across the room to the steel and glass dresser.

The three-paneled mirror was covered with rice paper. I tried to peel off a corner, but the paper clung to the glass like a skin.

The sight of the silver-backed hairbrush with its matching comb, the bottles of perfume, and the jars of cosmetics on the dresser had a soothing effect on me: I, too, would have arranged the bottles and jars by size, in a row, like tools.

Somehow I knew that I was in **Florinda's** room, in the witches' house.

This knowledge restored my sense of equilibrium.

Florinda's room was enormous. The bed and the dresser were the only pieces of furniture in it. They stood in opposite corners, away from the walls and at an angle, leaving a triangular space behind them.

I pondered the arrangement of the bed and the dresser for quite some time but **couldn't** figure out whether it followed some kind of

esoteric pattern, the significance of which eluded me, or whether it was merely the result of **Florinda**'s aesthetic whim.

Curious as to where the three doors in the room led, I tried them all.

The first one was locked from the outside.

The second one opened to a small, rectangular-shaped walled-in patio. Puzzled, I stared at the sky, until it finally dawned on me that it was not morning, as I had assumed upon awakening, but late afternoon.

I **wasn't** disturbed that I had slept the whole day. On the contrary, I was elated. Convinced that I am an insomniac, I am always overjoyed by my oversleeping spells.

The third door opened into the corridor.

Anxious to find **Isidore Baltazar**, I made my way to the living room. It was empty.

There was something forbidding about the neat and straight manner in which the furniture was arranged.

Nothing revealed that anyone had sat on the couch and the armchairs the night before. Even the cushions stood stiffly, as if at attention.

The dining room across the corridor looked equally forsaken, equally austere.

Not a chair was out of place. Not a crumb; not a stain in the polished surface of the mahogany table; nothing betrayed that I had sat there last night with the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** and **Mr. Flores**, and eaten dinner.

In the kitchen, separated from the dining room by an arched vestibule and a narrow hall, I found a jug, half filled with **champurrado**, and a covered plate with some sweet **tamales**.

I was too hungry to bother with heating them. I poured myself a **mugful** of the thick chocolate and ate the three corn cakes directly from their corn-husk wrappings. Stuffed with pieces of pineapple, raisins, and slivered almonds, they were delicious.

It was inconceivable to me that I had been left alone in the house, yet I **couldn't** ignore the stillness around me.

It **wasn't** the comforting peace one is conscious of when people are purposely being quiet, but rather it was the overwhelming soundlessness of a deserted place.

The possibility that, indeed, I had been abandoned there made me choke on a piece of tamale.

On my way back to **Florinda**'s room, I paused in front of every door I passed.

"Anybody home?" I called out as I knocked repeatedly.

There was no answer.

I was about to step outside when I distinctly heard someone ask, "Who is calling?"

The voice was deep and raspy, but I **couldn't** tell whether it was a man or a woman who had spoken.

I **couldn't** determine from which direction, let alone from which room, the voice had come.

I retraced my steps and called out again at the top of my voice whether anybody was home.

Upon reaching the far end of the corridor, I hesitated for a moment in front of a closed door.

I turned the doorknob, then quietly opened it a crack and sidled in.

With my eyes tightly shut, I reclined against the wall and waited for my heartbeat to normalize.

Suppose someone caught me in here, I thought guiltily, but my curiosity outweighed any sense of wrong-doing as I breathed in the air of mystery, of enchantment, that permeated the room.

The heavy, dark curtains were drawn, and the only light came from a tall reading lamp.

Its huge shade, fringed with tassels, cast a circle of yellow light on the chaise lounge by the window.

At the very center of the room stood a four-poster bed: Canopied and curtained, it dominated the space as if it were a throne.

The bronze and wood-carved oriental figurines, ensconced on the four round tables in each corner, appeared to stand guard over the room like some celestial deities.

Books, papers, and magazines were piled on the drop-front French desk and on the chest of drawers.

There was no mirror on the kidney-shaped dresser, and instead of a comb and brush, or bottles of perfume and cosmetics, a set of fragile-looking **demitasses** [* demitasse- small coffee cup; for serving black coffee] stood on the glass-topped surface.

Strands of pearls, gold chains, rings, and brooches spilled from the delicate gold-rimmed cups like some abandoned treasure.

I recognized two of the rings: I had seen them on **Zoila**'s hand.

The inspection of the bed I reserved for last.

Almost reverentially, as if indeed it were a throne, I pulled back the curtain and gasped with delight. The brightly colored pillows on the silky green spread made me think of wild flowers in a meadow.

And yet an involuntary shiver shook my body as I stood in the middle of the room.

I **couldn't** help but feel that the warmth, the mystery, and the enchantment this room exuded were but an illusion.

The sensation of having stepped into some kind of a mirage was even more pronounced in the third room.

It, too, seemed warm and friendly at first. The very air was tender and loving. Echoes of laughter seemed to bounce off the walls.

However, this atmosphere of warmth was only a tenuous, fleeting impression, like the fading sunlight streaking through the **glassless**, gauze-curtained windows.

As in the other room, the bed dominated the space. It too was canopied and decorated with brightly colored pillows that had been tossed about with absentminded abandon.

Against one wall stood a sewing machine. It was an old one; a hand-painted treadle machine.

Next to it was a tall bookcase. Instead of books, the shelves were stacked with bolts of the finest cottons, silks, and wool gabardine cloth, all neatly arranged by color and fabric.

Six different colored wigs, all stretched over staked gourds, were **dislaved** on a low table under the window.

Among them was the blond one I had seen **Delia Flores** wear, and the dark, curly one **Mariano Aureliano** had pulled over my head outside the coffee shop in **Tucson**.

The fourth room was a bit further down from the others and across

the hall.

The last afternoon sun rays, filtering through a latticed wall, lay on the floor like a carpet of light and shadows, a wavering square of rectangular patterns.

Compared to the other two rooms, it gave the impression of being empty.

The few pieces of furniture were so artfully placed it made the space seem larger than it actually was.

Low bookshelves with glass doors lined the walls.

At the far end, in an alcove, stood a narrow bed. The white-and-grey-checked blanket hung low, and matched the shadows on the floor.

The dainty rosewood secretaire with its delicate chair of **ebonized** rosewood with ormolu **didn't** detract from the overall sense of starkness of the room but rather enhanced it. I knew that it was **Carmela's** room.

I would have liked to check the titles of the books behind the glass panels, but my anxiety was too great.

As if someone were chasing me, I dashed out into the corridor and down to the inside patio.

I sat on one of the rush chairs.

I was trembling and perspiring, yet my hands were icy cold. It **wasn't** guilt that had me shaking- I **wouldn't** have minded getting caught snooping around- but the alien, other-worldly quality these beautifully furnished rooms exuded.

The stillness that clung about the walls was an unnatural stillness. It had nothing to do with the absence of its inhabitants, but with the absence of feelings and emotions that usually permeate lived-in spaces.

Every time someone had referred to the women as sorceresses and witches, I had inwardly laughed. They neither acted nor looked as I had expected witches to look and act- flamboyantly dramatic and sinister.

But now I knew for certain that they were indeed different from other human beings.

It frightened me that they were different in ways I **couldn't** understand; in ways I **couldn't** even conceive.

A soft, rasping sound put an end to my disturbing thoughts.

Following the distinctly eerie noise, I tiptoed down the corridor, away from the bedrooms, toward the other end of the house.

The rasping sound came from a room at the back of the kitchen. I crept up softly, only to have the sound die down the instant I pressed my ear against the door.

It resumed as soon as I moved away.

Puzzled, I once more pressed my ear to the door, and the rasping sound promptly ceased.

I moved back and forth several times, and, as if the rasping sound were dependent on my doings, it either started or stopped.

Determined to find out who was hiding- or worse, who was purposely trying to frighten me- I reached for the doorknob.

Unable to open the door, I fumbled for several minutes before I realized that it was locked and that the key had been left in the lock.

That someone dangerous might have been confined in that room, for a very good reason, only came to me once I was inside.

An oppressive semidarkness clung about the heavy drawn curtains, like something alive that was luring the shadows of the entire house to

this enormous room.

The light grew dimmer. The shadows thickened around what appeared to be discarded pieces of furniture and peculiar-looking small and enormous figures made out of wood and metal.

The same rasping sound that had drawn me to this room broke the silence.

Like felines, the shadows prowled about the room as if searching for prey.

In frozen horror, I watched the curtain. It pulsed and breathed like a monster of my nightmares.

All of a sudden, the sound and the movement ceased. The motionless silence was even more frightening.

I turned to leave, and the pulsating, rasping sound began again.

Resolutely, I crossed the room and pulled back the curtain.

I laughed out loud upon discovering the broken glass pane in the French door. The wind had been alternately sucking and blowing the curtain through the jagged gap.

The fading afternoon light streaming through the half-opened curtain rearranged the shadows in the room and revealed an oval-shaped mirror on the wall, half hidden by one of the odd-looking metal figures.

I squeezed myself between the sculpture and the wall and gazed rapturously into the old Venetian glass. It was blurry and misty with age, and it distorted my image so grotesquely that I ran out of the room.

I went outside the house, through the back door.

The wide clearing behind the house was deserted.

The sky was still bright, but the tall fruit trees circling the grounds had already turned the color of twilight.

A flock of crows passed overhead. Their black flapping wings extinguished the brightness in the sky, and night swiftly descended into the yard.

With a feeling of utter dejection and despair, I sat on the ground and wept. The harder I cried, the more pleasure I felt from lamenting at the top of my voice.

The sound of a rake jolted me out of my self-pity.

I looked up and saw a slight person raking leaves toward a small fire in the back of the clearing.

"**Esperanza!**" I cried out, rushing toward her, only to stop abruptly upon realizing that it **wasn't** her but a man.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled apologetically. "I mistook you for someone else."

I held out my hand and introduced myself.

I tried not to stare at him, but I **couldn't** help it: I **wasn't** quite sure that he **wasn't Esperanza** disguised as a man.

He put his hand in mine, pressing it softly, and said, "I'm the caretaker." He **didn't** tell me his name.

His hand felt as brittle as a bird's wing in mine.

He was a thin, ancient-looking man. His face was birdlike, too, aquiline and keen-eyed. His white hair was tufted and feathery.

It **wasn't** only his slight frame and birdlike appearance that reminded me of **Esperanza**, but also the wrinkled, expressionless face and the eyes, shiny and limpid as those of a child, and the teeth, small and square and very white.

"Do you know where **Florinda** is?" I asked.

He shook his head and I added, "Do you know where any of the others are?"

He was silent for a long moment, and then as though I **hadn't** asked him anything, he repeated that he was the caretaker. "I take care of everything."

"You do?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

He was so frail and puny-looking he **didn't** seem capable of taking care of anything, including himself.

"I take care of everything," he repeated, smiling sweetly as if thus he could erase my doubts.

He was about to say something else, but instead he chewed his lower lip thoughtfully for a moment, then turned around, and went on raking the leaves into a little pile with neat, deft, quick movements.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

Resting his chin on his hand, cupped over the end of the rake handle, he glanced at me absently.

Then grinning inanely, he looked all around him, as though at any moment someone might materialize from behind one of the fruit trees.

Sighing loudly and impatiently, I turned to leave.

He cleared his throat, and in a voice that was wavering and hoarse with old age said, "The old **nagual** took **Isidore Baltazar** to the mountains."

He **didn't** look at me: His eyes were focused somewhere in the distance. "They **ll** be back in a couple of days."

"Days!" I screeched indignantly. "Are you sure you heard them correctly?"

Dismayed that my worst fear had come true, I could only mumble, "How could he have left me here all by myself?"

"They left last night," the old man said, pulling back a leaf that the wind had blown away from the pile in front of him.

"That's impossible," I contradicted him forcefully. "We only got here last night. Late last night," I stressed.

Indifferent to my assertively rude tone and to my presence, the old man set fire to the little pile of leaves in front of him.

"**Didn't Isidore Baltazar** leave a message for me?" I asked, squatting beside him. "**Didn't** he leave me a note or something?"

I felt an impulse to shout, but for some reason I **didn't** dare.

Some mystifying aspect of the old man's appearance disconcerted me. The thought that he was **Esperanza** in disguise still nagged me.

"Did **Esperanza** go with them to the mountains?" I asked.

My voice trembled because suddenly I was seized by a desperate desire to laugh. Short of pulling down his pants and showing me his genitals, there was nothing he could do to convince me that he was indeed a man.

"**Esperanza** is in the house," he murmured, his attention fixed on the little pile of burning leaves. "She's in the house with the others."

"Don't be ridiculous: She's not in the house," I contradicted him rudely. "No one is in the house. I've been searching for them the whole afternoon. I checked every room."

"She's in the little house," the old man repeated obstinately, watching me as intently as he had watched the burning leaves. The glint of mischief

in his eyes made me want to kick him.

"What little..." My voice faded as I remembered the other house, the one I had seen upon our arrival. It actually caused me an intense physical pain to think of that place.

"You could have told me right away that **Esperanza** is in the little house," I said peevishly.

Surreptitiously, I glanced all around me, but I **couldn't** see the place. The tall trees and the wall beyond hid it from view.

"I'm going to see if **Esperanza** is indeed there as you claim," I said, rising.

The old man rose, too, and turning toward the nearest tree, he reached for an oil lamp and a burlap sack hanging from a low branch. "I'm afraid I can't let you go there by yourself," he said.

"I don't see why not," I countered, piqued. "Perhaps you're not aware of it, but I'm **Florinda's** guest."

"I was taken to the little house last night." I paused for a moment, then added for good measure, "I was there for sure."

He listened carefully, but his face looked doubtful.

"It's tricky to get there," he warned me at last. "I have to prepare the path for you. I have to..."

He seemed to catch himself in the middle of a thought he **didn't** want to express. He shrugged, then repeated that he had to prepare the path for me.

"What's there to prepare?" I asked irritably. "Do you have to cut through the chaparral with a machete?"

"I'm the caretaker. I prepare the path," he repeated obstinately and sat on the ground to light the oil lamp.

For an instant it guttered in the air, then burned strongly. His features appeared almost fleshless, unwrinkled, as if the light had smoothed away the mark of time. "As soon as I'm done with burning these leaves, I'll take you there myself."

"I'll help you," I offered. Clearly, the man was senile and needed to be humored.

I followed him around the clearing and helped him gather the leaves into little piles, which he promptly burned.

As soon as the ashes had cooled, he swept them into the burlap sack. The sack was lined with plastic.

It was this particular detail- the plastic lining- that brought back a half-forgotten childhood memory.

As we swept the heaps of ashes into the sack, I told him that as a small child living in a village near **Caracas**, I was often awakened by the sound of a rake.

I used to sneak out of bed and, cat-footed, creep down the corridor, past my parents' and brothers' rooms into the parlor, which faced the plaza.

Heedful of the creaking hinges, I used to open the wooden panels covering the windows and squeeze through the wrought iron bars.

The old man in charge of keeping the plaza clean was always there to greet me with a toothless smile, and together we used to rake into little piles the leaves that had fallen during the night- any other kind of refuse was put into trash cans.

We burned these piles, and as soon as the ashes had cooled, we swept

them into a silk-lined burlap sack. He claimed that the water fairies, dwelling in a sacred stream in the nearby mountains, turned the ashes into gold dust.

"Do you also know of fairies who change ashes into gold dust?" I asked, seeing how delighted the caretaker was with my story.

He **didn't** answer but giggled with such pleasure and abandon I **couldn't** help but laugh, too.

Before I knew it, we had reached the last little pile of ashes next to a recessed, arched doorway built into the wall. The narrow wooden gate stood wide open.

Across the chaparral was the other house almost hidden in shadows.

No light shone through the windows, and it appeared to be shifting away from me.

Wondering whether the house was but a figment of my imagination; a place remembered in a dream, I blinked repeatedly and rubbed my eyes.

Something was wrong, I decided, as I recalled walking up to the witches' house the night before with **Isidore Baltazar**.

The smaller house had stood to the right of the larger one. How then, I asked myself, could I now see the place from the witches' backyard?

In an effort to orient myself, I moved this way and that, but I **couldn't** get my bearings. I bumped into the old man, who was squatting before the pile of ashes, and fell over him.

With astounding agility he rose and helped me up. "You're full of ashes," he said, wiping my face with the folded cuff of his khaki shirt.

"There it is!" I cried out. Sharply focused, silhouetted against the sky, the elusive house appeared to be only a few steps away:

"There it is," I repeated, jumping up and down as if by doing so I could hold the house in place; detain it in time.

"That's the true house of the witches," I added, standing still in front of the old man so he could proceed with wiping the ashes off my face. "The big house is but a front."

"The house of the witches," the old man said slowly, savoring his words. Then he cackled, seemingly amused.

He swept the last of the ashes into his burlap sack, then motioned me to follow him through the gate.

Two orange trees grew on the other side of the gate, away from the wall.

A cool breeze rustled through the blooming branches, but the flowers **didn't** stir. They **didn't** fall to the ground.

Against the dark foliage, the blossoms looked carved, as though they had been made of milky quartz.

Like sentinels, the two trees stood guard over the narrow path.

The path was white and very straight, like a line that had been drawn on the landscape with a ruler.

The old man handed me the oil lamp, then scooped out a handful of ashes from his burlap sack and poured them from one hand to the other- as though he were weighing them- before he sprinkled them onto the ground.

"Don't ask any questions and do as I say," he said, his voice no longer hoarse: It had an airy quality: It sounded energetic and convincing.

He bent slightly, and walking backwards, he let the rest of the ashes trickle directly from his burlap sack onto the narrow trail.

"Keep your feet on the line of ashes," he admonished. "If you don't, you'll never reach the house."

I coughed to hide my nervous laughter.

Holding out my arms, I balanced on the narrow line of ashes as if it were a tightrope.

Each time we stopped for the old man to catch his breath, I turned to look at the house we had just left.

It seemed to be receding into the distance; and the one in front of us **didn't** seem to get any closer.

I tried to convince myself that it was merely an optical illusion, yet I had the vague certainty that I would never make it on my own to either house.

As if sensing my discomfort, the old man patted my arm reassuringly. "That's why I'm preparing the path."

He looked into his burlap sack and added, "It won't be long now before we'll get there."

"Just remember to keep your feet on the line of ashes. If you do, you'll be able to move back and forth safely, anytime."

My mind told me that the man was a lunatic.

My body, however, knew that I was lost without him and his ashes. I was so absorbed in keeping my feet on the faint line, it took me by surprise when we finally stood in front of the door.

The old man took the oil lamp from my hand, cleared his throat, then rapped lightly on the carved panel with his knuckles.

He **didn't** wait for an answer but pushed the door open and went inside.

"Don't go so fast!" I cried out, afraid to be left behind.

I followed him into a narrow vestibule. He left the oil lamp on a low table.

Then without a word or a backward glance, he opened a door at the far end and disappeared into the darkness.

Guided by some vague memory, I stepped into the dimly lit **room** and went directly to the mat on the floor.

There was no doubt in my mind now that I had been there the night before, that I had slept on that very mat.

What I **wasn't** so sure of was how I got to that room in the first place.

That **Mariano Aureliano** had carried me on his on his back across the chaparral was vivid in my mind. I also was certain that I had woken up in that room- before being carried over by the old **nagual**- with **Clara** sitting beside me on the mat.

Confident that within moments all would be explained to me, I sat on the mat.

The light in the oil lamp flickered and then went out.

I sensed, rather than saw, things and people moving around me. I heard a murmur of voices, intangible sounds coming from every corner. Out of all these noises, I recognized a familiar rustling of skirts and a soft giggle.

"**Esperanza?**" I whispered, "God! I am so glad to see you!" Although it was her I expected to see, I was nevertheless stunned when she sat beside me on the mat. Timidly, I touched her arm.

"It's me," she assured me.

Only after hearing her voice was I convinced that it was indeed

Esperanza and not the caretaker who had exchanged his khaki pants and shirt for the rustling petticoats and the white dress. And once I felt the soothing touch of her hand on my face, all thoughts the caretaker vanished.

"How did I get here?" I asked.

"The caretaker brought you here," she laughed. "Don't remember?"

She turned toward the low table and **relit** the oil lamp.

"I'm talking about last night," I clarified. "I know I was here. I woke up on this mat. **Clara** was here with me. And then **Florinda** was here, and the other women..."

My voice trailed off as I remembered that I had awoken afterward in the living room of the other house and then again on a bed.

I shook my head, as if I could thus bring some order to my memories.

Forlornly, I gazed at **Esperanza**, hoping she would fill in the gaps. I told her of the difficulties I was having remembering the night's events in sequential order.

"You **shouldn't** have any problems," she said. "Get in the track of dreams: You're **re** dreaming-awake now."

"You mean that I am asleep now, this very instant?" I asked mockingly. I leaned toward her and asked, "Are you asleep, too?"

"We are not asleep," she repeated, enunciating her words carefully. "You and I are dreaming-awake."

She held up her hands in a helpless gesture. "I told you what to do last year. Remember?"

A rescuing thought suddenly occurred to me, as if someone had just whispered it in my ear: 'When in doubt, one must separate the two tracks; the track for ordinary affairs and the track for dreams since each has a different state of awareness.'

I felt elated, for I knew that the first track one should test is the track of dreams. If the situation at hand **doesn't** fit that track, then one is not dreaming.

My elation quickly vanished when I tried to test the track for dreams. I had no inkling of how to go about it or of what the track for dreams was, for that matter; and worse, I **couldn't** remember who had told me about it.

"I did," **Esperanza** said just behind me:

"You have moved a great deal in the realm of dreams.

"You nearly remembered what I told you last year, the day after the picnic.

"I said to you then that, when in doubt about whether you are in a dream or whether you are awake, you should test the track where dreams run on- meaning the awareness we have in dreams- by feeling the thing you are in contact with.

"If you are dreaming, your feeling comes back to you as an echo. If it **doesn't** come back, then you are not dreaming."

Smiling, she pinched my thigh and said, "Try it on this mat you're lying on. Feel it with your buttocks. If the feeling returns, then you're dreaming."

There was no feeling returning to my numbed buttocks. In fact, I was so numb that I **didn't** feel the mat. It seemed to me I was lying on the rough tiles of the floor.

I had a strong urge to point out to her that it should be the opposite- if the feeling returns, then one is awake- but I controlled myself in time.

I knew without any doubt that what she meant by 'the feeling returning to us' had nothing to do with our known, agreed-upon knowledge of what feeling is.

The distinction between being awake and dreaming-awake still eluded me, yet I was certain that its meaning had nothing to do with our ordinary way of understanding awareness.

Right then, however, words came out of my mouth without any control on my part.

I said, "I know that I am dreaming-awake, and that's that."

I sensed that I was near a new, deeper level of understanding, and yet I could not quite grasp it.

I asked, "What I would like to know is, when did I fall asleep?"

"I've already told you, you're **re** not asleep. You are dreaming-awake."

I began to laugh involuntarily, in a quiet, utterly nervous manner.

She **didn't** seem to notice or to care.

"When did the transition occur?" I asked.

"When the caretaker was making you cross the chaparral and you had to concentrate on keeping your feet on the ashes."

"He must have hypnotized me!" I exclaimed, in a not altogether pleasant voice.

I began to talk incoherently, entangling myself in words without quite succeeding in making sense, until finally I was weeping and denouncing them all.

Esperanza watched me silently, her eyebrows lifted, her eyes wide open with surprise.

I was immediately ashamed of my outburst; but at the same time I was glad I had spoken because a momentary relief, the kind that comes after a confrontation, washed over me.

"Your confusion," she continued, "originates with your facility to move from one state of awareness into the other with great ease.

"If you had struggled, like everybody else does to attain smooth transitions, then you would know that dreaming-awake is not just hypnosis."

She paused for an instant, then finished softly, "Dreaming-awake is the most sophisticated state humans can attain."

She stared off into the room as if a clearer explanation might suddenly be brought to her by someone hiding in the shadows.

Then she turned to me and asked, "Did you eat your little food?"

Her change of subject took me by surprise, and I began to stammer.

Once I recovered, I told her that I had indeed eaten the sweet **tamales**. "I was so hungry, I **didn't** bother to heat them up. They were delicious."

Idly playing with her shawl, **Esperanza** asked me to give her an account of what I had done since I awoke in **Florinda's** room.

As if I had been given a truth-telling potion, I blurted out more than I intended to reveal, but **Esperanza didn't** seem to mind my snooping around the women's rooms.

She **wasn't** impressed with my knowing to whom each room belonged.

What interested her to no end, however, was my encounter with the

caretaker.

With a smile of unmistakable glee on her face, she listened as I told my tale of confusing the man with her.

When I mentioned that at one point I considered asking him to pull down his pants so I could check his genitals, she doubled up on the mat, shrieking with laughter.

She leaned against me and whispered suggestively in my ear, "I'll put you at ease." There was a wicked gleam in her eyes as she added, "I'll show you mine."

"There is no need to, **Esperanza**," I tried to ward her off. "I don't doubt that you are a woman."

"One can never be too sure what one is," she casually dismissed my words.

Oblivious to my embarrassment- caused not so much by her imminent nudity but by the thought that I had to look at her old, wrinkled body- she lay down on the mat and with great finesse slowly lifted her skirts.

My curiosity won out over my embarrassment.

I stared at her, open-mouthed. She had no panties on. She had no pubic hair. Her body was incredibly young, the flesh strong and firm, the muscles delicately delineated.

She was all one color; an even, **copperish** pink. There were no stretch marks on her skin, no ruptured veins. Nothing marred the smoothness of her stomach and legs.

I reached out to touch her, as if needing to reassure myself that her silky, smooth-looking skin was real, and she opened the lips of her vagina with her fingers.

I averted my face, not so much from embarrassment as from my conflicting emotions.

Nudity, whether male or female, **wasn't** the issue.

I had grown up quite freely at home. No one was particularly careful to avoid being seen naked.

And while in school in England, I had been invited one summer to spend a couple of weeks in Sweden at a friend's house by the sea. The whole family belonged to a nudist colony, and they all worshiped the sun with every bit of their naked skin.

Seeing **Esperanza** naked before me was different.

I was aroused in a most peculiar manner. I had never really focused on a woman's sexual organs.

Of course, I had examined myself thoroughly in the mirror, and from every possible angle.

I had also seen pornographic movies, which I had not only disliked, but had found offensive as well.

Seeing **Esperanza** so intimately was a shattering experience, for I had always taken my sexual responses for granted.

I had thought that as a woman I could only get aroused with a male.

My overwhelming desire to jump on top of her took me completely by surprise and was counterbalanced by the fact that I **didn't** have a penis.

When **Esperanza** suddenly rose from the mat and took off her blouse I gasped out loud, then stared at the floor until the feverish, tingling sensation in my face and neck subsided.

"Look at me!" **Esperanza** demanded impatiently.

Her eyes were bright. Her cheeks were flushed.

She was completely naked.

Her body was slight, yet bigger and stronger looking than when dressed. Her breasts were full and pointed.

"Touch them!" she commanded in a soft, alluring tone.

Her words echoed around the room like a disembodied sound, a mesmerizing rhythm that swelled into a throb in the air, a pulse of sound felt rather than heard, which little by little tightened and quickened until it beat fast and hard, like the rhythm of my own heart.

Then all I heard and felt was **Esperanza's** laughter.

"Is the caretaker hiding in here, by any chance?" I asked when I could talk. I was suddenly suspicious and guilty about my daring.

"I hope not!" she cried out with such an air of dismay that it made me laugh.

"Where is he?" I asked.

Her eyes opened wide, then she grinned as though she were going to laugh.

But she wiped the mirth from her face, and in a serious tone said that the caretaker was somewhere on the grounds, and that he took care of both houses but he **didn't** go around spying on anybody.

"Is he really the caretaker?" I asked, trying to sound skeptical. "I don't want to malign him, but he really **doesn't** look capable of taking care of anything."

Esperanza giggled then said that his frailness was deceptive. "He is very capable," she assured me:

"You have to be careful with him. He likes young girls, especially blond ones."

She leaned closer and, as if afraid we might be overheard, whispered in my ear, "Did he make a pass at you?"

"Heavens no!" I defended him. "He was exquisitely polite and helpful."

"It's just that..." My voice trailed off into a whisper, and my attention began to wander in an odd sort of way to the furniture in the room, which I **couldn't** see because the low-burning oil lamp cast more shadows than light on my surroundings.

When I finally managed to focus my attention back on her, I was no longer concerned with the caretaker.

All I could think of, with a persistence I **couldn't** shake off, was why **Isidore Baltazar** had left for the mountains without letting me know, without leaving me a note.

"Why would he leave me like that?" I asked, turning to **Esperanza**. "He must have told someone when he'll return."

Seeing her all-knowing smirk, I added belligerently, "I'm sure you know what's going on."

"I don't," she insisted, quite incapable of understanding my plight. "I don't concern myself with such things."

"And neither should you. **Isidore Baltazar** is gone, and that's that."

"He'll be back in a couple of days, in a couple of weeks. Who knows? It all depends on what happens in the mountains."

"It all depends?" I shrieked.

I found her lack of sympathy and understanding abominable. "What about me?" I demanded. "I can't stay here for weeks."

"Why not?" **Esperanza** inquired innocently.

I regarded her as if she were demented, then blurted out that I had nothing to wear, that there was nothing for me to do here.

My list of complaints was endless: They came pouring out until I was exhausted.

"I simply have to go home; be in my normal milieu," I finished. I felt the inevitable tears, and did my best to suppress them.

"Normal?" **Esperanza** repeated the word slowly, as though she were tasting it. "You can leave any time you wish.

"No one is holding you back. It can easily be arranged to get you to the border where you can catch a Greyhound bus bound for **Los Angeles**."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

I **didn't** want that either.

I **didn't** know what I wanted, but the thought of leaving was unbearable. I somehow knew that if I left I would never find these people again, not even **Isidore Baltazar** in **Los Angeles**.

I began to weep uncontrollably. I **wouldn't** have been able to put it into words, but the bleakness of a life, of a future without them, was unbearable to me.

I **didn't** notice **Esperanza** leaving the room, and I **didn't** notice her coming back. I **wouldn't** have noticed anything if it **wasn't** for the delicious aroma of hot chocolate wafting under my nose.

"You'll feel better after eating," she assured me, placing a tray in my lap.

Smiling slowly and affectionately, she sat beside me and confided that there is nothing like chocolate to take away one's sadness.

I **couldn't** agree with her more. I took a few hesitant sips and ate several of the buttered, rolled **tortillas**.

I told her that although I **didn't** really know her or any of her friends, I **couldn't** conceive of not ever seeing them again.

I confessed that I felt a freedom and an ease with her and her group that I had never encountered anywhere else before.

It was a strange feeling, I explained, part physical, part psychological, and wholly defiant of analysis.

I could describe it only as a sense of well-being or a certainty that I had finally found a place where I belonged.

Esperanza knew exactly what it was I was trying to express.

She said that having been part of the sorcerers' world even for a short time was addictive.

It **wasn't** the amount of time, she stressed, but the intensity of the encounters that mattered. "And your encounters have been very intense," she said.

"They have?" I asked.

Esperanza lifted her eyebrows with sincere surprise, then rubbed her chin in an exaggerated attitude, as though she were deliberating on a problem that had no solution.

After a long silence, she finally pronounced, "You will walk lighter after you fully realize that there is no going back to your old life."

Her voice, though low, had an extraordinary force. Her eyes held mine for a moment, and I knew that instant what her words meant.

"Nothing will ever be the same for me again," I said softly.

Esperanza nodded. "You'll return to the world, but not to your world

or to your old life," she said, rising from the mat with the abrupt majesty small people command.

She rushed toward the door, only to come to a sudden halt. "It's wildly exciting to do something without knowing why we are doing it," she said, turning to look at me:

"And it's even more exciting to set out to do something without knowing what the end result will be."

I **couldn't** disagree with her more, and declared, "I need to know what I'm doing. I need to know what I'm getting into."

She sighed and held up her hands in comical deprecation.

"Freedom is terribly frightening," she spoke harshly; and before I had a chance to respond, she added gently, "Freedom requires spontaneous acts.

"You have no idea what it is to abandon yourself spontaneously..."

"Everything I do is spontaneous," I interjected. "Why do you think I am here? Do you think I deliberated much whether I should come or not?"

She returned to the mat and stood looking down at me for a long moment before she said, "Of course you **didn't** deliberate about it. But your acts of spontaneity are due to a lack of thought rather than to an act of abandon."

She stomped her foot to prevent me from interring her again. "A real spontaneous act is an act in which you abandon yourself completely, but only after profound deliberation," she went on;

"An act where all the pros and cons have been taken into consideration and duly discarded.

"You expect nothing, and you regret nothing.

"With acts of that nature, sorcerers beckon freedom."

"I'm not a sorcerer," I mumbled under my breath, pulling at the hem of her dress to prevent her from leaving, but she made it clear that she had no interest in continuing our conversation.

I followed her outside, across the clearing, to the path that led to the other house.

As the caretaker had done earlier, she too urged me to keep feet on the line of ashes. "If you don't," she admonished, "you'll fall into the abyss."

"Abyss?" I repeated uncertainly, glancing all around me at the mass of dark chaparral extending on either side of us.

A light breeze sprung up. Voices and whispers rose from a dark mass of shadows. Instinctively, I held on to **Esperanza's** skirt.

"Can you hear them?" she asked, turning to face me.

"Who am I supposed to hear?" I murmured hoarsely.

Esperanza moved closer, then, as if afraid we might be overheard, she whispered in my ear, "**Surems** of another time. They use the wind to wander across the desert, forever awake."

"You mean ghosts?"

"There are no ghosts," she said with finality, and started walking again.

I made sure that my feet stayed on the line of ashes, and I **didn't** let go of her skirt until she came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the patio of the big house.

For an instant she hesitated, as though she **couldn't** decide to which

part of the house she ought to take me.

Then she went up and down the various corridors and turned corners until finally we stepped into an immense room that had escaped my earlier exploration of the house.

The walls were lined to the ceiling with books. At one end of the room stood a sturdy, long, wooden table. At the other end hung a white, **flouncy**, hand-woven hammock.

"What a magnificent room!" I exclaimed. "Whose is it?"

"Yours," **Esperanza** offered graciously.

She went to the wooden chest standing by the door and opened it. "The nights are cold," she warned, handing me three thick woolen blankets.

"You mean I can sleep in here?" I asked excitedly.

My whole body shivered with pleasure as I matted the hammock with the blankets and lowered myself into it.

As a child, I had often slept in one.

Sighing with contentment, I rocked myself back and forth, then pulled in my legs and stretched out luxuriously. "Knowing how to sleep in a hammock is like knowing how to ride a bicycle: One never forgets how," I said to her.

But there was no one to hear me. She had left without my noticing it.

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by **Florinda Donner**

Previous-**Pg** Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-**Pg** Next-**Pg** Chapter 11

HTML EDITOR:

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"Sorcerers," he went on, "make one see that the whole nature of reality is different from what we believe it to be; that is, from what we have been taught it to be.

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"But we are not willing to embody this idea; to accept it as a concrete, practical proposition.

"And the reason for that is that we are not willing to accept that culture also predetermines what we are able to perceive.

...

"Contrary to what people believe," he explained, "sorcerers are not practitioners of obscure esoteric rituals, but stand ahead of our times.

END **HTML** EDITOR

I turned off the light and lay very still in my hammock, lulled by the noises of the house, strange creaking sounds and the trickling of water

from an earthenware filter standing outside my door.

Abruptly, I sat up as the unmistakable sound of footsteps echoed along the corridor. "Who could it be at this hour?" I thought.

I tiptoed across the room and pressed my ear against the door.

The footsteps were heavy. My heart beat fast and loud as the steps came closer. They stopped in front of my door.

The knock was urgent, and although I was expecting it, it nonetheless startled me. I jumped back, knocking over a chair.

"Did you have a nightmare?" **Florinda** asked, stepping into the room. She left the door half open, and the light from the corridor shone inside.

"I thought you would be happy to hear the sound of my steps," she said mockingly, smiling at me. "I **didn't** want to sneak up on you."

She straightened up the chair, and draped a pair of khaki pants and a shirt over the backrest.

"Compliments of the caretaker. He says you can keep them."

"Keep them?" I repeated, eyeing the garments suspiciously. They looked clean and ironed. "What's wrong with my jeans?"

"You **ll** be more comfortable in these pants during the long drive to **Los Angeles**," **Florinda** said.

"But I don't want to leave!" I cried out in alarm. "I **m** staying here until **Isidore Baltazar** returns."

Florinda laughed, then seeing that I was about to weep, she said, "**Isidore Baltazar** is back, but you **re** welcome to stay longer if you wish."

"**Oh**, no, I don't," I blurted out.

The anxiety I had felt for the past two days was all but forgotten. So were all the questions I had wanted to ask **Florinda**.

All I could think of was that **Isidore Baltazar** was back. "Can I see him now?" I asked.

"I **m** afraid you can't," **Florinda** stopped me from leaving the room.

For a moment her statement **didn't** register. I stared at her uncomprehendingly, and she repeated that it **wasn't** possible to see the new **nagual** tonight.

"Why not?" I asked, bewildered. "I **m** sure he would want to see me."

"I **m** sure he would," she readily agreed. "But he is sound asleep, and you can't wake him up."

It was such a fierce refusal that all I could do was stare at her, speechless.

Florinda looked at the floor for a long time, then gazed up at me.

Her expression was sad. For an instant I believed she would relent and take me to see **Isidore Baltazar**.

Instead, she repeated with sharp finality, "I **m** afraid you can't see him tonight."

Hastily, as if afraid she might still change her mind, she embraced and kissed me, and then left the room.

She switched off the light outside, then turned from the shadows of the corridor to look at me and said, "Go to sleep now."

Tossing and turning, I lay awake for hours.

Close to dawn I finally got up and put on the clothes **Florinda** had brought me.

They fit me well, except for the pants, which I had to cinch in at the waist with a piece of string- I had no belt with me.

Shoes in hand, I stole down the corridor past the caretaker's room to the back entrance. Mindful of the creaking hinges, I opened the door carefully and only a crack.

It was still dark outside, yet a soft, radiant blue was spreading across the eastern sky.

I ran to the arched doorway built into the wall, stopping momentarily by the two trees outside it that guarded the path.

The air was heavy with the fragrance of orange blossoms.

Whatever lingering doubts I might have had about crossing the chaparral were dispelled as I **discovered** that fresh ashes had been strewn on the ground.

Without another thought I dashed to the other house.

The door was ajar, but I **didn't** go in right away.

I crouched beneath the window and waited for some kind of a sound.

I **didn't** have to wait long before I heard a loud snoring.

I listened for a while and went inside. Guided by that distinct snoring sound, I went directly to the room at the back of the house.

In the darkness I could hardly make out the sleeping form on the straw mat, yet I had no doubt that it was **Isidore Baltazar**.

Fearing that he might be startled if I were to wake him too suddenly, I returned to the front room and sat on the couch.

I was so excited I could not sit still. I was beside myself with joy thinking that any moment now he would wake up.

Twice I tiptoed back into the room and looked at him. He had turned in his sleep and was no longer snoring.

I must have dozed off on the couch. I sensed through my fitful sleep that someone stood in the room.

I half roused to murmur, "I'm waiting for **Isidore Baltazar** to wake up," but I knew I had made no sound.

I made a conscious effort to sit up.

I swayed dizzily before I could focus my eyes on the man standing beside me. It was **Mariano Aureliano**.

"Is **Isidore Baltazar** still asleep?" I asked him.

The old **nagual** gazed at me for a long time.

Wondering whether I was dreaming, I boldly reached for his hand, only to drop it abruptly. It burnt as if it were on fire.

He raised his brows, seemingly surprised by my actions.

"You won't be able to see **Isidore Baltazar** until the morning," he spoke slowly, as if it cost him a great effort to enunciate the words.

Before I had a chance to say that it was almost morning; that I would wait for **Isidore Baltazar** on the couch, I felt **Mariano Aureliano**'s burning hand on my back, pushing me across the threshold.

"Go back to your hammock."

There was a sudden rush of wind.

I turned around to protest, but **Mariano Aureliano** was no longer there.

The wind reverberated in my head like a deep gong. The sound grew softer and softer until it was but a bare vibration.

I opened my mouth to prolong the last faint echoes.

It was midmorning when I awoke in my hammock, wearing the clothes **Florinda** had brought me.

Automatically, almost without thought, I went outside and across the

clearing to the little house.

The door was locked.

I knocked repeatedly and I called out, but there was no answer.

I tried to force the windows open but they too were locked.

I was so shaken I was on the verge of tears.

I ran down the hill to the small clearing beside the road, the only spot where a car could be parked. **Isidore Baltazar**'s van was not there.

I walked along the dirt road for quite some time, looking for fresh tire tracks. There were none.

More confused than ever, I returned to the house.

Knowing that it would be useless to look for the women in their rooms, I stood in the middle of the inside patio and yelled for **Florinda** at the top of my voice.

There was no sound, except for the echo of my own voice settling around me.

No matter how many times I reviewed what **Florinda** had said, I **couldn't** come up with a satisfying **explanation**.

The only thing I could be sure of was that **Florinda** had come to my room in the middle of the night to bring me the clothes I was wearing. Her visit and her statement that **Isidore Baltazar** was back must have triggered a vivid dream in me.

To stop myself from speculating why I was alone in the house- not even the caretaker seemed to be about- I began to mop the floors.

Cleaning always had a soothing effect on me. I was done with all the rooms including the kitchen when I heard the distinct sound of a **Volkswagen** engine.

I ran down the hill and flung myself at **Isidore Baltazar** even before he got out of the van, almost jerking him to the ground.

"I still can't get over it," he laughed, putting his arms around me in a tight embrace. "You were the one the **nagual** told me so much about. Do you know that I nearly passed out when they greeted you?"

He **didn't** wait for my comment but hugged me again, and laughing, lifted me off the ground.

Then, as if some restraint had broken free within him, he began to talk nonstop.

He said that he had known about me for a year. The **nagual** had told him that he was entrusting a weird girl to him.

The **nagual** had described that girl metaphorically as 'twelve o'clock in the morning of a clear day which is neither windy nor calm, neither cold nor hot, but alternates between all those, driving one nuts.'

Isidore Baltazar confessed that being the pompous ass that he was, he knew instantaneously that the **nagual** was referring to his girlfriend.

"Who is your girlfriend?" I cut him short.

He made a sharp movement with his hand, positively displeased by my words.

"This is not a story of facts," he snapped. "This is a story of ideas; so you would see how idiotic I am."

His annoyance quickly gave way to a brilliant smile. "I actually believed I could find out for myself who that girl was." He paused for an instant, then added softly, "I've even involved a married woman with children in my search."

He heaved a deep sigh then grinned and said, "The moral of my story

is that in the sorcerers' world one has to cancel out the ego or it is curtains for us; for in that world, there is no way for average persons like ourselves to predict anything."

Then, seeing that I was weeping, he held me off at arm's length and gazed at me anxiously. "What is the matter, nibelunga?"

"Nothing really," I laughed in between my sobs, drying my tears. "I don't have an abstract mentality that can worry about the world of abstract stories," I added cynically.

In as hard a tone as I could muster, I added, "I worry about the here and now. You ve got no idea what I ve been through in this house."

"Of course, I have a very good idea," he retorted with deliberate harshness. "I ve been at it for years."

He regarded me with an inquisitor's eye and asked, "What I want to know is, why didn't you tell me you had been with them already?"

"I was about to, but I didn't feel it was important," I mumbled in confusion.

Then my voice acquired a firm and steady ring as words poured involuntarily out of me. "It turns out that meeting them was the only important thing I have ever done."

To hide my surprise, I immediately began to complain that I had been left in the house all by myself.

"I didn't have a chance to let you know that I was off to the mountains with the nagual," he whispered with a sudden irrepressible smile.

"I forgot all about that," I assured him. "I m talking about today.

"This morning when I awoke, I expected you to be here. I was certain you had spent the night in the little house, sleeping on a straw mat. When I couldn't find you, I panicked."

Seeing his puzzled face, I told him of Florinda's midnight visit, of my subsequent dream, and of finding myself alone in the house upon awakening this morning.

I sounded incoherent. My thoughts and words were all mixed up. However, I couldn't stop talking.

"There are so many things I cannot accept," I said, finally putting an end to my diatribe. "Yet I cannot refute them either."

Isidore Baltazar didn't say a word. He kept staring at me as if expecting me to continue, his eyebrows raised in an inquiring, mocking arch.

His face was thin and drawn and the color of smoke. His skin exuded a strange coolness and a faint scent of earth, as if he had spent his days underground in a cave.

All thought of my turmoil vanished as I gazed into his ominous left eye, with its terrible, merciless gaze.

At that moment it no longer mattered what was the authentic truth and what was the illusion- the dream within a dream.

I laughed out loud, feeling as light as the wind. I could feel an unbearable weight being lifted off my shoulders as I kept staring into his wizard's eye.

I recognized it. Florinda, Mariano Aureliano, Esperanza, and the caretaker all had such an eye. Preordained for all time to be without feeling; without emotion, that eye mirrors emptiness.

Then, as if it had revealed enough, an inside lid- as in a lizard's eye-

shut over the left pupil.

Before I had a chance to comment on his wizard's eye, Isidore Baltazar closed both eyes for an instant.

When he opened them again they were exactly alike, dark and shiny with laughter, the wizard's eye but an illusion.

He put one arm around my shoulders and walked with me up the hill.

"Get your things," he said just before reaching the house. "I ll wait for you in the car."

I thought it odd that he wouldn't come in with me, but at the time I didn't think of asking him why.

Only as I was gathering my few belongings did it occur to me that perhaps he was afraid of the women.

That possibility then made me laugh out loud; for I suddenly knew with a certainty that astonished me that the only thing Baltazar was not afraid of was women.

I was still laughing when I reached the van at the bottom of the hill.

I opened my mouth to explain to Isidore Baltazar the cause of my mirth, when a strange, fierce emotion flooded me; a stab so strong I couldn't speak.

What I felt wasn't sexual passion. Neither was it platonic affection. It wasn't the feeling I felt for my parents or brothers or friends.

I simply loved Isidore Baltazar with a love that was untainted by any expectation, doubts, or dread.

As if I had spoken out loud, Isidore Baltazar embraced me so fiercely I could hardly breathe.

We drove off very slowly.

I craned my neck out the window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the caretaker amidst the fruit trees.

"It feels odd to leave like this," I mused, slumping back in my seat. "In a way Florinda said goodbye to me last night. But I wish I could have thanked Esperanza and the caretaker."

The dirt road wound around the hill, and as we reached a sharp bend, the back of the little house came into view.

Isidore Baltazar stopped the car and turned off the engine. He pointed to the frail old man sitting on a crate in front of the house.

I wanted to get out of the car and run up the hill, but he held me back.

"Just wave at him," he whispered.

The caretaker rose from the crate. The wind made his loose jacket and pants flap against his limbs, as if they were wings.

He laughed out loud, then bent backwards, and seemingly with the wind's momentum did a double back flip.

For a moment he appeared to be suspended high in the air.

He never landed on the ground but vanished, as if the wind had sucked him away.

Where did he go?" I whispered in awe.

"To the other side," Isidore Baltazar giggled with childlike delight. "That was his way of saying good-bye to you."

He set the car in motion again.

As if he were baiting me, he glanced at me mockingly from time to time. "What is it that's troubling you, nibelunga?" he finally asked.

"You know who he is, don't you?" I said accusingly. "He isn't the caretaker, is he?"

Isidore Baltazar frowned slightly, then after a long silence he reminded me that, for me, the **nagual Juan Matus** was **Mariano Aureliano**.

He assured me that there must be a good reason that I knew him under that name. "I'm sure there is an equally sound justification for the old man not to reveal his name to you."

I argued that, since I knew who **Mariano Aureliano** was, I **didn't** see the purpose of the old man's pretension.

"And," I stressed smugly, "I do know who the caretaker is."

I glanced sideways to see **Isidore Baltazar's** reaction. His face revealed nothing.

"Like all the people in the sorcerers' world, the caretaker is a sorcerer," he said. "But you don't know who he is."

He turned to me briefly, then fixed his attention again on the road. "After all these years, I don't know who any of them really is, including the **nagual Juan Matus**."

"As long as I am with him, I think I know who he is. The moment his back is turned, however, I am at a loss."

Almost dreamily, **Isidore Baltazar** went on to say that in the world of everyday life, our subjective states are shared by all our fellow men.

For this reason, we know at all times what our fellow men would do under given circumstances.

"You're wrong, you're deadly wrong," I shouted. "Not to know what our fellow men would do under given circumstances is what's exciting about life."

"That's one of the few exciting things left. Don't tell me you want to do away with it."

"We don't know what our fellow men would exactly do," he explained patiently, "but we could write down a list of possibilities which would hold true; a very long list, I grant you, yet a finite list."

"In order to write down this list, we don't have to ask our fellow men for their preferences. All we have to do is place ourselves in their position and write down the possibilities pertinent to us. They'll be true to everybody, because we share them. Our subjective states are shared by all of us."

He said that our subjective knowledge of the world is known to us as common sense.

It might be slightly different from group to group, from culture to culture, yet in spite of all these differences, common sense is sufficiently homogeneous to warrant the statement that the everyday world is an intersubjective world.

"With sorcerers, however, the common sense we are accustomed to is no longer in operation," he stressed. "They have another kind of common sense, because they have other kinds of subjective states."

"You mean that they are like beings from another planet?" I asked.

Isidore Baltazar laughed. "Yes. They are like beings from another planet."

"Is that why they are so secretive?"

"I don't think secretive is the right term," he remarked thoughtfully:

"They deal differently with the everyday world. Their behavior appears secretive to us because we don't share the same meaning."

"And since we don't have any standards to measure what is common

sense to them, we **opt** for believing that their behavior is secretive."

"They do whatever we do: they sleep, they cook their meals, they read," I interjected. "Yet I could never catch them in the act. Believe me, they are secretive."

Smiling, he shook his head. "You saw what they wished you to see," he insisted. "And yet they **weren't** hiding anything from you. You **couldn't** see. That's all."

I was about to contradict him, but I **didn't** want him to dislike me.

It **wasn't** so much that he was right, for I **didn't** really understand what he was talking about; rather, I felt that all my snooping around had not given me a clue as to who these people were or what they did. Sighing, I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the backrest.

As we drove, I told him again of my dream; how real it was to have seen him asleep, snoring on the straw mat. I told him of my conversation with **Mariano Aureliano**; the heat on his hand.

The more I spoke, the more I was convinced that it **hadn't** been a dream at all. I drove myself into such a state of agitation I ended up weeping.

"I don't know what they did to me," I said. "I'm not quite sure whether I'm awake or dreaming even now."

"**Florinda** kept telling me that I was dreaming-awake."

Isidore Baltazar nodded, then said softly, "The **nagual Juan Matus** refers to it as heightened awareness."

"Heightened awareness," I repeated.

The words rolled easily off my tongue even though they sounded exactly the opposite of dreaming-awake.

I vaguely remembered hearing them before. Either **Florinda** or **Esperanza** had used the term, but I **couldn't** recall in what connection.

The words were on the verge of suggesting some meaning, albeit vague, but my brain was already too dulled by my unsuccessful attempts to recount my daily activities at the witches' house.

Regardless of how hard I tried, there were certain episodes I could not recall.

I fumbled for words that somehow paled and died away in front of my very eyes, like a vision half seen and half remembered.

It **wasn't** that I had forgotten anything, but rather, images came to me fragmented, like pieces in a puzzle that **didn't** quite fit.

This forgetfulness was a physical sensation, as if a fog had settled over certain parts of my brain.

"So dreaming-awake and heightened awareness are the same?" More than a question, it was a statement whose meaning escaped me.

I shifted in my seat and, pulling my legs under me, sat facing **Isidoro Baltazar**.

The sun outlined his profile. The black curly hair falling over his high forehead, the sculpted cheekbones, the strong nose and chin, and finely chiseled lips gave him a Roman appearance.

"I must be still in heightened awareness," I said, "I never noticed you before."

The car swayed on the road as he threw his head back and laughed. "You are definitely dreaming-awake," he stated, slapping his thigh. "Don't you remember that I'm short, brown, and homely looking?"

I giggled. Not because I agreed with his description but because it was

the only thing I remembered him saying in the lecture he gave the day I formally met him.

My merriment was quickly replaced by an odd anxiety. It seemed that months had passed, instead of only two days, since we came to the house of the witches.

"Time passes differently in the sorcerers' world," **Isidore Baltazar** said as if I had spoken out loud. "And one experiences it differently."

He went on to say that one of the most difficult aspects of his apprenticeship was to deal with sequences of events in terms of time. Often they were all mixed up in his mind; confused images that sank deeper whenever he tried to focus on them.

"Only now, with the **nagual's** help, do I remember aspects and events of his teachings that took place years ago," he said.

"How does he help you?" I asked. "Does he hypnotize you?"

"He makes me shift levels of awareness," he said. "And when he does, it is not only that I remember past events, but I relive them."

"How does he do that?" I insisted. "I mean, make you shift."

"Until recently I believed that it was accomplished by a sharp pat on my back, between the shoulder blades," he said:

"But now I'm quite certain that his mere presence makes me shift levels of awareness."

"Then he does hypnotize you," I insisted.

He shook his head and said, "Sorcerers are experts at shifting levels of awareness. Some are so adept they can shift the level of awareness of others."

I nodded. Already I had numerous questions, but he gestured for patience.

"Sorcerers," he went on, "make one see that the whole nature of reality is different from what we believe it to be; that is, from what we have been taught it to be.

"Intellectually, we are willing to tease ourselves with the idea that culture predetermines: who we are, how we behave, what we are willing to know, or what we are able to feel.

"But we are not willing to embody this idea; to accept it as a concrete, practical proposition.

... "And the reason for that is that we are not willing to accept that culture also predetermines what we are able to perceive.

"Sorcery makes us aware of different realities; different possibilities, not only about the world but also about ourselves, to the extent that we no longer are able to believe in even the most solid assumptions about ourselves and our surroundings."

I was surprised that I could absorb his words so easily, when I **didn't** really understand them.

"A sorcerer is not only aware of different realities," he went on, "but he uses that knowledge in **practicalities**.

"Sorcerers know- not only intellectually but also practically- that reality, or the world as we know it, consists only of an agreement extracted out of every one of us.

"That agreement could be made to collapse, since it's only a social phenomenon. And when it collapses, the whole world collapses with it."

Seeing that I **couldn't** follow his argument, he tried to present it from another angle.

He said that the social world defines perception to us in proportion to its usefulness in guiding us through the complexity of experience in everyday life.

The social world sets limits to what we perceive; sets limits to what we are capable of perceiving.

"To a sorcerer, perception can go beyond these agreed-upon parameters," he stressed. "These parameters are constructed and buttressed by words, by language, by thoughts. That is, by agreement."

"And sorcerers don't agree?" I asked tentatively, in an effort to understand his premise.

"They do agree," he said, beaming at me, "but their agreement is different.

"Sorcerers break the normal agreement, not only intellectually but also physically or practically or whatever one wants to call it.

"Sorcerers collapse the parameters of socially determined perception; and to understand what sorcerers mean by that, one has to become a practitioner.

"That is, one has to be committed. One has to lend the mind as well as the body.

"It has to be a conscious, fearless surrender."

"The body?" I asked suspiciously, immediately wondering what kind of ritual might be involved. "What do they want with my body?"

"Nothing, **nibelunga**," he laughed.

Then, in a serious yet kind tone, he added that neither my body nor my mind was yet in any condition to follow the arduous path of the sorcerer.

Seeing that I was about to protest, he quickly allowed that there was nothing wrong with either my mind or my body.

"Wait a minute now!" I interjected forcefully.

Isidore Baltazar ignored my interruption and went on to say that the world of sorcerers is a sophisticated world; that it **wasn't** enough to understand its principles intuitively. One also needed to assimilate them intellectually.

HTML EDITOR:

I disagree.

Since sorcery is **percieved** directly, intellect is an afterthought.

Originally fueled by his desire to bring sorcery to the academic world in reasonable terms, **Castaneda's** continuing belief that sorcery can be intellectually understood is the primary cause of his shortcomings to date.

END **HTML EDITOR**

"Contrary to what people believe," he explained, "sorcerers are not practitioners of obscure esoteric rituals, but stand ahead of our times.

"And the mode of our time is reason. We are reasonable men as a whole.

"Sorcerers, however, are men of reason, which is a different matter altogether. Sorcerers have a romance with ideas.

They have cultivated reason to its limits, for they believe that only by fully understanding the intellect can they embody the principles of sorcery without losing sight of their own sobriety and integrity.

"This is where sorcerers differ drastically from us. We have very little sobriety and even less integrity."

He glanced at me briefly and smiled.

I had the unpleasant impression that he knew exactly what I was thinking, or rather, that I **couldn't** think at all.

I had understood his words, but their meaning had eluded me.

I **didn't** know what to say. I **didn't** even know what to ask.

For the first time in my life, I felt utterly stupid.

It **didn't** make me feel inadequate, though, for I realized that he was right. My interest in intellectual matters had always been shallow and superficial. To have a romance with ideas was a totally alien concept to me.

We were at the U.S. border in **Arizona** in a few hours, yet the drive was **unwarrantedly** exhausting.

I wanted to talk, but I **didn't** know what to say, or rather, I **couldn't** find the words to express myself.

I felt somehow intimidated by all that had happened. It was a new feeling for me.

Sensing my uncertainty and discomfort, **Isidoro Baltazar** began to talk.

In a candid manner, he admitted to being baffled by the sorcerers' world even to this day; even after so many years of studying and interacting with them.

"And when I say studying, I really mean studying." He laughed and slapped his thigh to emphasize his statement.

"Only this morning I was clobbered by the sorcerers' world in ways impossible to describe."

He spoke in a tone that was half assertion, half complaint, yet there was such a delighted power in his voice; some wonderful inner strength in him, that I felt uplifted.

He gave me the impression that he could do anything, endure anything, and allow nothing to matter.

I sensed a will in him; an ability to overcome all obstacles.

"Imagine, I really thought I was gone with the **nagual** for only two days." Laughing, he turned to me and shook me with his free hand.

I had been so absorbed by the sound, the vitality of his voice, that I failed to understand what he was talking about.

I asked him to repeat what he had said. He did, and I still missed what he meant.

"I don't get what's exciting you so much," I finally said, suddenly irritated by my inability to grasp what he was trying to tell me. "You were gone for two days. What of it?"

"What?" His loud exclamation made me jump in my seat, and banged my head on the roof of the van.

He peered straight into my eyes but **didn't** say a word.

I knew he was not accusing me of anything, yet I felt that he was making fun of my moroseness, my changing moods, or my lack of attention.

He parked the car on the side of the road, turned off the engine, then shifted in his seat to face me.

"And now I want you to tell me all you've experienced." There was a nervous excitement in his voice, a restlessness, a vitality.

He assured me that the sequential order of events **didn't** mean a thing.

His compelling, engaging smile was so reassuring, I told him at length all I remembered.

He listened attentively, chuckling from time to time, urging me with a movement of his chin every time I faltered.

"So, all this has happened to you in..." He paused, gazing at me with shining eyes, then casually added, "two days?"

"Yes," I said firmly.

He crossed his arms over his chest in an expansive gesture.

"Well, I have news for you," he said. The merry look in his eyes belied the seriousness of his tone, the set expression of his straight lips. "I've been gone for twelve days. But I thought it was only two."

"I thought you were going to appreciate the irony of it because you had kept a better count of time. You **didn't**, though. You're just like me. We've lost ten days."

"Ten days," I mumbled, bewildered, then turned to look out the window.

I **didn't** say a word for the rest of the trip. It **wasn't** that I **didn't** believe him. It **wasn't** that I **didn't** want to talk.

There was nothing for me to say, even after I bought the L.A. Times in the first newsstand that carried it and corroborated that, indeed, I had lost ten days.

But were they really lost?

I asked myself that question, yet I **didn't** wish a reply.

Previous-Pg Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-Pg Next-Pg **Florinda Donner** - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 12

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by **Florinda Donner**

Previous-Pg Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-Pg Next-Pg Chapter 12

HTML EDITOR:

That enables us to see ourselves and our surroundings for what they really are: breathtaking events that bloom into transitory existence once, and are never to be repeated again.

...

"There is nothing any one of us would do to keep you against your will in this magical world," she said, smiling:

"And yet we would do any imaginable or unimaginable thing to help you stay in it."

...

"The only thing I cannot and will not do, and neither will **Isidore Baltazar** for that matter, is to help you be your old ugly, greedy, indulgent self. That would be a travesty."

END **HTML** EDITOR

Isidoro Baltazar's office-studio consisted of one rectangular room overlooking a parking lot, a small kitchen, and a pink-tiled bathroom. He took me there the night we returned from **Sonora**. Too exhausted to notice anything, I followed him up the two flights of stairs, along a darkly carpeted corridor to apartment number 8. The instant my head hit the pillow, I was asleep and dreamt that we were still on the road. We had driven nonstop all the way from **Sonora**, alternating with each other at the wheel and pausing only to eat or fill up the gas tank.

The apartment was sparsely furnished. Beside the twin bed, he had a long, masonite folding picnic table that served as his desk, a folding chair, and two metal filing cabinets in which he kept his field notes. Several suits and half a dozen shirts hung in the two big closets in the hall. The rest of the space was taken up by books. They were stacked up in piles. There were no bookcases. The books appeared to have never been touched, let alone read. The cupboards in the kitchen were also crammed with books, except for one shelf, which had been set aside for a plate, a mug, a knife, a fork, and a spoon. On the gas stove stood a kettle and a saucepan.

Within three weeks I found myself a new apartment, about a mile down the street from the UCLA campus, right around the corner from his office-studio. Yet I continued to spend most of my time at his place. He had set up a second twin bed for me, a card table, and a folding chair- identical to his- at the other end of the room.

In the six months that followed, Sonora became a mythological place for me. Having no longer any desire to block away my experiences, I juxtaposed the memories of the two times I had been there. But hard as I tried, I couldn't remember a thing about the eleven days I had lost: one during the first trip, ten during the second.

Isidoro Baltazar plainly refused even to mention the idea of having lost those days. At times, I was in total agreement with him: The absurdity of considering those days lost simply because I couldn't remember them became so plain to me that I was filled with gratitude toward him for attaching no importance to the matter. It was clear that he was protecting me. At other times, however, for no reason at all, I nursed a deep resentment. It was his duty to help me, to clarify the mystery for me, I repeated to myself, until I was convinced he was purposely hiding things from me.

"You'll drive yourself nuts if you keep harping on it," he finally said one day. "And all your turmoil will be for nothing, because it will resolve nothing." He hesitated for a moment, as if reluctant to voice what he was about to say next, then shrugged and added in a challenging tone, "Why don't you use the same energy in a more practical manner, like lining up and examining your bad habits."

Instead of admitting to such a notion, I immediately counter-attacked with the other complaint that had been brewing inside me. I still hadn't met the other young women who had been entrusted to him by the old nagual.

He had told me so much about them that I felt I already knew them. Whenever I had asked him about them, he had answered my questions at great length. He spoke rapturously about them. With profound and obviously sincere admiration, he had said that an outsider would describe them as attractive, intelligent, accomplished- they all possessed advanced university degrees- self-assured, and fiercely independent.

To him, however, they were much more than that: They were magical beings who shared his destiny.

They were linked to him by ties of affection and commitment that had nothing to do with the social order.

They shared in common their search for freedom.

Once, I even gave him an ultimatum. "You've got to take me to them, or else."

Isidoro Baltazar laughed gaily, a deep, chuckling laugh. "All I can tell you is that nothing is as you imagine," he said. "And there is no way to tell when you will finally meet them. You'll just have to wait."

"I've waited long enough!" I shouted. Seeing no reaction on his face, I added derisively, "You're deluding yourself if you believe that I will find a bunch of women in Los Angeles. I don't even know where to start looking."

"You'll find them the way you found me," he stated, "the way you found Mariano Aureliano."

I regarded him suspiciously. I couldn't help but suspect that there was a sort of secret malice about him. "I wasn't looking for you," I pointed out peevishly. "Nor was I looking for Mariano Aureliano. Believe me, meeting you and him was purely accidental."

"There are no accidental meetings in the sorcerers' world," he noted casually. I was on the verge of telling him that I didn't need this kind of advice when he added in a serious voice, "You'll meet them when the time is right. You don't have to go looking for them."

Facing the wall, I counted to ten, then turned toward him smiling and said sweetly, "The problem with you is that you're a typical Latin. Tomorrow is always good enough for you. You've no concept of getting things done." I raised my voice to prevent him from interrupting me. "My insistence on meeting your friends is to speed things up."

"To speed things up?" he repeated incomprehensibly. "What's there to speed up?"

"You have been telling me almost daily that there is so little left," I reminded him. "You, yourself, are always talking about how important it is for me to meet them, and yet you act as if you had an eternity before you."

"I tell you this constantly because I want you to hurry and clean your inner being, not because I want meaningless acts done as fast as you can," he said impatiently. "It isn't up to me to introduce them to you. If it were up to me, I wouldn't be sitting here listening to your inanities." He closed his eyes and sighed exaggeratedly in mock resignation. He smiled, then mumbled softly, "You're too dumb to see what's happening."

"Nothing is happening," I retorted, stung by his insult. "I'm not as stupid as you think. I've noticed this air of ambivalence about your reactions toward me. Sometimes I have the distinct impression that you don't know what to do with me."

"I know exactly what to do," he contradicted me.

"Then why do you always appear undecided when I propose something?" The words had escaped me as if of their own accord.

Isidoro Baltazar looked sharply at me. For a moment I expected that he would attack me with those quick, harsh words he could use, demolish me with some sharp criticism. But his voice was surprisingly gentle when he said that I was quite right in my assessment.

"I always wait till events make a choice for me," he affirmed. "And then I move with speed and vigor. I will leave you behind if you don't watch out."

"I'm already far behind," I said in a self-pitying tone. "Since you won't help me find these women, I'm doomed to remain behind."

"But this is not the real pressing problem," he said. "You haven't yet made your decision, that's the trouble." He lifted his brows expectantly,

as if waiting for my impending outburst.

"I don't know what you mean. What is it I have to decide?"

"You haven't decided to join the sorcerers' world. You're standing at the threshold, looking in, waiting to see what's going to happen. You're waiting for something practical that will make it worth your while."

Words of protest rose in my throat. But before I could give vent to my profound indignation, he said that I had the mistaken idea that moving into a new apartment and leaving my old life-style behind was a change.

"What is it then?" I asked sarcastically.

"You haven't left anything behind, except your belongings," he said, ignoring my tone. "For some people that is a gigantic step. For you, though, it's nothing. You don't care about possessions."

"No, I don't," I agreed, then insisted that regardless of what he believed, I had made my decision to join the sorcerers' world a long time ago. "Why do you think I'm sitting here if I haven't joined yet?"

"You have certainly joined it in body," he stated, "but not in spirit. Now you are waiting for some kind of map, some comforting blueprint before you make your final decision. Meanwhile, you'll go on humoring them. The main problem with you is that you want to be convinced that the sorcerers' world has something to offer."

"Doesn't it?" I blurted out.

Isidoro Baltazar turned to me, his face crinkling with delight. "Yes, it has something very special to offer. It's called freedom. However, there's no guarantee that you'll succeed in attaining it; that any of us, for that matter, will succeed."

I nodded thoughtfully, then asked him what I had to do to convince him that I had indeed joined the sorcerers' world.

"You don't have to convince me. You have to convince the spirit. You have to close the door behind you."

"What door?"

"The one you still keep open. The door that will permit you to escape if things are not to your liking or don't fit your expectations."

"Are you saying that I will leave?"

He regarded me with an enigmatic expression, then shrugged his shoulders and in a voice that was but a mere murmur said, "That's between you and the spirit."

"But if you yourself believe that--"

"I don't believe anything," he cut me short. "You came into this world the way everybody else did. It was none of anybody's doing. And it will be none of anybody's doing if you or anyone else decides to leave."

I gazed at him in confusion. "But surely you'll try to convince... if I..." I stammered.

He shook his head before I finished speaking. "I will not convince you or anyone else. There will be no power in your decision if you need to be propped up every time you falter or doubt."

"But who will help me?" I asked, stricken.

"I will. I'm your servant." He smiled, not cynically but shyly and sweetly. "But I serve the spirit first. A warrior is not a slave but a servant of the spirit. Slaves have no choice; servants do. Warriors' choice is to serve impeccably."

"My help is exempt from calculation," he continued. "I cannot invest in you, and neither, of course, can you invest in me or in the sorcerers'

world. This is the basic premise of that world: Nothing is done in it that might be construed as useful; only strategic acts are permitted. This is what the **nagual Juan Matus** taught me and the way I live: A sorcerer practices what he or she preaches. And yet nothing is done for practical reasons. When you get to understand and practice this, you will have closed the door behind you."

A long, breathless silence settled between us. I changed positions on the bed where I was sitting. Thoughts swarmed into my head. Perhaps none of the sorcerers would believe me, but I had certainly changed, a change that had been almost imperceptible at first. I noticed it because it had to do with the most difficult thing some of us women can encounter: jealousy and the need to know.

My fits of jealousy were a pretense, not necessarily a conscious one, but nevertheless there was something of a posturing about them. Something in me demanded that I be jealous of all the other women in **Isidoro Baltazar's** life. But then something in me was keenly aware that the new **nagual's** life **wasn't** the life of an ordinary man, not even one who might have many wives. Our relation, if it could be called that, did not fit into any kind of habitual, known mold, no matter how I tried to make it fit into that mold. In order for jealousy and possessiveness to have a grasp, it needs a mirror; not only one's own, but one's partner's as well. And **Isidoro Baltazar** no longer mirrored the drives, needs, feelings, and emotions of a man.

My need to know about **Isidoro Baltazar's** life was an overpowering need: It simply consumed me that he never allowed me a real entry into his private world. And yet I did nothing about it. It would have been quite simple to follow him or to snoop through his papers and find out once and for all who he really was, I often reminded myself. But I **couldn't** do it. Something in me knew that I could not proceed with him as I normally would have done. What stopped me, more than any sense of propriety, was the trust he had bestowed on me. He had given me complete access to his belongings, and that made him, not only in practice but even in my thoughts, inviolable.

I laughed out loud. I did understand what a warrior's strategic act was. **Isidoro Baltazar** was wrong. He was taking my lifelong habit of moodiness and Germanic finickiness as lack of commitment. It **didn't** matter. I knew that I had at least begun to understand and practice the warrior's strategy, at least when he was present- not necessarily present in the studio but present in **Los Angeles**. In his absence, however, I often began to falter, and when I did, I usually went to sleep in his studio.

One night, as I was inserting my key in the lock, I felt an arm reach out and pull me in.

I screamed in terror. "What... what..." I stammered as the hand that was holding my arm let go of me.

Trying to regain my balance, I leaned against the wall. My heart thumped wildly.

"**Florinda!**" I stared at her, bewildered. She had on a long robe, gathered at the waist. Her hair hung loose down the sides and back. I wondered whether she was real or merely a shadowy apparition, rimmed by the faint light behind her shoulders. I moved toward her and surreptitiously touched her sleeve.

"Is that you, **Florinda**? Or am I dreaming?"

"It's the real thing, dear. The real me."

"How did you get here? Are you all by yourself?" I was well aware of the futility of asking her that.

"Had I known that you would come, I would have started earlier with my cleaning," I said, trying to smile. My lips stuck to my teeth. "I love to clean **Isidore Baltazar**'s studio at night. I always clean at night."

Instead of making any remark, **Florinda** turned sideways, so the light hit her face.

A wicked smile of delight dawned in her eyes. "I told you never to follow any one of us or come uninvited. You're lucky," she said. "You're lucky it **wasn't** someone else who pulled you in here tonight."

"Who else could have pulled me in?" I asked with a bravado I was far from feeling.

Florinda gazed at me for a moment longer, then turned around and said over her shoulder, "Someone who **wouldn't** have cared if you had died of fright."

She moved her head slightly, so her profile was outlined by the faint light. She laughed softly, and, waving her hand in the air as if to brush away the words, she traveled the length of the room to the small kitchen. She seemed not to walk but to glide in a sort of undeliberate dance. It made her long white hair, hanging unbraided down her back, shimmer like a silvery curtain in the uncertain light.

Trying to imitate her graceful walk, I followed behind her. "I do have a key, you know," I said. "I've been coming here every day, at any hour, since we returned from **Sonora**. In fact, I practically live here."

"**Didn't Isidore Baltazar** tell you not to come here while he's in Mexico?" **Florinda**'s tone was even, almost casual. She was not accusing me, yet I felt she was.

"He might have mentioned something," I remarked with studied indifference. Seeing that she frowned, I felt compelled to defend myself. I told her that I was often there by myself and that I **didn't** think it would make any difference whether **Isidore Baltazar** was five miles or five hundred miles away. Emboldened by her repeated nods, I confided that besides doing my schoolwork there, I spent hours rearranging the books in the closets. I had been **restacking** them by author and subject matter. "Some of the books are so new the pages are still uncut," I explained. "I've been separating them. In fact, that's what I came here to do tonight."

"At three in the morning?" she exclaimed.

Blushing, I nodded. "There are plenty of pages still to cut. It takes forever in that one has to be very careful not to damage the pages. It's soothing work, though. It helps me sleep."

"Extraordinary," **Florinda** said softly.

Encouraged by her obvious approval, I went on talking. "I'm sure you can understand what being here does to me," I said. "In this apartment, I feel detached from my old life, from everything and everyone but **Isidore Baltazar** and his magical world. The very air fills me with a sense of utter remoteness."

I sighed, long and loudly. "Here I never feel alone, even though most of the time I'm here by myself. Something about the atmosphere of this apartment reminds me of the witches' house. That same coldness and lack of feeling, which at first I had found so disturbing, permeates the walls. And it's precisely this lack of warmth, this remoteness, that I seek

day and night. I find it oddly reassuring. It gives me strength."

"Incredible," **Florinda** whispered as if in disbelief and took the kettle to the sink.

She said something, which I **didn't** hear above the splash of water, then put the water-filled kettle on the stove.

"I'm so happy that you feel so at home here," she said, sighing dramatically. "The security you must feel in such a little nest, knowing you have a companion." She added in a most facetious tone that I should do everything I could to make **Isidore Baltazar** happy and that included sexual practices, which she described with horrendous directness.

Stupefied to hear such things, I stared at her open-mouthed. With the assuredness and efficiency of someone familiar with the peculiar setup of the kitchen, she produced the two mugs, my special teapot, and the bag of chocolate chip cookies I kept hidden in the cupboards behind the thick German and French **Cassels'** dictionaries.

Smiling, **Florinda** turned to me and asked abruptly, "Whom did you expect to find here tonight?"

"Not you!" I blurted out, realizing too late that my answer had given me away. I went into a lengthy and elaborate elucidation of why I believed I might find there, if not all of them, then at least one of the other young women.

"They will cross your path when the time is right," **Florinda** said. "It **isn't** up to you to force an encounter with them."

Before I knew what I was saying, I found myself blaming her, as well as **Mariano Aureliano** and **Isidore Baltazar**, for my sneakiness. I told her that it was impractical- not to mention impossible- for them to expect me to wait until some unknown women crossed my path and to believe that I would actually recognize them by something so inconceivable as their inner glow. As usual, the more I complained, the better I felt.

Florinda ignored me. "One, two spoonfuls, and one for the pot," she chanted in an exaggerated British accent as she measured out the tea.

Then in a most casual manner she remarked that the only capricious and impractical thing was for me to think of and treat **Isidore Baltazar** as a man.

"I don't know what you mean," I said defensively.

She gazed at me intently until I blushed. "You know exactly what I mean," she stated, then poured the tea into the mugs.

With a quick gesture of her chin she indicated which of the two I should take. With the bag of cookies in her hand she sat on **Isidore Baltazar**'s bed, the one nearest to the kitchen. Slowly, she sipped her tea. I sat beside her and did the same.

"You haven't changed at all," she said all of a sudden.

"That's pretty much what **Isidore Baltazar** said to me some days ago," I retorted. "I know, however, that I've changed a great deal."

I told her that my world had been turned upside down since my return from **Sonora**. At great length I explained about finding a new apartment, about moving and leaving everything I owned behind.

She did not so much as nod but sat there silent and stiff like a stone.

"Actually, I can't take much credit for disrupting routines or becoming inaccessible," I conceded, laughing nervously and faltering on through her silence:

"Anyone in close contact with **Isidore Baltazar** will forget that there

are boundaries between night and day, between weekdays and holidays."

I glanced at her sideways, pleased with my words. "Time just flows by and gives way to some..." but I **couldn't** finish the sentence: I had been hit by a strange thought.

Nobody, in my memory, had ever told me about disrupting routines or becoming inaccessible.

I regarded **Florinda** intently, then my glance wavered involuntarily. Was it her doing? I asked myself. Where did I get these ideas? And what was even more baffling, I knew exactly what these ideas meant.

"This should be a warning that something is just about to pop out of you," **Florinda** said, as if she had followed my train of thoughts.

She went on to say that whatever I had done so far in dreams **hadn't** imbued my waking hours with the necessary hardness, the necessary self-discipline needed to fare in the sorcerers' world.

"I've never done anything like this in my life," I said. "Give me a break. I am new at it."

"Of course," she readily agreed.

She reclined her head against the pillows and closed her eyes.

She was silent for so long I thought she had fallen asleep, and thus I was startled when she said, "A real change is not a change of mood or attitude or outlook. A real change involves a total transformation of the self."

Seeing that I was about to interrupt her, she pressed her fingers against my lips and added, "The kind of change I'm talking about cannot be accomplished in three months or in a year or in ten. It will take a lifetime."

She said that it was extraordinarily difficult to become something different than what one was raised to be.

"The world of sorcerers is a dream; a myth: yet it is as real as the everyday world," **Florinda** proceeded:

"In order to perceive and to function in the sorcerers' world, we have to take off the everyday mask that has been strapped to our faces since the day we were born and put on the second mask; the mask that enables us to see ourselves and our surroundings for what they really are: breathtaking events that bloom into transitory existence once, and are never to be repeated again.

"You'll have to make that mask yourself." She settled more comfortably on the bed and, cupping her hands around the mug, which I had refilled, took noisy little sips.

"How do I make this mask?" I asked.

"By dreaming your other self," she murmured:

"Certainly not by just having a new address, new clothes, new books."

She glanced at me sideways and grinned mockingly. "And certainly not by believing you have a new man."

Before I could deny her brutal accusation, she said that outwardly I was a fluid person, capable of moving at great speed. But inside I was rigid and stiff.

As **Isidore Baltazar** had remarked already, she, too, maintained that it was fallacious for me to believe that moving into a new apartment and compulsively giving away all I possessed was a change.

I bowed my head, accepting her criticism. I had always had an urge to get rid of things. And as she had pointed out, it was basically a

compulsion. To my parents' chagrin, I had periodically disposed of my clothes and toys since early childhood. My joy at seeing my room and closets neatly arranged and nearly empty surpassed the joy of having things.

Sometimes my compulsion was so overpowering that I thinned out my parents' and brothers' closets as well. Hardly ever were these items missed, for I always made sure to get rid of clothes I **hadn't** seen anyone wear for a while. Quite a few times, nevertheless, the whole household would explode in sudden and total confusion as my father went from room to room, opening wardrobes and yelling, searching for a specific shirt or a pair of pants.

Florinda laughed, then got to her feet and moved to the window overlooking the alley. She stared at the black-out curtain as though she could see through it.

Glancing backward over her shoulder, she said that for a woman it is a great deal easier than for a man to break ties with family and past.

"Women," she maintained, "are not accountable. This lack of accountability gives women a great deal of fluidity.

"Unfortunately, women rarely, if ever, make use of this advantage."

She moved about the room, her hand trailing over the large metal filing cabinet and over the folding card table.

"The hardest thing to grasp about the sorcerers' world is that it offers total freedom." She turned to face me and added softly, "But freedom is not free."

"What does freedom cost?"

She said, "Freedom will cost you the mask you have on; The mask that feels so comfortable and is so hard to shed off; not because it fits so well, but because you have been wearing it for so long."

She stopped pacing about the room and came to stand in front of the card table.

"Do you know what freedom is?" she asked rhetorically. "Freedom is the total absence of concern about yourself," she said, sitting beside me on the bed.

"And the best way to quit being concerned with yourself is to be concerned about others."

"I am," I assured her. "I constantly think of **Isidore Baltazar** and his women."

"I'm sure you do," **Florinda** readily agreed.

She shook her head and yawned. "It's time for you to begin to shape your new mask; the mask that cannot have anyone's imprint but your own.

"It has to be carved in solitude. Otherwise it won't fit properly. Otherwise there will always be times when the mask will feel too tight, too loose, too hot, too cold ..." Her voice trailed off as she went on enumerating the most outlandish discomforts.

A long silence ensued, and then in that same sleepy voice she said, "To choose the sorcerers' world is not just a matter of saying you have. You have to act in that world.

"In your case, you have to dream. Have you dreamt-awake since your return?"

In a thoroughly morose mood, I admitted that I **hadn't**.

"Then you haven't made your decision yet," she observed severely.

"You are not carving your new mask. You are not dreaming your other self.

"Sorcerers are bound to their world solely through their impeccability."

A definite gleam appeared in her eyes as she added, "Sorcerers have no interest to convert anyone to their views.

"There are no gurus or wise men among sorcerers, only **naguals**.

"They are the leaders, not because they know more or because they are in any way better sorcerers, but simply because they have more energy.

"I **m** not necessarily referring to physical strength," she qualified, "but to a certain configuration of their being that permits them to help anyone break the parameters of perception."

"If sorcerers are not interested in converting anyone to their views, why then is **Isidore Baltazar** the old **nagual**'s apprentice?" I interrupted her.

"**Isidore Baltazar** appeared in the sorcerers' world the same way you did," she said. "Whatever it was that brought him could not be ignored by **Mariano Aureliano**. It was his duty to teach **Isidore Baltazar** all he knew about the sorcerers' world."

She explained that no one had been looking for **Isidore Baltazar** or for me. Whatever had brought us into their world had nothing to do with anyone's doing or volition.

"There is nothing any one of us would do to keep you against your will in this magical world," she said, smiling:

"And yet we would do any imaginable or unimaginable thing to help you stay in it."

Florinda turned sideways as if she wanted to hide her face from me.

An instant later she looked back over her shoulder. Something cold and detached showed in her eyes, and the change of expression was altogether so remarkable that I was frightened. Instinctively, I moved away from her.

"The only thing I cannot and will not do, and neither will **Isidore Baltazar**, for that matter, is to help you be your old ugly, greedy, indulgent self. That would be a travesty."

As if to soften the insult, she put her arm around my shoulders and hugged me.

"I **ll** tell you what you need," she whispered; but then was silent for so long I thought she had forgotten what she was going to say.

"You need a good night's sleep," she finally murmured.

"I **m** not in the least tired," I retorted.

My response was automatic, and I realized that most of my responses were contradictions of what was being said. For me, it was a matter of principle to be right.

Florinda laughed softly, then embraced me again. "Don't be so Germanic," she murmured. "And don't expect everything to be spelled out clearly and precisely to you."

She added that nothing in the sorcerers' world was clear and precise: Instead, things unfolded slowly and vaguely.

"**Isidore Baltazar** will help you," she assured me. "However, do remember that he won't help you in the way you expect to be helped."

"What do you mean?" I asked, disentangling myself from her arms so

I could look at her.

"He will not tell you what you want to hear. He will not tell you how to behave, for, as you already know, there are neither rules nor regulations in the sorcerers' world."

She giggled gleefully, seemingly enjoying my growing frustration.

"Always remember, there are only improvisations," she added, then, yawning widely, she stretched out fully on the bed and reached for one of the neatly folded blankets stacked on the floor.

Before she covered herself, she rose up on her elbow and looked at me closely. There was something hypnotic about her sleepy voice as she told me that I should always bear in mind that I traveled on the same warrior's path as **Isidore Baltazar**.

She closed her eyes, and in a voice that was almost too faint to be heard said, "Never lose sight of him. His actions will guide you in so artful a manner that you won't even notice it. He's an impeccable and peerless warrior."

I urgently shook her arm. I was afraid she would fall asleep before she finished talking.

Without opening her eyes, **Florinda** said, "If you watch him carefully, you **ll** see that **Isidore Baltazar** doesn't seek love or approval.

"You **ll** see that he remains impassive under any conditions.

"He **doesn't** demand anything, yet he is willing to give anything of himself.

"He avidly seeks a signal from the spirit in the form of a kind word; an appropriate gesture... and when he gets it, he expresses his thanks by redoubling his efforts.

"**Isidore Baltazar** doesn't judge. He fiercely reduces himself to nothing in order to listen, to watch, so that he can conquer and be humbled by his conquest; or be defeated and enhanced by his defeat.

"If you watch carefully, you **ll** see that **Isidore Baltazar** doesn't surrender. He may be vanquished, but he **ll** never surrender.

"And above all, **Isidore Baltazar** is free."

I was dying to interrupt her, to cry out that she had already told me all that, but before I could ask her anything else, **Florinda** was sound asleep.

Afraid I might miss her in the morning if I returned to my apartment, I sat down on the other bed.

Strange thoughts rushed into my awareness.

I relaxed. I let myself go completely as I realized that they were disconnected from the rest of my normal thoughts.

I saw them like beams of light, flashes of intuition.

Following one of those flashes of intuition, I decided to feel with my seat the bed I was sitting on. And to my dumbfounded surprise, my buttocks felt as if they had sunk into the bed itself.

For an instant, I was the bed, and the bed was reaching out to touch my buttocks. I relished this sensation for quite some time.

I knew then that I was dreaming, and I understood with complete clarity that I had just felt what **Esperanza** had described as 'my feeling being thrown back at me.'

And then my whole being melted, or better yet, it exploded.

I wanted to laugh out loud for the sheer joy of it, but I **didn't** want to wake **Florinda**. I had remembered it all!

Now I had no difficulty whatsoever in recalling what I had done in the witches' house in those ten lost days. I had dreamt!

Under **Esperanza's** watchful eye, I had dreamt on and on of waking up in the witches' house or in **Esperanza's** place or sometimes in other places I **couldn't** quite see at the moment.

Clara had insisted that before any particular thing I saw in dreams could be fixed permanently in my memory, I needed to see it twice.

I had seen all the women more than twice: They were permanently etched in my memory.

As I sat there on the bed watching **Florinda** sleep, I remembered the other women of the sorcerers' party with whom I had interacted in a dreamlike state during those forgotten days.

I saw them clearly, as if they had conjured themselves up before me; or rather, as if I had been transported, bodily, back to those events.

The most striking to me was **Nelida**, who looked so much like **Florinda** that at first I believed she was her twin. Not only was she tall and thin as **Florinda**, but she had the same color eyes, hair, **and** complexion: Even their expressions were the same. Temperamentally, they were alike, too, except that **Nelida** came across as more subdued, less forceful. She seemed to lack **Florinda's** wisdom and energetic force. And yet there was a patient, silent strength to **Nelida** that was very reassuring.

Hermelinda could have easily passed as **Carmela's** younger sister. Her thin, five-foot two-inch body was delicately rounded and so were her exquisite manners. She appeared to be less self-assured than **Carmela**. She was soft-spoken and moved in quick jerks that somehow meshed into gracefulness. Her companions told me that her shyness and quietness brought out the best in others and that she could not handle a group or even two people at the same time.

Clara and **Delia** made a stupendous team of **pranksters**. They **weren't** really as big as they first appeared. It was their robustness, their vigor and energy, that made one think they were large, indestructible women. And they did play the most delightful competitive games. They paraded their outlandishly eccentric outfits at the slightest opportunity. Both played the guitar very well and had beautiful voices to match: They sang, one trying to outdo the other, not only in Spanish, but in English, German, French, and Italian as well. Their repertoire included ballads, folk songs, every conceivable popular song including the latest pop songs. I only had to hum or recite the first line of a song and either **Clara** or **Delia** would immediately finish the whole song for me. And then they had their poem writing contests, writing verse to the occasion.

They had written poems to me and slipped them under my door, unsigned. I had to guess who had written the poem. Each claimed that if I truly loved her, as she loved me, I would intuitively know the author.

What made their competitiveness delightfully appealing was the fact that there was no edge to it. It was meant to entertain, not to put each other down. Needless to say, **Clara** and **Delia** had as much fun as their audience.

If they took a liking to someone, as they seemed to have done with me, there was no limit to their affection and loyalty. Both of them defended me with an astonishing perseverance, even when I was in the wrong. In their eyes, I was perfect and could do no wrong. From them I

learned that it was a dual responsibility to uphold that trust. It **wasn't** that I was afraid of disappointing them and tried to live up to their expectations, but rather, it was the most natural thing for me to believe that I was perfect and to behave with them in an impeccable manner.

The strangest among all the women sorcerers was my dreaming teacher, **Zuleica**, who never taught me anything. She **didn't** even speak to me or perhaps **hadn't** noticed that I existed.

Zuleica was, just like **Florinda**, very beautiful; perhaps not as striking, but beautiful in a more ethereal way. She was petite: Her dark eyes with the winged eyebrows and the small, perfect nose and mouth were framed by wavy dark hair that was turning grey. It accentuated her aura of other-worldliness.

Hers was not an average beauty, but a sublime one, tempered by her relentless self-control. She was keenly aware of the comic element of being beautiful and appealing in the eyes of others.

She had learned to recognize it and used it as if it were a prize she had won. She was, therefore, totally indifferent to anything or anyone.

Zuleica had learned to be a ventriloquist and had turned it into a superior art. According to her, words voiced by moving the lips become more confusing than they really are.

I was delighted by **Zuleica's** habit of talking, as a ventriloquist, to walls, tables, china, or any other object in front of her, and so I kept on following her around whenever she made an appearance. She walked through the house without seeming to touch the ground, without seeming to stir the air. When I asked the other sorcerers whether this was an illusion, they explained that **Zuleica** abhorred leaving footprints.

After I had met and interacted with all the women, they explained to me the difference between the dreamers and the **stalkers**. They called it the two planets.

Florinda, **Carmela**, **Zoila**, and **Delia** were **stalkers**: forceful beings with a great deal of physical energy; go-getters; inexhaustible workers; specialists on that extravagant state of awareness they called dreaming-awake.

The other planet- the dreamers- was composed of the other four women: **Zuleica**, **Nelida**, **Hermelinda**, and **Clara**. They had a more ethereal quality. It was not that they were less forceful or less energetic: It was rather that their energy was simply less apparent. They projected a sense of other-worldliness even when engaged in the most mundane activities. They were the specialists on another peculiar state of awareness they called 'dreaming in worlds other than this world.' I was told that this was the most complex state of awareness women could reach.

When the dreamers and the **stalkers** worked together, the **stalkers** were like a protective, hard, outer layer that hid a deep core. The dreamers were that deep core: They were like a soft matrix that cushioned the hard, outer layer.

During those days in the witches' house, I was taken care of as if I were their most precious concern: They **cossetted** and fussed over me as if I were a baby. They cooked me my favorite foods. They made me the most elegant and well-fitting clothes I had ever had. They showered me with presents, outright silly things and valuable jewels, which they put away, waiting for the day I would wake up, they said.

There were two more women in the sorcerers' world. They were both **stalkers**: two fat girls, **Martha** and **Teresa**. Both were lovely to look at and had glorious appetites to match. Not that they fooled anyone, but they kept a cache of cookies, chocolates, and assorted candies hidden in a secret compartment in the pantry. To my great delight, they made me privy from the very beginning to their secret cache and encouraged me to dip freely into it, which, of course, I did.

Martha was the older of the two. She was in her mid-twenties, an exotic blend of German and Indian blood. Her color, if not altogether white, was pale. Her luxurious black hair was soft and wavy and framed a high-cheeked, broad face. Her slanted eyes were a brilliant green-blue, and her ears were small and delicate, like a cat's, soft and almost rosily transparent.

Martha was given to long, sorrowful sighs- Germanic, she claimed- and to moody silences, a heritage of her Indian soul. She had recently begun to take lessons on the violin, which she would practice at any hour of the day. Instead of anyone criticizing her or getting angry, they unanimously agreed that **Martha** had a great ear for music.

Teresa was barely five feet tall, but her bulk made her seem much taller. Rather than looking Mexican, she looked like an Indian from India. Her flawless skin was a rich, creamy light brown. Her almond-shaped eyes, liquid and dark, were framed by long, curly lashes, so heavy they kept her lids low, giving her a dreamy, far-away expression. Her gentleness and sweet disposition made one want to protect her.

Teresa was artistic, too. She painted watercolors late in the afternoon. With her easel before her, her brushes and tray with paint and water at the ready, she would sit for hours in the yard, waiting for the light and shadows to be just right. Then, with **Zen**-like control and fluidity, she would dash across the page with her paint-dipped brushes.

The bulk of my hidden memories had surfaced. I was exhausted. The rhythm of **Florinda**'s faint snoring rising and falling across the room like a distant echo was mesmerizing.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I did was to call out her name. She **didn't** answer.

The bed was empty. The yellow sheet, tucked tightly under the mattress, showed no evidence that anyone had sat, let alone slept, there. The two pillows were back to their usual position- plopped against the wall- and the blanket she had used was stacked with the others on the floor.

Eagerly, I searched the apartment for a clue, some indication that she had indeed been there.

I found nothing, not even a long grey hair in the bathroom.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 13

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 13

HTML EDITOR:

With great equanimity, he said, ""Nothing these sorcerers do is just to entertain themselves, or to impress someone, or to give way to their

compulsiveness. Everything they do or say has a reason- a purpose."

END **HTML** EDITOR

Whenever I was fully awake, I **didn't** quite remember about those lost days, except that I knew, with absolute certainty, that they were not lost. Something had happened to me during that time; something with an inward meaning that escaped me.

I **didn't** make a conscious effort to recapture all those vague memories. I simply knew they were there half-hidden like people one knows slightly but whose names one can't exactly recall.

I have never been a good sleeper, but from that night on- since **Florinda**'s appearance at **Isidore Baltazar**'s studio- I went to sleep at all hours just to dream.

I simply passed out every time I lay down, and slept for inordinately long stretches of time. I even put on weight, which unfortunately **didn't** go to the right places.

Yet I never dreamt with the sorcerers.

One afternoon I awoke abruptly to a loud clatter. **Isidore Baltazar** had dropped the kettle in the sink. My head hurt, my eyes were blurred. I had the immediate memory of a terrible dream that just as quickly escaped recall. I was sweating heavily.

"It's all your fault," I yelled at him. "If you would only help me, I **wouldn't** be sleeping my life away." I wanted to rant, to give in to my frustration and impatience. But it suddenly flashed through my mind that I **couldn't** do that because I could no longer enjoy my complaining as I used to.

His face was radiant with pleasure, as though I had spoken my thoughts out loud. He grabbed his chair, sat astride it, and said, "You know that I cannot help you. Women have a different dreaming avenue. I can't even conceive what women do to dream."

"You ought to know, with so many women in your world," I retorted churlishly.

He laughed: Nothing seemed to alter his good spirits.

"I can't even begin to conceive what women do to dream," he went on:

"Males have to struggle incessantly to arrange their attention in dreams: Women don't struggle, but they do have to acquire inner discipline."

His smile was brilliant as he added, "There is one thing that might help you. Don't approach dreaming in your usual compulsive manner. Let it come to you."

I opened and closed my mouth, then quickly my astonishment turned to rage. My former insight forgotten, I put on my shoes and stomped out in a huff, making sure to bang the door behind me. His laughter followed me all the way to my car in the parking lot below.

Dejected, feeling utterly unloved, alone, and above all, sorry for myself, I drove to the beach. It was deserted. It was raining at the beach. There was no wind, and the rain fell very gently, very straight.

There was something peaceful about the hushed sound of the lapping waves and the rain hitting the water. I took off my shoes, tucked up my pants, and walked until I was washed clean of my indulgent moods.

I knew that I was rid of them because I heard from the whispering, lapping waves **Florinda**'s words, "It's a solitary fight."

I **wasn't** threatened: I simply accepted that I was indeed alone; and it was this acquiescence that brought me the conviction of what I had to do. And since I am not one to wait, I acted immediately.

After leaving a note under **Isidore Baltazar's** door- I **didn't** want him to talk me out of it- I set out for the witches' house. I drove all night, all the way to **Tucson**. I checked in at a motel, slept most of the day, then late in the afternoon set out again, taking the same route **Isidore Baltazar** had followed on our return trip.

My sense of direction is poor, yet that route is imprinted deep within me. With a baffling assurance, I knew exactly what roads to take; where to turn. I reached the witches' house in no time at all. I **didn't** bother to check my watch, for I **didn't** want to lose the feeling that no time had elapsed between the time I got into my car in **Tucson** and my arrival at the witches' house.

That there was no one at the house **didn't** bother me in the least. I was aware that no direct, formal invitation had been extended to me; but I remembered clearly that **Nelida** had told me, as she hid in a drawer a small basket with the gifts they had all given me, that I should come back any time I wished.

Nelida's words rang in my ears: "Day or night, this basket will pull you safely in."

With an assurance that ordinarily only comes from practice, I went directly to the room **Esperanza** had given me. The white, **flouncy** hammock was ready, as if waiting for me.

A vague uneasiness finally took hold of me, but I **wasn't** nearly as scared as I should have been. Not quite relaxed, I lowered myself in the hammock, one leg outside to rock myself back and forth.

"To hell with my fears," I cried out and pulled my leg in and stretched out luxuriously like a cat until all my joints cracked.

"**Oh**, you've made it back safely," a voice said to me from the corridor.

I **didn't** see her and I **didn't** necessarily recognize her voice, yet I knew it was **Nelida**. I waited expectantly for her to come in, but she **didn't**.

"Your food is in the kitchen," I heard her say. Her steps moved away from my door, down the corridor.

I jumped up and dashed after her. "Wait, wait, **Nelida!**" I shouted.

There was no one in the hall or in the rooms I passed on my way to the kitchen. There was no one in the whole house, for that matter. Yet, I was sure they were there. I heard their voices, their laughter, the clatter of dishes, of pots and pans.

I spent the next few days in a perpetual state of anticipation, waiting for something significant to occur.

I **couldn't** imagine what was supposed to happen, but I knew that it had to be connected with the women.

For some unfathomable reason, the women **didn't** want to be seen. Their astoundingly furtive behavior kept me in the corridors it all hours, prowling noiselessly, like a shadow.

Regardless of the ingeniously sneaky schemes I devised to surprise the women, I never caught so much as a glimpse of them. They glided in and out of their rooms, in and out of the house, as if in between worlds, leaving in their wake the sound of their voices and laughter.

Sometimes I wondered whether the women were indeed there;

whether the sounds of footsteps, of murmurs and giggles, were but **figments** of my imagination.

Whenever I was about to believe it was my imagination, I would hear one of them tinkering on the patio. Then, seized by renewed fervor, expectation, and excitement, I would run to the back of the house, only to discover that once again I had been outwitted.

At those times I was convinced that the women, being real witches, had some kind of a bat-like internal echo location system that alerted them to my sounds.

My disappointment at not being able to catch them in front of the stove always vanished at the sight of the exotic little meals they left behind for me. The deliciousness of the dishes amply compensated for the meagerness of the portions. With great gusto I ate their wonderful food. Yet I was still hungry.

One day just before twilight, I heard a man's voice softly calling my name from the back of the house. I jumped out of my hammock and ran down the corridor. I was so glad to see the caretaker, I nearly jumped on him like a dog does. Unable to contain my joy, I kissed him on the cheeks.

"Watch out, **nibelunga**." He said this in the same voice and manner of **Isidore Baltazar**. I sprang back, my eyes wide with surprise. He winked at me and added, "Don't get carried away, because the next thing you know, you'll be taking advantage of me."

For an instant I **didn't** know what to make of his words. But then he laughed, and patted my back reassuringly. I completely relaxed.

"It's good to see you," he said softly.

"It's wonderful to see you!" I giggled self-consciously, then asked him where everybody else was.

"**Oh**, they are around," he said vaguely. "At the moment they are mysteriously inaccessible, but ever present." Seeing my disappointment he added, "Have patience."

"I know they are around," I murmured. "They leave food for me." I glanced over my shoulder to ham it up and confided, "But I'm still hungry. The portions are too little."

According to the caretaker, this was the natural condition of power food: One could never get enough of it. He said that he cooked his own food- rice and beans with either chunks of pork, beef, or chicken- and ate only once a day but never at the same hour.

He took me then to his quarters. He lived in the large, cluttered room behind the kitchen, amidst the odd wood and iron sculptures, where the air, thick with the scents of jasmine and eucalyptus, hung heavy and motionless around the drawn curtains. He slept on a **cot**, which he kept folded in the armoire when it was not in use, and ate his meal at a small **chippendale** table with spindly legs.

He confided that he, like the mysterious women, disliked routines. Day or night, morning or afternoon, was all the same to him.

He swept the patios and raked the leaves outside the clearing whenever he felt like doing so. Whether there were blossoms or leaves on the ground was immaterial.

In the days that followed, I had a hellish time trying to adjust to this seemingly unstructured way of life. Out of compulsion, rather than out of any desire to be useful, I helped the caretaker with his chores. Also, I invariably accepted his invitations to share his meals. His food was as

delicious as his company.

Convinced that he was more than the caretaker, I did my best to get him off-guard with my devious questions; a useless technique, for I never got any satisfactory answers.

"Where do you come from?" I bluntly asked him one day while we were eating.

He looked up from his plate, and as if he had been expecting an outright interrogation, he dutifully pointed to the mountains toward the east, framed by the open window like a painting.

"The **Bacatete** Mountains?" My voice betrayed my disbelief. "But you're not an Indian," I mumbled **disconcertedly**. "The way I see it, only the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**, **Delia Flores**, and **Genaro Flores** are Indians."

Emboldened by the surprised, expectant look on his face, I added that, in my opinion, **Esperanza** transcended racial categories. I leaned across the table and in a secretive tone confided to him what I had already told **Florinda**. "**Esperanza wasn't** born like a human being. She was established by an act of witchcraft. She is the very devil."

Leaning back in his chair, the caretaker shrieked with joy. "And what do you have to say about **Florinda**? Did you know she's French? Or rather, her parents were French. They were from the families that came to Mexico with **Maximilian** and **Carlota**."

"She's very beautiful," I murmured, trying to remember when, exactly, in the eighteenth century the Austrian prince was sent by Napoleon to Mexico.

"You haven't seen her when she's all dolled up," the caretaker gushed. "She's something else. Age means nothing to her."

"**Carmela** told me that I am like **Florinda**," I said in a fit of vanity and wishful thinking.

Propelled by the laughter bubbling up inside him, the caretaker sprang up from his chair. "That'll be the day." He said the words with no particular feeling, as though he **didn't** care in the least how they would be received.

Irritated by his remark; his lack of feeling, I glared at him with ill-concealed animosity. Then, eager to change the subject, I asked him about the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**. "Where exactly does he come from?"

"Who knows where **naguals** come from?" he muttered, moving toward the window.

For a long while he gazed at the distant mountains, then he turned toward me once again and said, "Some people say that **naguals** come from hell itself. I believe it. Some people say that **naguals** are not even human." Again he paused, and I wondered if the long silence was to be repeated.

As if sensing my impatience, he came to sit beside me and added, "If you ask me, I'd say that **naguals** are superhuman. That's the reason they know everything about human nature. You can't lie to a **nagual**. They see through you. They see through anything. They even see through space to other worlds in this world, and to other worlds out of this world."

I moved uneasily in my chair, wishing he would stop talking. I regretted engaging him in this conversation. There was no doubt in my mind that the man was insane.

"No, I'm not insane," he assured me, and I let out a loud shriek.

"I'm saying things that you've never heard before, that's all."

Feeling oddly on the defensive, I blinked repeatedly. But my uneasiness gave me a surge of courage, and I asked him point blank, "Why are they hiding from me?"

"It's obvious," he shot back, then seeing that it **wasn't** at all obvious to me, he added, "You should know it. You and your kind are the crew, not me. I'm not one of them. I'm merely the caretaker. I oil the machine."

"You're getting me more confused than I was," I muttered, irritated. Then a momentary flash of insight hit me. "Who are the crew you are referring to?"

"All the women you met the last time you were here. The dreamers and the **stalkers**. They told me that the **stalkers** are your kind, and you are one of them."

He poured himself a glass of water and went with it to the window. He took a few sips then informed me that the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** had tried out my stalking abilities in **Tucson, Arizona**, when he sent me into the coffee shop to put a cockroach in my food. The caretaker turned his back to the window, looked straight into my face, and added, "You failed."

"I don't want to hear about that nonsense," I cut him short. I had no desire to hear the rest of the story.

His face crinkled with mischief. "But then, after your failure, you exonerated yourself by kicking and yelling at the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** without shame or regard. **Stalkers**," he stressed, "are people who have a knack for dealing with people."

I opened my mouth to say that I **didn't** understand a word he was saying, but quickly shut it again.

"What has been baffling," he went on, "is that you are a great dreamer. If it **wouldn't** be for that, you'd be like **Florinda** - less the height and the looks, of course."

Smiling venomously, I cursed the old creep silently.

"Do you remember how many women were there at the picnic?" he asked all of a sudden.

I closed my eyes to better visualize the picnic. I clearly saw six women sitting on the canvas cloth, spread out under the eucalyptus trees. **Esperanza wasn't** there, but **Carmela**, **Zoila**, **Delia**, and **Florinda** were.

"Who were the other two?" I asked, more mystified than ever.

"**Ah**," he murmured appreciatively, a brilliant smile creasing his face. "Those two were dreamers from another world. You saw them clearly, but then they disappeared, and your mind **didn't** acknowledge their vanishing because it was simply too outlandish."

I nodded absentmindedly, unable to conceive that I had actually seen only four women, when I knew that there had been six.

The thought must have seeped through to him, for he said that it was only natural to have focused on the four. "The other two are your source of energy. They are incorporeal and not from this world."

Lost and bewildered, all I could do was stare at him: I had no more questions to ask.

"Since you are not in the planet of the dreamers," he clarified, "your dreams are nightmares, and your transitions between dreams and reality are very unstable and dangerous to you and to the other dreamers. So

Florinda has taken it upon herself to buffer and protect you."

I rose with such impetus my chair turned over. "I don't want to know anything else!" I cried out. Just in time, I stopped myself from blurting out that I was better off not knowing about their mad ways and rationales.

The caretaker took me by the hand and walked with me outside, across the clearing, across the chaparral to the back of the small house.

"I need you to help me with the generator," he said. "It needs fixing."

I laughed out loud and told him that I **didn't** know anything about generators. Only when he opened the trap door of a concrete encasement did I realize that the electric current for the lights in the house was generated there. I had completely taken for granted that the electrical lights and appliances of rural Mexico were like those I was familiar with.

From that day on, I tried not to ask him too many questions. I felt that I was not prepared for his answers. Our meetings acquired the nature of a ritual in which I did my best to match the old man's exquisite usage of the Spanish language. I spent hours pouring over the various dictionaries in my room, searching for new and often archaic words with which to impress him.

One afternoon, as I was waiting for the caretaker to bring in the food—it was the first time since I discovered his room that I was alone in it—I remembered the old, strange mirror. I carefully examined its spotty, misty surface.

"You'll get trapped in the mirror if you look at yourself too much," a voice behind me said.

Expecting to see the caretaker, I turned around, but there was no one in the room.

In my eagerness to reach the door, I almost knocked over the wood and iron sculpture behind me.

Automatically, I reached out to steady it, but before I so much as touched it, the figure seemed to spin away from me in an odd circular motion, then came to its original position with an astonishingly human sigh.

"What's the matter?" the caretaker asked, stepping into the room. He placed a large tray on the rickety table and, looking up into my ashen face, asked once more what was wrong with me.

"Sometimes, I've the feeling that these monstrosities are alive, watching me," I said, gesturing with my chin toward the nearby sculpture.

Noticing his grave, unsmiling face, I hastened to reassure him that I **didn't** mean monstrous in terms of ugliness but rather in terms of being big.

I took several deep, shuddering breaths and repeated that his sculptures gave me the impression of being alive.

Glancing furtively around himself and lowering his voice to a barely audible whisper, he said, "They are alive."

I felt so uncomfortable that I began to babble about the afternoon I first discovered his room; how I had been lured to it by an eerie-sounding murmur that turned out to be the wind pushing the curtain through a broken window.

"Yet at the time I believed it to be a monster," I confided, giggling nervously. "An alien presence feeding on the twilight shadows."

Chewing his lower lip, the caretaker regarded me with keen eyes.

Then his gaze drifted unfocused around the room. "We better sit down to eat," he finally said. "We don't want to let our food get cold."

He held out the chair for me, and as soon as I was comfortably seated, he added in a vibrant tone, "You're quite right to call them presences, for they are not sculptures. They are inventions."

He confided in a conspiratorial tone, "They were conceived from patterns glimpsed at in another world, by a great **nagual**."

"By **Mariano Aureliano**?" I asked.

He shook his head and said, "By a much older **nagual**, named **Elias**."

"Why are these inventions in your room?" I asked. "Did this great **nagual** make them for you?"

"No," he said. "I only take care of them."

Rising, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a neatly folded white handkerchief and proceeded to dust the nearby invention with it.

"Since I'm the caretaker, it falls upon me to take care of them. One day, with the help of all these sorcerers you've already met, I will deliver these inventions where they belong."

"And where is that?"

"Infinity, the cosmos, the vacuum."

"How do you propose to take them there?"

"Through the same power that got them here in the first place: the power of dreaming-awake."

"If you dream like these sorcerers dream," I began cautiously, trying hard to conceal the triumph in my voice, "then you must also be a sorcerer yourself."

"I am, but I am not like them."

His candid admission confused me. "What's the difference?"

"Ah!" he exclaimed knowingly. "All the difference in the world. But I can't explain it now. If I do, you'd get even more morose and angry. Someday, though, you'll know all about it by yourself, without anyone having to tell you."

I could feel the wheels churning in my head as I desperately tried to come up with something else to say; another question to ask.

"Can you tell me how the **nagual Elias** came to have the inventions?"

"He saw them in his dreaming and captured them," the caretaker confided.

"Some of them are copies, done by him, of inventions he **couldn't** cart away."

"Others are the real thing; inventions transported by that great **nagual** all the way to here."

I **didn't** believe a word he said, yet I **couldn't** help but add, "Why did the **nagual Elias** bring them?"

"Because the inventions themselves asked him to."

"Why did they?"

The caretaker dismissed my **probings** with a wave of his hand and urged me to eat my food.

His unwillingness to satisfy my curiosity only piqued my interest. I **couldn't** imagine why he **didn't** want to talk about the contraptions when he was so good at evasive answers: He could have told me anything.

The instant we finished our meal, he asked me to retrieve his **cot** from the armoire.

Knowing his preference, I unfolded it for him in front of the curtained French door.

Sighing contentedly, he lay down, resting his head on the rectangular little pillow that was attached to one end of the cot. It was filled with dried beans and maize kernels. According to him, the pillow ensured sweet dreams.

"I'm ready for my nap now," he said, loosening the belt on his pants. It was his polite way of dismissing me.

Peeved by his refusal to talk about the inventions, I piled our plates on the tray and stormed out of the room. His snores followed me all the way to the kitchen.

That night I awoke to the strumming of a guitar. Automatically, I reached for the flashlight I kept beside my low-hanging hammock and checked my watch. It was a bit past midnight. I wrapped my blanket tightly around me and tiptoed out into the corridor that led to the inside patio.

On the patio, sitting on a rush chair, was a man playing a guitar. I couldn't see his face, but I knew it was the same man Isidororo Baltazar and I had seen and heard the first time I was there.

As he had done then, the man stopped playing the moment he saw me. He got up from his chair and went inside the house.

As soon as I was back in my room, his plucking resumed. I was about to doze off when I heard him sing in a clear, strong voice. He sang to the wind, beckoning it to come from across miles of silence and emptiness.

As if responding to his haunting invocation, the wind gathered force. It whistled through the chaparral. It tore the withered leaves from the trees and swept them into rustling heaps against the walls of the house.

On an impulse, I opened the door to the patio. The wind filled the room with an unspeakable sadness, not the sadness of tears but the melancholic solitariness of the desert, of dust and ancient shadows. The wind circled around the room like smoke. I inhaled it with every breath. It sat heavy in my lungs, yet the deeper I breathed, the lighter I felt.

I went outside and, squeezing between the tall bushes, made my way to the back of the house. The white-washed walls caught the moonlight and reflected it brightly onto the windswept ground of the wide clearing.

Afraid I might be seen, I darted from fruit tree to fruit tree, hiding in the dark shadows cast by the moonlight until I reached the two blooming orange trees outside the wall guarding the path to the little house.

The wind brought the sound of giggles and dim murmurings from across the chaparral. Daringly, I dashed along the path, only to lose my nerve once I reached the front door of the small, dark house.

Quivering with excitement, I inched my way to an open window. I recognized Delia's and Florinda's voices, but the window was too high for me to see what the women were doing.

I listened, expecting to hear something profound; to be transported by some mind-shattering revelation that would help me resolve what I had come there for- my inability to dream.

But I only heard gossip. I became so engrossed in their malicious insinuations that I laughed out loud several times, forgetting that I was eavesdropping.

At first I thought they were gossiping about outsiders, but then I realized they were talking about the women dreamers, and their most

insidious remarks were directed against Nelida.

They said that she had so far been unable, after so many years, to break away from the grip of the world. Not only was she vain- they claimed she spent all day in front of the mirror- but she was lusty as well. She did everything in her power to be a sexually desirable woman in order to entice the nagual Mariano Aureliano. Someone pointed out, cattily, that, after all, she was the only one who could accommodate his enormous, intoxicating organ.

Then they talked about Clara. They called her a pompous elephant who believed that it was her duty to bestow blessings on everyone. The recipient of her attention was, at the moment, the nagual Isidore Baltazar, and the treat was her naked body. He wasn't to have it, only to see it. Once in the morning and again once at night she would regale him with the sight of her nakedness. She was convinced that by doing this, she would ensure the young nagual's sexual prowess.

The third woman they talked about was Zuleica. They said that she had delusions of being a saint and the Virgin Mary. Her so-called spirituality was nothing but craziness. Periodically she would lose her marbles; and whenever she had one of her fits of insanity, she would clean the house from top to bottom, even the rocks in the patio or around the grounds.

Then there was Hermelinda. She was described as being very sober, very proper, the paragon of middle-class values. As Nelida, she was incapable, after so many years, of stopping herself from seeking to be the perfect woman, the perfect homemaker. Although she couldn't cook or sew or embroider or play the piano to entertain her guests, Hermelinda wanted to be known, they said in between fits of giggles, as the paragon of good femininity, just as Nelida wanted to be known as the paragon of naughty femininity.

If the two of them would only combine their talents, one voice remarked, then they would have the perfect woman to please the master; perfect in the kitchen and in the living room, wearing an apron or an evening dress, and perfect in bed with her legs up whenever the master wanted it.

When they grew silent, I ran back to the house, to my room and into my hammock, but hard as I tried, I could no longer go back to sleep.

I felt that some kind of a protective bubble had burst around me, obliterating my sense of delight; of enchantment at being at the witches' house. All I could think of was that, by my own doings this time, I was stuck there in Sonora with a bunch of crazy old women who did nothing else but gossip when I could have been in Los Angeles having fun.

I had come looking for advice. Instead, I was ignored; reduced to the company of a senile old man who I believed to be a woman.

By the time I sat down to eat with the caretaker in the morning, I had driven myself into such a state of righteous indignation that I couldn't swallow a bite.

"What's the matter?" the old man asked, gazing at me intently. Normally, he avoided direct eye contact. "Aren't you hungry?"

I glared back at him. Giving up any attempt at self-control, I unburdened all my pent-up anger and frustration.

As I went on complaining, I had a flash of sobriety: I told myself that I shouldn't blame the old man, that I should be grateful, for he had shown

me nothing but kindness.

But it was too late to stop myself. My petty grievances had acquired a life of their own. My voice became shriller still as I magnified and deformed the events of the past few days. With malicious satisfaction, I told him that I had eavesdropped on the women.

"They don't want to help me in the least," I asserted with resonant authority. "All they do is gossip. They said horrible things about the women dreamers."

"What did you hear them say?"

With great relish I told him everything. I surprised myself with my extraordinary power to recollect every detail of the women's wicked remarks.

"Obviously, they were talking about you," he declared the moment I finished my account. "In a symbolic fashion, of course." He waited for the words to sink in, and before I could protest, he asked innocently, "Aren't you quite a bit like all this?"

"Like hell I am!" I exploded. "And don't give me any psychological shit. I won't take this kind of crap; not even from an educated man, much the less from you, you fucking peon."

The caretaker's eyes opened wide in bewilderment and his frail shoulders sagged. I felt no sympathy for him, only pity for myself. I had wasted my time telling him what I had heard.

I was about to say what a mistake it had been for me to make that long, arduous journey and all for nothing, when the caretaker looked at me with such contempt that I felt ashamed of my outburst.

"If you hold your temper, you'll understand that nothing these sorcerers do is just to entertain themselves, or to impress someone; or to give way to their compulsiveness," he said with great equanimity. "Everything they do or say has a reason- a purpose."

He stared at me with an intensity that made me want to move away, but I couldn't. "Don't go around thinking that you're here on a vacation," he stressed. "For the sorcerers you've fallen prey to, there are no holidays."

"What are you trying to tell me?" I demanded angrily. "Don't beat around the bush, just say it."

"How can anyone be more clear?" His voice was deceptively mellow and loaded with more meaning than I could fathom. "The witches already told you last night what you are. They used the four women of the dreamers' planet as a false front to describe to you, the eavesdropper, what you really are: a slut, with delusions of grandeur."

So great was my shock, I was momentarily stunned. Then anger, hot as lava, shot through my whole body.

"You miserable, insignificant piece of shit," I yelled and kicked him in the groin. Before my kick had landed I already had a flash image of the little old bastard on the ground, wriggling with pain, except that my kick never landed anywhere but in the air. With the speed of a prize fighter he had jumped out of the way.

He smiled with his mouth, but his eyes were flat and cold as he watched me puffing and groaning. "You are playing on the nagual Isidore Baltazar all those tricks the witches talked about. You were trained for it. Think about it. Don't just get angry."

I opened my mouth to say something, but no sound emerged. It

wasn't so much his words that had left me speechless as his devastatingly indifferent, icy tone. I would have preferred he had yelled at me, for then I would have known how to react: I would have yelled louder.

There was no point in fighting him. He wasn't right, I assured myself. He was simply a senile man with a bitter tongue. No, I wasn't going to get mad at him, but I wasn't going to take him seriously either.

"I hope you're not going to weep," he warned me before I recovered from my shock.

Despite my determination not to get mad at the senile bastard, my face grew red with anger. "Of course, I'm not," I snapped.

Before I tried another kick, I yelled at him that since he was only a chicken-shit servant he deserved to be beaten for his impertinence, but the hard, relentless expression in his eyes made me lose my momentum.

Without the faintest change in his courteous yet inexpressive tone, somehow he managed to convince methat I should apologize to him.

"I'm sorry," I finally said, and truly meant it. "My bad temper and bad manners always get the best of me."

"I know it: They all warned me about you," he said seriously, then added, smiling, "Eat your food."

I was ill at ease all through the meal. Chewing slowly, I watched him surreptitiously.

Although he didn't make the slightest effort to be friendly, I knew that he wasn't angry with me. I tried to comfort myself with that thought, but I didn't find it very comforting.

I sensed that his lack of concern wasn't deliberate or studied. He wasn't punishing me. Nothing of what I had said or done would have had any effect on him.

I swallowed the last bite and said the first thing that entered into my head with an assurance that astonished me, "You're not the caretaker."

He looked at me and asked, "And who do you think I am?" His face relaxed into an amused grin.

His smile made me lose all caution. A tremendous recklessness came over me. I blurted out- and naturally as an insult- that he was a woman, that he was Esperanza.

Relieved that I had finally gotten it off my chest, I sighed loudly and added, "That's why you're the only one who has a mirror: You need to look convincing as either a man or a woman."

"The Sonoran air must have affected you," he mused. "It's a known fact that the thin desert air affects people in the most peculiar manner."

He reached for my wrist and held it in a tight grip as he added, "Or it is perhaps your nature to be mean and onerous and blurt out with an air of absolute authority anything that enters your head?"

Chuckling, the caretaker leaned closer toward me, and suggested that I take a nap with him. "It'll do us a lot of good. We're both onerous," he said.

"So that's it!" I exclaimed, uncertain whether I should take offense or laugh at his suggestion. "You want me to sleep with you, eh?" I added that Esperanza had already warned me about him.

"Why do you object to taking a nap with me if you believe me to be Esperanza?" he asked, rubbing the nape of my neck. His hand was warm and soothing.

"I don't object," I defended myself feebly. "I simply hate naps. I never take a nap. I was told that even as a baby I hated naps."

I spoke rapidly and nervously, tripping over my words, repeating myself. I wanted to get up and leave, but the slight pressure of his hand on my neck kept me pinned down to the chair.

"I know that you're Esperanza," I insisted rashly. "I recognize her touch: It has the same soothing effect as yours."

I could feel my head sway, and my eyes closed against my will.

"So it has," he agreed gently. "It'll do you good to lie down, even if only for a moment."

Taking my silence for acquiescence, he went to the armoire and pulled out his cot and two blankets. He gave me one.

It was a time of endless surprises for me. Without knowing why, I lay down without protest.

Through half-closed lids, I watched him stretch until all his joints cracked.

He shook off his boots, unfastened his belt, then lowered himself on the cot next to me.

Under the cover of his thin cotton blanket, he wiggled out of his pants, casually dropping them on the floor, next to his boots.

He lifted his blanket and showed himself to me.

Blushing, I stared at him with wild curiosity and wonder.

His naked body, like Esperanza's, was the antithesis of what I had taken it to be. His body was supple, hairless, and smooth. He was thin as a reed and yet muscular. And he was definitely a male and young!

I didn't even pause to think, but holding my breath, I gingerly lifted my blanket.

The sound of a woman's faint giggle made me close my eyes and pretend I was asleep.

But knowing that she wasn't going to come into the room, I relaxed.

Putting my arms behind my head I became absorbed in an uncanny sense that the caretaker and the faint giggles coming from the corridor had restored a balance; had renewed the magic bubble all around me.

What exactly I meant by this, I didn't know, except that the more my body relaxed, the closer I was getting to an answer.

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[Florinda Donner](#) - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 14

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

[Florinda Donner](#)

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Chapter 14

[HTML](#) EDITOR:

They were on a perpetual warpath. And the enemy was the idea of the self.

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Only superficially, Isidore Baltazar claimed, are we willing to accept that what we call reality is a culturally determined construct.

We need to accept at the deepest level possible that culture is the product of a long, cooperative, highly selective, highly developed, and last but not least, highly coercive process that culminates in a mutually shared agreement that shields us from other possibilities.

END [HTML](#) EDITOR

After my return from the witches' house I never needed any more coaxing or encouragement.

The women sorcerers had succeeded in giving me a strange coherence; a sort of emotional stability I never had before.

It wasn't that I was suddenly a changed person, but rather there was a clear purpose to my existence. My fate was delineated for me.

I had to struggle to free my energy.

And that was that. Simplicity itself.

But I didn't remember, clearly or even vaguely, all that had transpired in the three months I spent at their house.

The task of remembering it took me years; a task into which I plunged with all my might and determination.

The nagual Isidore Baltazar, nevertheless, warned me about the fallaciousness of clear-cut goals and emotionally charged realizations.

He said that they were worthless because the real arena of a sorcerer is the day-to-day life and in this arena superficial rationales do not withstand pressure.

The women sorcerers had said more or less the same but in a more harmonious way.

They explained that since women are used to being manipulated, they agreed easily. But a woman's agreements are simply empty adaptations to pressure.

But if it is possible to convince that women of the need to change her ways, then half the battle is won.

Even if they don't intellectually agree, their emotional realization is infinitely more durable than that of men.

I had the two opinions to weigh. I thought that both were right. From time to time, all my sorcery rationales crumbled under the pressures of the everyday world, but my original commitment to the sorcerers' world was never in need of revision.

Little by little I began to acquire enough energy to dream.

This meant that I finally understood what the women had told me:

Isidore Baltazar was the new nagual; and he was no longer a man.

This realization also gave me enough energy to return periodically to the witches' house.

That place, known as the witches' house, belonged to all the sorcerers of the nagual Mariano Aureliano's group. A big and massive house from the outside, it was indistinguishable from other houses in the area; hardly noticeable in spite of the exuberantly blooming bougainvillea hanging over the wall that encircled the grounds.

What made people pass the house without noticing it, the sorcerers said, was the tenuous fog that covered it, thin as a veil, visible to the eye, but unnoticeable to the mind.

Once inside the house, however, one was acutely and inescapably aware of having stepped into another world. The three patios, shaded by fruit trees, gave a dreamlike light to the dark corridors and the many rooms that opened on these corridors. What was most arresting about the house were the brick and tile floors which were laid out in the most intricate designs.

The witches' house was not a warm place, yet it was friendly. It was not a home by any stretch of the imagination, for there was something

crushing about its impersonality; its relentless austerity. It was the place where the old **nagual Mariano Aureliano** and his sorcerers conceived their dreams and realized their purpose.

Since the concern of those sorcerers had nothing to do with the daily world, their house reflected their otherworldly preoccupations: Their house was the true gauge of their individuality; not as persons, but as sorcerers.

At the witches' house, I interacted with all the sorcerers of the **nagual Mariano Aureliano's** party.

They **didn't** teach me sorcery or even dreaming. According to them, there was nothing to teach.

They said that my task was to remember everything that had transpired between all of them and me during those initial times that we were together. In particular, I was to remember everything that **Zuleica** and **Florinda** did or said to me- but **Zuleica** had never talked to me.

Whenever I tried to ask any of them for help, they outright refused to have anything to do with me. They all argued that, without the necessary energy on my part, all they would do would be to repeat themselves; and that they **didn't** have time for that.

At first, I found their refusal ungenerous and unfair. After a while, however, I gave up every attempt to probe them, and I simply enjoyed their presence and their company.

I realized that they were, of course, totally right in refusing to play our favorite intellectual game; that of pretending to be interested by asking so-called soul-searching questions which usually have no meaning to us whatsoever.

And the reason they have no meaning to us is that we don't have the energy to do anything about the answer we might hear, except to agree or disagree with it.

Via our daily interaction, however, I realized scores of things about their world.

The women dreamers and **stalkers** embodied two modes of behavior among women, as different as they could be.

Initially, I wondered whether the group that was described to me as the dreamers- **Nelida**, **Hermelinda**, and **Clara**- were the actual **stalkers**. For as far as I could ascertain, my interaction with them was on a strictly everyday, worldly level.

Only later did I fully realize that their mere presence elicited- without even any hint of it- a new modality of behavior on my part. That is, I felt no need to reassert myself with them. There were no doubts, there were no questions on my part whenever I was with them.

They had the singular ability to make me see- without ever having to state it verbally- the absurdity of my existence. And yet I felt no need to defend myself.

Perhaps it was this lack of forcefulness, of directness, that made me acquiesce, accept them without any resistance.

It **wasn't** long before I realized that the women dreamers, by interacting with me on a worldly level, were giving me the necessary model to **rechannel** my energies.

They wanted me to change the manner in which I focused on mundane matters such as cooking, cleaning, laundering, staying in school, or earning a living.

These were to be done, they told me, under different auspices: They were not to be mundane chores but artful endeavors; one as important as the other.

Above all, it was their interaction with each other and with the women **stalkers** that made me aware of how special they were.

In their humanness; their ordinariness, they were devoid of ordinary human failings.

Their total awareness coexisted easily with their individual characteristics; be it short-temperedness, moodiness, rude forcefulness, madness, or cloying sweetness.

In the presence and company of any of those sorceresses, I experienced the most peculiar feeling that I was on a perpetual holiday. But that was but a mirage.

They were on a perpetual warpath, and the enemy was the idea of the self.

At the witches' house, I also met **Vicente** and **Silvio Manuel**, the other two sorcerers in the **nagual Mariano Aureliano's** group.

Vicente was obviously of Spanish descent. I learned that his parents had come from **Catalonia**. He was a lean, aristocratic-looking man with deceptively frail-looking hands and feet. He shuffled around in slippers and preferred pajama tops, which hung open over his khaki pants, to shires. His cheeks were rosy, but otherwise he was pale. His beautifully cared for goatee added a touch of distinction to his otherwise absentminded demeanor.

Not only did he look like a scholar, but he was one. The books in the room I slept in were his; or rather, it was he who collected them, who read them, who cared for them. What made his erudition [* erudition- profound scholarly knowledge] so appealing- there was nothing he **didn't** know about- was that he conducted himself as though he was always the learner. I felt sure that this could seldom be the case, for it was obvious that he knew more than the others.

It was his generous spirit that made him give his knowledge away with a magnificent naturalness and without ever shaming anyone for knowing less.

Then there was **Silvio Manuel**. He was of medium height, corpulent, beardless, and brown skinned. A mysterious, sinister-looking Indian, he was the perfect image of what I expected an evil-looking **brujo** to look like. His apparent moodiness frightened me, and his sparse answers revealed what I believed to be a violent nature.

Only upon knowing him did I realize how much he enjoyed cultivating this image. He was the most open, and for me, delightful, of all the sorcerers.

Secrets and gossip were his passion. Whether they were truths or falsehoods **didn't** matter to him. It was his recounting of them that was priceless to me, and to everyone else, for that matter.

He also had an inexhaustible supply of jokes, most of them downright dirty. He was the only one who enjoyed watching **TV** and thus was always up to date on world news. He would report it to the others with gross exaggerations, salting it with a great deal of malice.

Silvio Manuel was a magnificent dancer. His expertise in the various indigenous, sacred dances was legendary. He moved with rapturous abandon and would often ask me to dance with him. Whether it was a

Venezuelan **loropo**, a **cumbia**, a samba, a tango, the twist, rock and roll, or a cheek-to-cheek bolero, he knew them all.

I also interacted with John, the Indian I had been introduced to by the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** in **Tucson, Arizona**. His round, easygoing, jovial appearance was but a facade. He was the most unapproachable of all the sorcerers. He drove around in his pickup truck on errands for everyone else. He also fixed whatever needed to be mended in and around the house.

If I **didn't** bother him with questions or comments and kept silent, he would take me with him on his errands and show me how things were fixed. From him I learned how to change washers and adjust a leaking faucet or toilet tank; how to fix an iron, a light switch; how to change the oil and spark plugs in my car. Under his guidance, the proper use of a hammer, a screwdriver, a saw, and an electric drill became quite natural to me.

The only thing none of them did for me was answer my questions and probes about their world. Whenever I tried to engage them, they referred me to the **nagual Isidore Baltazar**. Their standard rebuff was to say, "He's the new **nagual**. It's his duty to deal with you. We are merely your aunts and uncles."

At the beginning, the **nagual Isidore Baltazar** was more than a mystery to me. Where he actually lived was not clear to me. Oblivious to schedules and routines, he appeared at and disappeared from the studio at all hours. Day and night were all the same to him. He slept when he was tired- hardly ever- and ate when he was hungry- almost always.

Between his frantic comings and goings, he worked with a concentration that was astounding. His capacity to stretch or compress time was incomprehensible to me. I was certain that I spent hours, even entire days, with him, when in reality it could have been only moments, snatched here and there either during the day or the night from something else he did- whatever it might have been.

I had always considered myself an energetic person. However, I could not keep up with him. He was always in motion- or so it appeared; agile and active; ever ready to undertake some project. His vigor was simply incredible.

It was much later that I fully understood that the source of **Isidore Baltazar's** boundless energy was his lack of concern with himself.

It was his unwavering support; his imperceptible yet masterful machinations that helped me stay on the right track. There was a lightheartedness in him, a pure delight in his subtle yet forceful influence, that made me change without my noticing that I was being led along a new path; a path on which I no longer had to play games or needed to pretend or use my womanly wiles to get my way.

What made his guidance so tremendously compelling was that he had no ulterior motive. He **wasn't** in the least possessive, and his guidance **wasn't** adulterated with promises or sentimentality.

He **didn't** push me in any particular direction. That is, he **didn't** advise me on what courses I should take or what books I should read. That was left entirely up to me.

There was only one condition he insisted upon: I was to work on no particular goal other than the edifying and pleasurable process of thinking. A startling proposition! I had never considered thinking in

those terms or in any others. Although I **didn't** dislike going to school, I had certainly never thought of schoolwork as particularly pleasurable. It was simply something I had to do, usually in a hurry and with the least possible effort.

I **couldn't** help but agree with what **Florinda** and her cohorts had so bluntly pointed out to me the first time I met them: I went to school not to pursue knowledge but to have a good time. That I had good grades was more a matter of luck and loquaciousness than studiousness. I had a fairly good memory, I knew how to talk, and I knew how to convince others.

Once I got past my initial embarrassment over having to admit and to accept the fact that my intellectual pretensions were a sham and that I **didn't** know how to think except in the most shallow manner, I felt relieved. I was ready to put myself under the sorcerers' tutelage, and to follow **Isidore Baltazar's** study plan.

To my great disappointment, he **didn't** have one. All he did was insist that I stop studying and reading outdoors. He believed that the thinking process was a private, almost secret rite and could not possibly occur outdoors in public view. He compared the process of thinking with leavened dough. It can only rise inside a room.

"The best way to understand anything, of course, is in bed," he said to me once. He stretched out on his bed, propped his head against several pillows, and crossed the right leg over the left, resting the ankle on the raised knee of the left leg.

I **didn't** think much of this absurd reading position, yet I practiced it whenever I was by myself. With a book propped on my chest, I would fall into the most profound sleep. Keenly sensitive to my insomniac tendencies, I was more pleased with sleep than with knowledge.

Sometimes, however, just prior to that moment of losing consciousness, I would feel as if hands were coiling around my head, pressing ever so lightly against my temples.

My eyes would automatically scan the open page before I was even conscious of it and lift entire paragraphs off the paper. The words would dance before my eyes until clusters of meaning exploded in my brain like revelations.

Eager to uncover this new possibility opening up before me, I pushed on, as if driven by some relentless taskmaster.

There were times, however, when this cultivation of reason and method exhausted me, physically as well as mentally. At those times, I asked **Isidore Baltazar** about intuitive knowledge; about that sudden flash of insight, of understanding, that sorcerers are supposed to cultivate above all else.

He always said to me at those times that to know something only intuitively is meaningless. Flashes of insight need to be translated into some coherent thought, otherwise they are purposeless. He compared flashes of insight to **sightings** of inexplicable phenomena. Both wane as swiftly as they come. If they are not constantly reinforced, doubt and forgetfulness will ensue, for the mind has been conditioned to be practical and accept only that which is verifiable and quantifiable.

He explained that sorcerers are men of knowledge rather than men of reason. As such, they are a step ahead of Western intellectual men who assume that reality- which is often equated with truth- is knowable

through reason. A sorcerer claims that all that is knowable through reason is our thought processes; but that it is only by understanding our total being, at its most sophisticated and intricate level, that can we eventually erase the boundaries with which reason defines reality.

Isidore Baltazar explained to me that sorcerers cultivate the totality of their being. That is, sorcerers don't necessarily make a distinction between our rational and our intuitive sides. They use both to reach the realm of awareness they call silent knowledge, which lies beyond language, beyond thought.

Again and again, **Isidore Baltazar** stressed that for one to silence one's rational side one first has to understand his or her thought process at its most sophisticated and intricate level. He believed that philosophy, beginning with classical Greek thought, provided the best way of illuminating this thought process. He never tired of repeating that, whether we are scholars or laymen, we are nonetheless members and inheritors of our Western intellectual tradition. And that means that regardless of our level of education and sophistication, we are captives of that intellectual tradition and the way it interprets what reality is.

Only superficially, **Isidore Baltazar** claimed, are we willing to accept that what we call reality is a culturally determined construct.

And what we need is to accept at the deepest level possible that culture is the product of a long, cooperative, highly selective, highly developed, and last but not least, highly coercive process that culminates in an agreement that shields us from other possibilities.

Sorcerers actively strive to unmask the fact that reality is dictated and upheld by our reason; that ideas and thoughts stemming from reason become regimes of knowledge that ordain how we see and act in the world; and that incredible pressure is put on all of us to make certain ideologies acceptable to ourselves.

He stressed that sorcerers are interested in perceiving the world in ways outside of what is culturally determined.

What is culturally determined is that our personal experiences, plus a shared social agreement on what our senses are capable of perceiving, dictate what we perceive.

Anything out of this **sensorially** agreed-upon perceptual realm is automatically encapsulated and disregarded by the rational mind.

In this manner, the frail blanket of human assumptions is never damaged.

Sorcerers teach that perception takes place in a place outside the sensorial realm. Sorcerers know that something more vast exists than what we have agreed our senses can perceive. Perception takes place at a point outside the body, outside the senses, they say.

But it **isn't** enough for one merely to believe this premise: It is not simply a matter of reading or hearing about it from someone else.

In order for one to embody it, one has to experience it.

Isidore Baltazar said that sorcerers continually and actively strive to break that frail blanket of human assumptions.

However, sorcerers don't plunge into the darkness blindly. They are prepared. They know that whenever they leap into the unknown, they need to have a well-developed rational side. Only then will they be able to explain and make sense of whatever they might bring forth from their journeys into the unknown.

He added that I **wasn't** to understand sorcery through reading the works of philosophers. Rather, I was to see that both philosophy and sorcery are highly sophisticated forms of abstract knowledge. Both for sorcerer and philosopher, the truth of our Being-in-the-world does not remain unthought. A sorcerer, however, goes a step further. He acts upon his findings which are already by definition outside our culturally accepted possibilities.

Isidore Baltazar believed that philosophers are intellectual sorcerers. However, their **probings** and their pursuits always remain mental endeavors. Philosophers cannot act upon the world they understand and explain so well except in the culturally agreed-upon manner. Philosophers add to an already existing body of knowledge. They interpret and reinterpret existing philosophical texts. New thoughts and ideas resulting from this intense studying don't change them, except perhaps in a psychological sense. They might become kinder, more understanding people- or, perhaps, the opposite.

However, nothing of what philosophers do philosophically will change their sensorial perception of the world, for they work from within the social order.

Philosophers uphold the social order even if intellectually they don't agree with it. Philosophers are sorcerers manqué. [* manqué- unfulfilled or frustrated in realizing an ambition]

Sorcerers also build upon an existing body of knowledge.

However, they don't build upon this knowledge by accepting what has already been established and proven by other sorcerers.

Sorcerers have to prove to themselves anew that that which already stands as accepted does indeed exist, does indeed yield to perceiving.

To accomplish this monumental task, sorcerers need an extraordinary amount of energy which they obtain by detaching themselves from the social order without retreating from the world.

Sorcerers break the agreement that has defined reality, without breaking up in the process themselves.

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

[Florinda Donner](#)

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Chapter 15

Uncertainty took hold of me shortly after we crossed the border into Mexico at **Mexicali**. My justification for going to Mexico with **Isidore Baltazar**, which had seemed so brilliant to me before, now seemed only a shady excuse for forcing him to take me along.

I doubted now that I would be able to read sociological theory at the witches' house as I said I would.

I knew that I would do there exactly what I did on all previous **occasions**: sleep a great deal, dream weird dreams, and try desperately to figure out what the people in the sorcerers' world wanted me to do.

"Any regrets?" **Isidore Baltazar**'s voice made me jump. He was **looking** at me sideways and had probably been watching me for a while.

"Of course not," I hastened to assure him, wondering whether he was

referring to my general feeling or to my quietness.

I stammered some inanities about the heat, then turned to look out the window.

I **didn't** speak anymore, mainly because I was scared and morose. I could feel anxiety crawling on my skin like a swarm of ants.

Isidore Baltazar, on the other hand, warmed up to his ebullient best. He was elated. He sang and told me inane jokes. He recited poetry in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Even tidbits of spicy gossip about people we both knew at **UCLA** failed to dispel my gloom. That I **wasn't** a responsive audience **didn't** mean a thing to him.

Even my yelling at him to leave me alone **didn't** dampen his high spirits.

"If people were watching us, they would believe that we've been married for years," he commented in between fits of laughter.

If sorcerers were watching us, I thought dejectedly, they would know that something is wrong. They would know that **Isidore Baltazar** and I are not equals.

I am factual and final about my actions and decisions.

For him actions and decisions are fluid, whatever their outcome, and their finality is measured in that he assumes full responsibility for them, regardless of how trivial or how significant they are.

We drove, straight south. We **didn't** meander, as we usually did in order to get to the witches' house. When we left **Guaymas**- never before had we been that far south on our way to the witches' house- I asked him, "Where are you taking me?"

He casually responded, "We are taking the long way. Don't worry."

That was the same answer he gave me when I asked again, during our dinner in **Navojoa**.

We left **Navojoa** behind and drove south, heading toward **Mazatlan**. I was beside myself with worry.

Around midnight, **Isidore Baltazar** veered off the main highway and turned into a narrow dirt road. The van swayed and rattled as he drove over potholes and stones. Behind us the main highway was visible only for an instant in the scant flicker of the **taillights**, then it disappeared altogether, swallowed by the bushes that fringed the road.

After an excruciatingly long ride, we came to an abrupt halt, and he switched off the headlights.

"Where are we?" I asked, looking all around me.

For a moment I saw nothing. Then, as my eyes got accustomed to the darkness, I saw tiny white specks not too far ahead of us. Tiny stars that appeared to have fallen from the sky.

The exuberant fragrance of the jasmine bushes climbing up the roof and tumbling down over the **ramada** had been so entirely blocked out of my mind that, when I suddenly recognized it, I felt as though I had inhaled that perfumed air before only in a dream.

I began to giggle. It all gave me an almost childlike sense of wonder and delight. We were at **Esperanza's** house.

"It was here I first came with **Delia Flores**," I mumbled to myself.

Then in one instant I was nearly choking with anxiety, and reached for **Isidore Baltazar's** hand and asked, "But how can this be possible?"

"What?" he asked in a bewildered tone.

He was agitated and ruffled. His hand which usually was always

warm was icy cold.

"This house was in the outskirts of **Ciudad Obregon**, more than a hundred miles north," I yelled. "I drove here myself. And I never left the paved road."

I looked all around me in the darkness, and I recalled that I had also driven from that house to **Tucson**, and I had never been in or near **Navojoa** in my life.

Isidore Baltazar was silent for a few minutes. He seemed preoccupied; searching in his mind for an answer.

I knew there was none that would have pleased me.

Shrugging, he turned to face me.

There was a force, an edge to him- much like there was to the **nagual Mariano Aureliano**- as he said that to him there was no doubt that I had been dreaming-awake when, together with **Delia**, I left **Hermosillo** for the healer's house. "I suggest that you let it go at that," he admonished:

"I know from personal experience how the mind can go in circles trying to arrange the **unarrangeable**."

I was about to protest when he cut me off, and pointed to the light moving toward us. He smiled in anticipation, as though he knew exactly to whom that enormous, swaying shadow on the ground belonged.

"It's the caretaker," I murmured in astonishment, as he came to stand in front of us.

Impulsively, I put my arms around his neck and kissed him on both cheeks. "I never expected to see you here," I muttered.

He smiled sheepishly but **didn't** talk to me.

He embraced **Isidore Baltazar**, patting him repeatedly on the back the way Latin men are wont to do when greeting each other, then mumbled something to him.

Hard as I tried to listen, I **couldn't** understand a single word.

The caretaker led us to the house.

There was something forbidding about the massive front door. It was closed.

So were the barred windows. No light, no sound escaped the thick walls.

We circled the house to the backyard enclosed by a high fence; to the door that led directly to a square room.

I felt reassured upon recognizing the four doors. It was the same room I had been taken to by **Delia Flores**.

It was as sparsely furnished as I remembered it: a narrow bed, a table, and several chairs.

The caretaker placed the oil lamp on the table and then urged me to sit down.

Turning to **Isidore Baltazar**, he draped an arm around his shoulders and walked with him out into the dark corridor.

The suddenness of their departure left me stunned.

Before I fully recovered from my surprise and my indecision as to whether I should follow them, the caretaker reappeared.

He handed me a blanket, a pillow, a flashlight, and a chamber pot.

"I would rather use the outhouse," I said primly.

The caretaker shrugged his shoulders, then pushed the chamber pot under the bed.

"Just in case you have to go in the middle of the night."

His eyes glinted with emphatic glee as he told me that **Esperanza** kept a big, black watchdog outside. "He **doesn't** take kindly to strangers wandering across the yard at night."

As if on cue, I heard a loud barking.

"I'm not a stranger," I said casually, trying to ignore the ominous note in the beast's barking. "I've been here before. I know the dog."

The caretaker lifted his brows in surprise, then asked, "Does the dog know you?"

I glared at him.

He sighed, and reaching for the oil lamp on the table, he turned toward the door.

"Don't take away the light," I said, stepping quickly in front of him to block his way.

I tried to smile, but my lips stuck to my teeth.

"Where is everybody?" I finally managed to ask. "Where are

Esperanza and **Florinda**?"

"At the moment, I'm the only person who's here," he said.

"Where is **Isidore Baltazar**?" I asked, panic-stricken. "He promised to take me to the witches' house. I've to work on my paper."

My thoughts; my words were all jumbled and confused as I talked about my reasons for accompanying **Isidore Baltazar** to Mexico.

I was close to tears as I told the caretaker how important it was for me to finish my work.

He patted my back most reassuringly and made soothing noises, as if he were talking to a child.

"**Isidore Baltazar** is asleep. You know how he is. The instant his head hits the pillow, he's gone out of the world."

He smiled faintly and added, "I'll leave my door open in case you need me. Just call me if you have a nightmare or something, and I'll come right away."

Before I had a chance to tell him that I **hadn't** had one since the last time I was in **Sonora**, the caretaker disappeared down the dark corridor.

The oil lamp on the table began to sputter, and moments later it went out.

It was pitch dark.

I lay down fully clothed and closed my eyes.

All was silent except for a soft, raspy breathing coming from far away. Conscious of that breathing sound and the hardness and narrowness of my bed, I soon gave up the effort to sleep.

Flashlight in hand, I crept down the corridor on noiseless feet, hoping to find **Isidore Baltazar** or the caretaker.

Softly, I rapped on door after door.

No one answered. No sound came from any of the rooms. An odd, almost oppressive silence had settled over the house. Even the **rustlings** and **chirpings** outside had ceased. As I suspected, I had been left alone in the house.

Rather than worry about it, I decided to look into the rooms.

They were bedrooms; eight of them of the same size and disposition; rather small, perfectly square, and furnished only with a bed and a night table.

The walls and the two windows in all of them were painted white, and the tile floors were of an intricate design.

I opened the sliding doors of the closets by gently pushing their bottom left corners with my foot. I knew, without knowing how I knew, that a tap or gentle kick on that spot released a mechanism that opened the doors.

I moved the folded blankets stacked up on the floor in one of the closets and got to a small secret door. I released the concealed dead bolt, disguised as a wall light socket.

Since I was beyond being surprised, I accepted my knowledge of the trap doors; a knowledge that was, of course, inadmissible to my conscious mind.

I opened the small, secret door, crawled through the tiny opening, and found myself in the closet of the next room. With no great astonishment- since I already knew it- I discovered that by squatting through these secret openings I could go from one to another of the seven rooms.

I swore under my breath as my flashlight went out.

Hoping to revive the batteries, I took them out and screwed them back in again.

It was no use: They were dead.

The darkness was so intense in these rooms that I **couldn't** see my own hands. Afraid of hitting myself against a door or a wall, I slowly felt my way into the corridor.

The effort was so great that I was gasping and shaking as I pulled myself upright and leaned against the wall.

I stood in the corridor for a long time, wondering in which direction to go to find my own room.

From the distance came fragments of voices.

I **couldn't** tell whether the sound came from inside the house or from the outside.

I followed the sound. It led me to the patio.

I vividly recalled that green, almost tropical patio past the stone archway, with its ferns and thick foliage, its fragrance of orange blossoms, and honeysuckle vines.

I **hadn't** taken but a few steps when I saw the enormous silhouette of a dog shadowed against the wall.

The beast growled. Its blazing eyes sent a chill running up my spine.

Instead of giving in to my fear, or perhaps because of it, I felt the strangest thing happen.

It was as if I had always been folded like a Japanese fan or like a folded cutout figurine.

Suddenly, I unfolded. The physical sensation was almost painful.

The dog watched me, confused. It began to whine like a puppy. It flapped its ears and coiled on the ground.

I stood there glued to the spot.

I **wasn't** afraid: I simply **couldn't** move.

Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I folded back, turned around, and left. This time I had no trouble finding my room.

I awoke with a headache and that illusion of not having slept at all, which, as an insomniac, I knew so well.

The muscles of my body were disconnected.

I groaned out loud as I heard a door open and light fell over my face.

Feebly, I tried to turn on my other side without falling off the narrow

bed.

"Good morning!" **Esperanza** exclaimed, stepping into the room in a sweep of skirts and petticoats. "Actually, good afternoon," she corrected herself, pointing at the sun through the open door.

There as a wonderful gaiety in her, a delightful power in her voice when she told me that it was she who had thought of retrieving my books and papers from the van before **Isidoro Baltazar** left with the old **nagual**.

Abruptly, I sat up. I was fully awake.

"Why **didn't** the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** come to say hello to me? Why **didn't Isidoro Baltazar** tell me he was leaving?" I blurted out.

I mentioned to her that now I would never be able to finish my paper and enter graduate school.

Esperanza regarded me with a curious expression, and said that if writing my paper was such a mercenary act I would never be able to bring it through.

Before I had a chance to tell her that personally I **didn't** care if never entered graduate school, she added, "You don't do your paper to get into graduate school.

"You do it because you love doing it; because there's nothing else at the moment you would rather do."

"There is plenty I would rather do."

"Like what?" she challenged me.

I thought for a moment but **couldn't** come up with anything specific.

I had to admit, if only to myself, that I had never enjoyed working on a paper as much as I did on this one.

For once, I had started with the reading and research at the beginning of the term instead of waiting, as I usually did, until a few days before the paper was due.

It was the knowledge that it was my ticket into graduate school that had spoiled my enjoyment.

Esperanza, as if again privy to my thoughts, said that I should forget about graduate school and only think of writing a good paper.

"Once you're part of the sorcerers' world and begin to grasp the nature of dreams, you are on your way to understanding what sorcery is all about; and that understanding frees you."

I looked at her, puzzled. I **couldn't** figure out what she was trying to tell me.

"It frees you from wanting anything." **Esperanza** enunciated the sentence very carefully, as if I were deaf.

She regarded me thoughtfully then added, "Greed is your middle name, and yet you don't need or want anything..."

Her voice trailed off as she began to arrange my books, papers, and stacks of index cards on the table.

Her face was radiant as she turned to look at me.

In her hands, she held several pencils. "I sharpened them for you with a razor blade," she said. "I'll sharpen them for you whenever they get dull."

She placed the pencils beside my legal-sized writing pad and then flung her arms wide, as if to encompass the whole room. "This is a wonderful place for you to work. No one will bother you here."

"I'm sure of that," I said. Seeing that she was about to leave, I asked

her where **Isidoro Baltazar** had slept last night.

"On his straw mat. Where else?" Giggling softly, she gathered up her skirts and petticoats and stepped out into the yard. I watched her until she disappeared behind the stone arch. My eyes hurt, dazzled from staring into the light.

Moments later, there was a loud knock on one of the doors that opened into the corridor.

"Are you decent?" the caretaker asked, pushing the door open before I had a chance to say that I was. "Nourishment for your brain," he said, placing a bamboo tray on the table.

He poured me a bowl of clear broth, then urged me to eat the **machaca Sonorese**. "I made it myself," he informed me.

The mixture of scrambled eggs, shredded meat, onions, and hot chilies was delicious.

"When you finish, I'll take you to the movies," he said.

"When I finish eating?" I asked excitedly, stuffing a whole tortilla in my mouth.

"When you finish with your paper," he clarified.

As soon as I was done with the meal, he said that I had to get acquainted with the dog. "Otherwise, you won't be able to go outside. Not even to the outhouse."

I was about to tell him that I had actually met the dog and had gone to the outhouse last night, when with a swift gesture of his chin he motioned me to follow him into the yard.

The big black dog lay curled up in the shade of the high fence of plaited cane. The caretaker squatted beside the animal and scratched it behind the ears. Bending even lower, he whispered something in the animal's ear.

Abruptly, the caretaker rose: Startled, I stepped backward, falling on my seat. The dog whined, and the caretaker, with one incredible leap, cleared the high fence. I scrambled to my feet and was about to run out of there fast when the dog stretched its forepaws and placed them on my feet. I could feel the pressure of the paws through my shoes. The dog looked up at me and opened its muzzle in a wide, drawn-out yawn. Its tongue and gums were blue-black.

"That's a sign of the finest pedigree."

I was so startled to hear the caretaker behind me that I wheeled around. I lost my balance again and fell over the dog. I **didn't** dare move at first, then slowly I eased my head to the side. The dog's amber-colored eyes were fixed on me. The dog bared its teeth, not in a growl but in a most friendly, doggish smile.

"Now you're friends," the caretaker pronounced, helping me up. "And it's time for you to start on your paper."

The next three days were dominated entirely by my desire to finish my task. I worked for long stretches but somehow **didn't** feel the passing of time.

It **wasn't** that I was so engrossed in my work that I lost track of the hours. Rather, time seemed to have transformed itself into a matter of space. That is, I began to count time as interludes; interludes between my **sightings of Esperanza**.

Every day around midmorning, when I was eating my breakfast- whatever she had left for me in the kitchen- she would suddenly appear.

Soundlessly, she seemed to materialize out of the perpetual bluish smoke that hung about the kitchen like a cloud.

Invariably, she combed my hair with a coarse wooden comb but never said a word. Neither did I.

I would see her again in the afternoons. As soundlessly as she appeared in the kitchen, she would abruptly materialize in the yard, and sit in her custom-made rocking chair under the stone archway.

For hours, she would stare into space, as if she could see beyond the limits of human vision.

Other than a brief nod or a quick smile, there was no interaction between us at that hour, yet I knew that I was protected in her silence.

The dog, as if it had been directed by the caretaker, never left my side. It followed me around day and night, even to the outhouse.

I particularly looked forward to our late afternoon outings, when the dog and I would race across the fields toward the row of trees that divided the plots of land.

There we would sit in the shade, staring into space like **Esperanza**.

It sometimes seemed to me that I could reach out and touch the distant mountains.

I would listen to the breeze rustling through the branches and wait until the yellow light of the setting sun turned the leaves into golden chimes. I waited until the leaves turned blue and finally black.

Then the dog and I would race back to the house, to escape the faint voice of the wind telling about the loneliness of that arid land.

On the fourth day I awoke, startled.

From beyond the door that opened to the yard, a voice called out, "Time to get up, lazy bones." The caretaker's voice was drowsily indifferent.

"Why don't you come in?" I asked. "Where were you all these days?"

There was no answer.

I sat wrapped in my blanket, waiting for him to appear, too tense and sleepy to go out and see for myself why he was hiding.

After a while I roused myself and went outside.

The yard was deserted.

In an effort to chase my sleepiness away, I drew bucket after bucket of cold water over my head.

My breakfast was different that morning: **Esperanza didn't** show up.

It was only after I settled down to work that I realized that the dog had also vanished.

Listlessly, I thumbed through my books. I had very little energy and even less desire to work. I just sat at my table for hours, gazing at the distant mountains through my opened door.

The transparent silence of the afternoon was broken now and then by the faint clucking of hens scratching the ground for seeds and by the penetrating cry of the cicadas vibrating in the blue, cloudless light as if it were still noon.

I was about to doze off when I heard some noise in the yard.

I looked up quickly.

The caretaker and the dog lay side by side on a straw mat in the shade of the fence.

There was something odd about the way they lay, sprawled out on the straw mat. They were so still, they appeared dead.

With a mixture of concern and curiosity, I tiptoed toward them.

The caretaker noticed my presence before the dog did. He opened his eyes wide in an exaggerated fashion, then in one swift motion sat up crosslegged and asked, "Did you miss me?"

"I did!" I exclaimed, then laughed nervously.

It seemed an odd question for him to ask. "Why **didn't** you come into my room this morning?"

Seeing his blank expression I added, "Where have you been for the past three days?"

Instead of answering, he asked in a harsh tone, "How is your work coming along?"

I was so taken aback by his brusqueness, I **didn't** know what to say.

I **didn't** know whether I should tell him that my paper was none of his business or whether I should confess that I was stuck.

"Don't upset yourself trying to think up an explanation," he said. "Just tell me the truth.

"Tell me that you need my expert opinion on your term paper."

Afraid I would burst out laughing, I squatted beside the dog and scratched its head.

"Well?" the caretaker demanded. "Can't you admit that without me you're lost?"

Uncertain about the state of his mind, I decided it was better to humor him than to contradict him.

I said that, indeed, I **hadn't** written a single line the whole day; and that I had been waiting for him; knowing that only he could rescue me.

I assured him that it **wasn't** really up to my professors at school but up to him to decide my fate as a graduate student.

The caretaker beamed at me, then asked that I bring him my paper. He wanted to have a look at it.

"It's in English," I said pointedly. "You won't be able to read it."

My impulse, to add that even if it were in Spanish he **wouldn't** be able to understand it, was checked by the certainty that I **wasn't** that ill mannered after all.

He insisted I bring him the paper.

I did.

He spread out the pages all around him, some on the mat, others on the dusty ground, then retrieved from his shirt pocket a pair of metal-rimmed glasses and put them on.

"It's important to look like an educated man," he whispered, leaning toward the dog.

The animal pricked up one ear, then made a soft growling sound, as if to agree with him.

The dog shifted positions, and the caretaker motioned me to sit between him and the animal.

He looked like an owl; erudite and austere as he pored over the loose sheets on the ground.

He made disapproving, clucking sounds with his tongue. He scratched his head. He shuffled and **reshuffled** the sheets, as if trying to find some order that eluded him.

The muscles in my neck and shoulders ached from sitting in that position.

Sighing with impatience, I reclined against the fence and closed my

eyes.

In spite of my growing irritation, I must have dozed off, for I was suddenly startled by a faint yet insistent buzz.

I opened my eyes. Sitting nearby, facing me, sat a gorgeously dressed, beautiful-looking woman. She said something to me, but I **couldn't** hear what it was. The buzzing in my ears rose.

The woman leaned forward, toward me, and in a loud, clear voice asked, "**Aren't** you going to say hello to me?" "**Nelida!** When did you get here? I was trying to shake off the buzzing in my ears," I explained.

She nodded, then drew up her long, shapely legs under the skirt she was wearing and wrapped her arms around them.

"It's good to see you," she said dreamily.

With frowning brows, the caretaker mumbled to himself as he studied the pages before him.

"Your scribbles are not only hard to read," he pronounced after a while, "but they don't make much sense.

Nelida stared at me with narrow, critical eyes, as if daring me to contradict him.

I fidgeted, eager to get away, to escape the scrutiny of her unnerving gaze.

She leaned forward and grabbed my arm in a firm grip.

The caretaker began to read from the pages with an exasperating slowness.

What he read sounded familiar, but whether he actually followed the text I **couldn't** tell because I **couldn't** concentrate. I was too irritated by the capricious manner in which he cut the sentences, the phrases, and sometimes even the words.

"All in all," he stated upon finishing with the last page, "it's a badly written paper."

He stacked the loose sheets in a pile, then leaned against the fence.

Very deliberately he bent his knees up in the same position **Isidore Baltazar** had taught me- the right leg crossed over with the ankle resting on the left thigh- and closed his eyes.

He was silent for so long I thought he had fallen asleep and was thus startled when in a slow, measured voice he began to talk about anthropology, history, and philosophy.

His thoughts seemed to come into being while he was talking, and words flowed out of him clearly and precisely, with a simplicity that was easy to follow, easy to understand.

I listened to him attentively. Yet at the same time I **couldn't** help thinking, "How could he possibly know so much about Western intellectual trends? How educated was he? Who was he really?"

"Could you repeat everything again?" I asked the instant he finished speaking. "I'd like to take notes."

"Whatever I said is all in your paper," the caretaker assured me. "It is buried under too many footnotes, quotes, and undeveloped ideas."

He leaned closer until his head almost touched mine.

"It's not enough to cite works in an effort to supply your paper with the veracity it lacks."

Dumbfounded, I could only stare at him.

"Will you help me write my paper?" I asked.

"No, I can't do that," he said with a grave look in his eyes. "That's

something you must do on your own."

"But I can't," I protested. "You just pointed out how badly written my paper is. Believe me, that's my best shot."

"It's not!" He contradicted me forcefully, then gazed at me with an air of astonishment that was mingled with a friendly warmth:

"I'm sure your professors will accept the paper once it's neatly typed.

"But I **wouldn't**. There is nothing original about it."

I was too stunned to be upset.

"You're only paraphrasing what you have read," the caretaker continued. "I demand that you rely more on your own opinions, even if they contradict what is expected of you."

"It's only a term paper," I said defensively. "I know it needs more work, but I also need to please my professors.

"Whether I agree with the expressed views is beside the point. I need to get accepted into graduate school, and that entails, in part, pleasing my professors."

"If you want to draw strength from the sorcerers' world," he said, "you can no longer work under such premises.

"Ulterior motives are not acceptable in this magical world of ours.

"If you want to be a graduate student, then you have to behave like a warrior, not like a woman who has been trained to please. "You know, even when you are **bestially** nasty, you strive to please.

"But from now, whenever you write, since you were not trained to do writing, you can certainly adopt a new mood: the warriors' mood."

"What do you mean by the warriors' mood?" I asked. "Do I have to fight my professors?"

"Not your professors," he said. "You have to fight yourself; every inch of the way.

"And you have to do it so artfully and so cleverly that no one will notice your struggle."

I **wasn't** quite sure what he meant, and I **didn't** want to know, either.

Before he could say anything else, I asked him how he knew so much about anthropology, history, and philosophy.

Smiling, he shook his head. "**Didn't** you notice how I did it?" he asked, then proceeded to answer his own question. "I picked the thoughts out of thin air. I simply stretched my energy fibers and hooked those thoughts, as one hooks fish with a fishing line, from the immeasurable ocean of thoughts and ideas that is out there."

He made a wide gesture with his arms, as though to encompass the very air around him.

I argued, "To pick up thoughts, **Isidore Baltazar** told me, one must know which are the ones that might be useful. So you must have studied history, philosophy, and anthropology."

"Perhaps I did at one time," he said **undecidedly**, scratching his head in perplexity. "I must have."

"You had to!" I stated sententiously, as if I had made a great discovery.

Sighing loudly, he leaned against the fence and closed his eyes.

Nelida asked, "Why do you insist on always being right?"

Startled to hear her speak, I stared at her open-mouthed.

The corners of her lips curled up into a mischievous, secret smile.

Then she motioned me to close my mouth.

I had been so engrossed in listening to what the caretaker had to say about my paper I had forgotten all about her even though she had been sitting right in front of me.

Or had she? The thought that she might have gone and returned without me noticing it filled me with anxiety.

"Don't let that bother you," **Nelida** said softly, as if I had voiced my fears out loud. "We are in the habit of coming and going without anyone ever noticing us."

Her tone canceled the chilling effect of her statement.

Gazing from one to the other, I wondered whether they would actually vanish, unperceived, before my very eyes.

I tried to make sure they **wouldn't**.

Stretching like a cat, I lay flat on the straw mat and inched my foot toward the hem of **Nelida's** dress, which trailed on the ground; my hand went to the caretaker's jacket.

He must have noticed the tug on his sleeve, for he sat up abruptly and stared at me.

I closed my eyes but kept watching them through my lashes.

They **didn't** move. Their straight postures betrayed no trace of fatigue, whereas I had to fight to keep my eyes open.

A cool breeze, fragrant with the scent of eucalyptus, sprang up. Streaks of colored clouds trailed across the sky, and the deep, transparent blue grew slowly more diffused. It melted away so languidly, it was impossible to distinguish what was cloud and what was sky, what was day and what was night.

With my foot on the hem of **Nelida's** dress and clutching onto the caretaker's jacket as if my life depended on it, I fell asleep.

It seemed that only moments had passed when I was awakened by a hand touching my face.

"**Florinda?**" I whispered, knowing instinctively that the woman sitting beside me was someone else. She was murmuring something.

I had the feeling she had been murmuring for a long time and I had just awakened to hear what she was saying.

I wanted to sit up, but the woman prevented me from doing so with a gentle but firm touch on my shoulder.

A small flame flickered somewhere unsteadily in the darkness.

It shed a gentle, wavering pallor upon her face. It made her look ghostlike.

She seemed to grow as she moved closer. Her eyes, too, grew larger as they stared down into mine. The arch of her brows, like a curve drawn with a black marker, was concentrated in a frown.

"**Nelida!**" I sighed with relief.

Smiling faintly, she nodded.

I wanted to ask her about the caretaker and about my term paper, but she pressed her fingers against my lips and continued with her murmurings.

The sound grew fainter and fainter. It seemed to come from a great distance, and then it finally faded away all together.

Nelida rose and motioned me to do the same.

I did so and noticed that we were not outside in the yard but in one of the empty bedrooms along the corridor.

"Where is my term paper?" I asked, alarmed at the possibility that the

wind might have scattered the pages. The idea that I might have to begin my work from scratch made me feverish.

Nelida made an imperious gesture with her chin, motioning me to follow her.

She was much taller than I, and looked exactly like **Florinda**.

Had it not been that she was so delicate, I **wouldn't** have been able to tell them apart.

At that moment, she appeared as an **unfinished** version of **Florinda**-as **Florinda** must have been when she was younger.

There was something so ethereal about **Nelida**, so frail, and yet so appealing. I used to joke with **Isidore Baltazar** that if I were a man I would go for her.

He had retorted- I had hoped in jest- that that was perhaps the reason why **Nelida** hardly ever talked to me.

We headed toward my room.

I heard steps all around me.

It **couldn't** be **Nelida**, I decided, for she walked so quietly she seemed not to touch the ground. The absurd notion that I was hearing my own steps made me tiptoe as silently as a cat, yet I still kept hearing the steps.

Someone's feet moved like mine did; the same rhythm echoing slightly on the tile floor.

I glanced backward several times, but there was, of course, no one behind me. Hoping to dispel my fear, I giggled out loud.

Nelida turned around abruptly. I thought she was going to reprimand me, but she, too, began to laugh.

She put her arm around my shoulders. Her touch **wasn't** particularly warm or tender.

I **didn't** care. I liked her, and her touch was very reassuring to me.

Still giggling, and with the sound of footsteps all around us, we entered my room.

A strange brilliance hung about the walls, as if a fog had seeped through the four doors in the room, which at that moment I could not see.

The fog had changed the shape of the room, giving it strange contours, almost making it round.

Regardless of how much I blinked and squinted, all I could see was the table I had been working on for the past three days. I stepped closer.

To my relief, I saw my paper arranged in a neat pile. Next to it were all my pencils: They had been sharpened.

"**Nelida!**" I cried out excitedly, wheeling around. I could no longer see her.

The fog was denser now. It closed around me with every breath I drew. It seeped inside me, filling me with a deep, excited feeling of lightness and lucidity.

Guided by some invisible source, I sat at the table and spread out the pages all around me.

Right under my watchful eyes the entire structure of my paper emerged, superimposing itself on my original draft like a double exposure on a frame of film.

I lost myself in admiration of the skilled development of the themes. As if they were being maneuvered by some invisible hand that thought and wrote, the paragraphs rearranged themselves, **imposing** a new order. It was all so gorgeously clear and simple that I laughed out of joy.

"Write it down."

The words echoed softly in the room. Curious, I glanced all **und** me, but I saw no one.

Knowing that whatever I was experiencing was definitely more than a dream, I reached for my **notepad** and a pencil, and began to write with a furious speed.

Ideas came to me with an incredible clarity and ease. They pulsed in my head and in my body like sound waves. I simultaneously heard and saw the words.

Yet it **wasn't** my eyes or my ears that perceived what was there before me. Rather, it was some filaments within me that were ching out and, like some noiseless vacuum cleaner, sucking up the words shining before me like dust particles.

After a while, the order superimposed on my paper began to blur. One by one the lines faded away.

Desperately, I tried to hold on to this splendid structure, knowing that it would all vanish without a trace. Only the memory of my awareness of that magnificent lucidity remained. And then that, too, was extinguished, as if a candle had been blown out.

A curl of fog, as fine as a thread, lingered in the room. Then it withdrew in little ripples, and an oppressive darkness closed in around me. I was so drained, I knew I was going to faint.

"Lie down!"

I **didn't** even bother to look up, knowing that I **wouldn't** be able to see anyone. With great effort, I rose from my chair and staggered to my bed.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 16

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 16

For a moment, I just lay on my bed, vaguely aware of my amazing, astonishing dream, so unlike any other dream. For the first time ever I was conscious of all I had done.

"**Nelida**?" I whispered as a soft, raspy, murmuring, coming from the other end of the room, intruded on my reveries. I sat up only to lie back quickly as the room began to spin around me.

I waited for a few moments, then tried again. I stood and took a few hesitant steps. I collapsed on the floor and hit my head against the wall.

"Shit!" I cried out when the room kept spinning around me. I **m** fainting."

"Don't be so dramatic," **Florinda** said, then giggled as she saw my bewildered face.

She touched first my forehead, then my neck, as if she were afraid I might be running a fever. "You **aren't** fainting," she pronounced. "You need to replenish your energy."

"Where is **Nelida**?"

"**Aren't** you happy to see me?" She took my arm and helped me back to the bed. "You're faint with hunger."

"I **m** not." I contradicted her, more out of habit than conviction.

Although I **didn't** feel hungry, I was certain my dizziness was caused by a lack of food. Except for breakfast, I **hadn't** eaten at all during the day.

"We wondered why you **didn't**," **Florinda** said, responding to my thoughts. "We prepared such a delicious stew for you."

"When did you get here?" I asked. "I have been silently calling you for days."

Closing her eyes, **Florinda** made a humming sound, as if the noise would help her remember. "We have been here for several days, I think," she finally said.

"You think!" I was completely taken aback, my temper getting the better of me. I quickly recovered. "Why **didn't** you let me know that you were here?"

More than hurt, I was puzzled that I had failed to notice their presence. "How could I have been so unaware?" I mumbled, more to myself than to her.

Florinda regarded me with a curious expression in her eyes. She seemed surprised by my bafflement.

"If we had let you know that we were here, you **wouldn't** have been able to concentrate on your work," she remarked sagaciously. "As you well know, instead of writing your paper, you would have been pending on our comings and goings. All your energy would have been spent in trying to find out what we do, **wouldn't** it?"

Her voice was low and raspy, and a strange, excited light made her eyes even more shiny than usual. "It was a deliberate act on our part that you should work without distractions," she assured me.

Then she went on to explain that the caretaker had helped me with my paper only after he was satisfied with what I had done so far. She claimed that in dreaming he found the inherent order of my notes.

"I, too, saw the inherent order of my notes," I said smugly. "I, too, saw it in a dream."

"Of course you did," **Florinda** readily agreed. "We pulled you into dreaming so you could work on your paper."

"You pulled me into dreaming?" I repeated.

There was something startlingly normal about her statement. Yet at the same time it made me feel apprehensive.

I had an uncanny sense that I was finally close to understanding what dreaming-awake was, but somehow I **couldn't** quite grasp it.

In an effort to make sense, I told **Florinda** all that had happened from the moment I saw the caretaker and the dog in the yard.

It was difficult to make it sound coherent, for I **couldn't** decide myself when I had been awake and when I had been dreaming.

To my utter bewilderment, I could recall the exact outline of my paper as I had seen it superimposed on my original draft. "My concentration was far too keen for me to have been dreaming," I pointed out.

"That's precisely what dreaming-awake is," **Florinda** interrupted me. "That's why you remember it so well."

Her tone was that of an impatient teacher explaining a simple but fundamental point to a backward child. "I've already told you that dreaming-awake has nothing to do with falling asleep and having a dream."

"I took notes," I said, as if that would invalidate her statement.

Seeing her nod, I asked her if I would find whatever I saw in dreaming-awake jotted down in my own handwriting on my pad.

"You will," she assured me. "But before you do, you **ll** have to eat first."

She rose and, holding out her hand, helped me to my feet. To put a semblance of order to my appearance, she tucked my shirt into my jeans and brushed off the pieces of straw sticking to my sweater.

She held me at arm's length and regarded me critically. Not satisfied with the results, she began to fuss with my hair, tweaking the unruly strands this way and that.

"You look quite frightful with your hair sticking out all over the place," she pronounced.

"I **m** used to taking a hot shower upon awakening," I said, and followed her out into the corridor.

Seeing that she was heading toward the kitchen, I told her that I had to go to the outhouse first.

"I **ll** walk with you." Noticing my displeased face, she added that she only wanted to make sure I **didn't** get dizzy and fall into the shit hole.

Actually, I was glad to hold on to her arm as we made our way to the yard.

I almost fell as we stepped outside, not so much from weakness as from the shock of seeing how late in the day it was.

"What's the matter?" **Florinda** asked. "Do you feel faint?"

I pointed up at the sky. A faint gleam was all that remained of the sun's light. "I can't possibly have lost a day," I said. My voice had all but vanished even before I finished speaking.

I struggled to assimilate the idea that indeed a whole night and the whole day had passed, but my mind would not accept it. Not being able to account for time, measured in the usual manner, unhinged me.

"Sorcerers break time's flux," **Florinda** answered my thoughts.

"Time, in the fashion we measure it, **doesn't** exist when one dreams the way sorcerers dream.

"Sorcerers stretch or compress time at will. For sorcerers, time is not a matter of minutes or hours or days but an altogether different matter.

"When dreaming-awake, our perceptual faculties are heightened," she proceeded in a patient, measured tone:

"However, when it comes to perceiving time, something altogether different happens. The perception of time does not become heightened but is canceled out completely."

She added that time is always a factor of consciousness; that is, to be aware of time is a psychological state that we automatically transform into physical measurements.

It is so ingrained in us that we can hear, even when we are not consciously aware of it, a clock ticking inside us, subliminally keeping track of time.

"In dreaming-awake, that capacity is absent," she emphasized. "A thoroughly new, unfamiliar structure, which somehow is not to be understood or interpreted as we normally do with time, takes over."

"Then all I will ever consciously know about dreaming-awake is that time has either been stretched or compressed," I said, trying to come to grips with her elucidation.

"You will understand a great deal more than that," she assured me

emphatically:

"Once you become adept at entering heightened awareness, as **Mariano Aureliano** calls it, you **ll** be aware then of whatever you wish because sorcerers are not involved in measuring time. They are involved in using it; in stretching or compressing it at will."

"You mentioned earlier that you all helped me into dreaming," I said. "Then some of you must know how long that state lasted."

Florinda said that she and her companions were perennially in a state of dreaming-awake, that it was precisely their joint effort that pulled me into dreaming-awake, but that they never kept track of it.

"Are you implying that I might be dreaming-awake now?" I asked, knowing the answer before she responded. "If I am, what did I do to reach this state? What steps did I take?"

"The simplest step imaginable," **Florinda** said. "You **didn't** let yourself be your usual self. That is the key that opens doors.

"We have told you many times and in many ways that sorcery is not at all what you think it is.

"To say that to stop yourself from being your usual self is sorcery's most complex secret sounds like idiocy, but it is't. It is the key to power, therefore the most difficult thing a sorcerer does.

"And yet, it **isn't** something complex or impossible to understand. It **doesn't** boggle the mind, and for that reason no one can even suspect its importance or take it seriously.

"Judging by the result of your latest dreaming-awake, I can say that you have accumulated enough energy, through preventing yourself from being your usual self."

She patted my shoulder and turned away. "I **ll** see you in the kitchen," she whispered.

The kitchen door was ajar but no sound came from the inside.

"**Florinda?**" I whispered.

A soft laughter answered my call, but I **couldn't** see anyone.

As soon as my eyes became accustomed to the penumbra, I saw **Florinda** and **Nelida** sitting around the table. Their faces were unnaturally vivid in that tenuous light. Their same hair, their same eyes, their same noses and mouths, gleamed as if lit by an inner light. It was the most eerie thing to see two beings so totally alike.

"You two are so beautiful that you're scary," I said and stepped closer.

The two women gazed at each other, as if to validate my statement, then burst into a most disturbing laughter. I felt a curious prickle running down my spine. Before I had a chance to comment on their odd sounding laughter, they stopped.

Nelida beckoned me to sit on the empty chair beside her.

I took a deep breath. I had to stay calm, I told myself as I sat down.

There was a tenseness and a crispness about **Nelida** that unnerved me. She served me a plateful of a thick soup from the tureen standing in the middle of the table.

"I want you to eat everything," she said, pushing the butter and a basket with warm **tortillas** toward me.

I was famished. I attacked my food as if I had not eaten for days. It tasted wonderful. I ate all there was in the tureen and washed down the buttered **tortillas** with three **mugfuls** of hot chocolate.

Satiated, I slumped back in my chair. The door to the yard was wide open and a cool breeze rearranged the shadows in room.

Twilight seemed to be lasting forever. The sky was still streaked with heavy layers of color: vermilion, deep blue, violet, and gold. The air had that transparent quality that brought close the distant hills.

As if propelled by some inner force, the night seemed to shoot out of the ground. The shadowed movements of the fruit trees in the wind, rhythmic and graceful, swept the darkness up into the sky.

Esperanza burst then into the room and placed a lit oil lamp on the table. She regarded me with unblinking eyes, as if she had difficulty in focusing.

She gave the impression that she was still concerned with some otherworldly mystery, that she **wasn't** yet quite there. Then slowly her eyes thawed, and she smiled as if she knew now that she had returned from a great distance.

"My paper!" I cried out upon discovering the loose sheets and my **notepad** under her arm.

Grinning broadly, **Esperanza** handed me my notes.

Eagerly, I examined the sheets and laughed out loud upon seeing the pages on the pad filled with precise and detailed instructions- written half in Spanish, half in English- on how to proceed with my term paper. The handwriting was unmistakably mine.

"It's all there," I said excitedly. "That's how I saw it in my dream."

The thought that I might be able to zoom through graduate without having to work so hard made me forget all my for anxiety.

"There are no shortcuts to writing good term papers," **Esperanza** said. "Not even with the aid of sorcery. You should know that without the preliminary reading, the note taking, and the writing and rewriting, you would never have been able to recognize the structure and order of your term paper in dreaming."

I nodded wordlessly. She had spoken with such an incontestable authority that I **didn't** know what to say.

"What about the caretaker?" I finally managed to ask. "Was he a professor in his youth?"

Nelida and **Florinda** turned to **Esperanza**, as if it were up to her to answer.

"I **wouldn't** know that," **Esperanza** said evasively. "**Didn't** he tell you that he's a sorcerer in love with ideas?"

She was silent for a moment, then added softly, "When he is not taking care of our world, as befits a caretaker, he reads."

"Besides reading books," **Nelida** elucidated, "he reads a most extraordinary number of scholarly journals. He speaks several languages, so he's quite up to date with the latest of everything. **Delia** and **Clara** are his assistants. He taught them to speak English and German."

"Is the library in your house his?" I asked.

"It belongs to all of us," **Nelida** said. "However, I'm sure he's the only one, beside **Vicente**, who has read every book on the shelves."

Noticing my incredulous expression, she advised me that I **shouldn't** be fooled by appearances regarding the people in the sorcerers' world.

"To reach a degree of knowledge, sorcerers work twice as hard as normal people," she assured me. "Sorcerers have to make sense of the everyday world as well as the magical world. To accomplish that, they

have to be highly skilled and sophisticated, mentally as well as physically."

She regarded me with narrowed, critical eyes then chuckled softly.

"For three days, you worked on your paper," she explained. "You worked very hard, **didn't** you?" She waited for my assent then added that, while dreaming-awake, I worked on my term paper even harder than I did while awake.

"Not at all," I hastened to contradict her. "It was all quite **md** effortless." I explained that all I did was see a new version of my paper superimposed on my old draft, and then I copied what I saw.

"To do that took all the strength you had," **Nelida** maintained. "While dreaming-awake, you channeled all your energy into a single purpose. All your concern and effort went into finishing your paper. Nothing else mattered to you at the moment. You had no other thoughts to interfere with your endeavor."

"Was the caretaker dreaming-awake when he looked at my paper?" I asked. "Did I see what he saw?"

Nelida rose and walked slowly to the door. For a long moment she peered out into the darkness then returned to the table. She whispered something to **Esperanza**, which I **didn't** hear, and then sat down again.

Esperanza chuckled softly then said that what the caretaker saw in my paper was different from what I saw and wrote down. "Quite naturally so, for his knowledge is by far more vast than yours."

Esperanza stared at me with her quick, dark eyes that somehow made the rest of her face seem lifeless. "Guided by his suggestions, and according to your own capabilities, you saw what your paper ought to read like. That's what you wrote down."

"While dreaming-awake, we have access to hidden resources, which we never use ordinarily," **Nelida** said, going on to explain that, the instant I saw my paper, I remembered the clues the caretaker had given me.

Noticing my incredulous expression, she reminded me what the caretaker had said about my paper: "Too many footnotes, too many notes and sloppily developed ideas."

Her eyes radiated sympathy and amusement as she went on to say that since I was dreaming and I am not as stupid as I pretended to be, I immediately saw all kinds of links and connections that I **hadn't** noticed before within my material.

Nelida leaned toward me, a half-smile playing over her lips as she waited for my reaction.

"It's time you know what made you see a better version of your original paper." **Esperanza** sat up straight and gave me a wink as if to emphasize that she was about to reveal a major secret. "When dreaming-awake, we have access to direct knowledge."

I could see the disappointment in her eyes as she regarded me for a long moment.

"Don't be so dense!" **Nelida** snapped impatiently:

"Dreaming-awake should have made you realize that you have, as all women do, a unique capacity to receive knowledge directly."

Esperanza made a silencing gesture with her hand and said, "Did you know that one of the basic differences between males and females is how they approach knowledge?"

I had no idea what she meant.

Slowly and deliberately, she tore off a clean sheet from my **notepad** and drew two human figures. One head she crowned with a cone and said that it was a man. On the other head, she drew the same cone, but upside down, and said that it was a woman.

"Men build knowledge step by step," she explained, her pencil poised on the figure crowned with a cone:

"Men reach up. They climb toward knowledge.

"Sorcerers say that men cone toward the spirit. They cone up toward knowledge.

"This coning process limits men on how far they can reach."

She retraced the cone on the first figure. "As you can see, men can only reach a certain height. Their path toward knowledge ends up in a narrow point: the tip of the cone."

She looked at me sharply. "Pay attention," she warned me and pointed her pencil to the second figure, the one with the inverted cone on its head.

"As you can see, the cone is upside down, open like a funnel. Women are able to open themselves directly to the source, or rather, the source reaches them directly, in the broad base of the cone.

"Sorcerers say that women's connection to knowledge is expansive. On the other hand, men's connection is quite restricted.

"Men are close to the concrete," she proceeded, "and aim at the abstract.

"Women are close to the abstract, and yet try to indulge themselves with the concrete."

"Why are women, being so open to knowledge or the abstract, considered inferior?" I interrupted her.

Esperanza gazed at me with rapt fascination.

She rose swiftly, stretched like a cat until all her joints cracked, then sat down again.

"That women are considered inferior, or, at the very best, that female traits are equated as complementary to the male's, has to do with the manner in which males and females approach knowledge," she explained:

"Generally speaking, women are more interested in power over themselves than over others.

"Power over others is clearly what males want."

"Even among sorcerers," **Nelida** interjected, and the women all laughed.

Esperanza went on to say that she believed that originally women saw no need to exploit their facility to link themselves broadly and directly to the spirit.

She said women saw no necessity to talk about or to intellectualize this natural capacity of theirs because it was enough for them to put their natural capacity in action, and to know that they had it.

"Men's incapacity to link themselves directly to the spirit was what drove them to talk about the process of reaching knowledge," she stressed. "They haven't stopped talking about it.

"And it is precisely this insistence on knowing how they strive toward the spirit; this insistence on analyzing the process that gave them the certainty that being rational is a typically male skill."

Esperanza explained that the conceptualization of reason has been done exclusively by men, and that this has allowed men to belittle women's gifts and accomplishments. And even worse, it has allowed men to exclude feminine traits from the formulation of the ideals of reason.

"By now, of course, women believe what has been defined for them," she emphasized:

"Women have been reared to believe that only men can be rational and coherent.

"Now men carry with them a load of unearned assets that makes them automatically superior regardless of their preparation or capacity."

"How did women lose their direct link to knowledge?" I asked.

"Women haven't lost their connection," **Esperanza** corrected me.

"Women still have a direct link with the spirit.

"They have only forgotten how to use it; or rather, they have copied men's condition of not having it at all.

"For thousands of years, men have struggled to make sure that women forget it.

"Take the Holy Inquisition, for example. That was a systematic purge to eradicate the belief that women have a direct link to the spirit.

"All organized religion is nothing but a very successful maneuver to put women in a lower place. Religions invoke a divine law that says that women are inferior."

I stared at her in amazement, wondering to myself how she could possibly be so erudite. [* erudite- having or showing profound knowledge]

"Men's need to dominate others and women's lack of interest in expressing or formulating what they know and how they know it has been a most nefarious alliance," **Esperanza** went on:

"It has made it possible for women to be coerced from the moment they're born into accepting that fulfillment lies in homemaking, in love, in marriage, in having children, and in self-denial.

"Women have been excluded from the dominant forms of abstract thought and educated into dependence.

"Women have been so thoroughly trained in the belief that men must think for them that women have finally given up thinking."

"women are quite capable of thinking." I interrupted her.

"Women are capable of formulating what they have learned,"

Esperanza corrected me, "but what they have learned has been defined by men.

"Men define the very nature of knowledge, and from that knowledge they have excluded that which pertains to the feminine.

"Or if the feminine is included, it is always in a negative light.

"And women have accepted this."

"You are years behind the times," I interjected. "Nowadays women can do anything they set their hearts to do. They pretty much have access to all the centers of learning, and to almost anything men can do."

"But this is meaningless as long as women don't have a support system; a support base," **Esperanza** argued:

"What good is it that women have access to what men have when women are still considered inferior beings who have to adopt male attitudes and behaviors in order to succeed?

"The truly successful women are the perfect converts: They too look

down on women.

"According to men, the womb limits women both mentally and physically.

"This is the reason why women, although they have access to knowledge, have not been allowed to help determine what this knowledge is.

"Take for instance, philosophers," **Esperanza** proposed. "The pure thinkers.

"Some of them are viciously against women.

"Others are more subtle in that they are willing to admit that women might be as capable as men were it not for the fact that women are not interested in rational pursuits.

"And if women are interested in rational pursuits they **shouldn't** be because it is more becoming for a woman to be true to her nature: a nurturing, dependent companion of the male."

Esperanza expressed all this with unquestionable authority.

Within moments, however, I was assailed by doubts. "If knowledge is but a male construct, then why your insistence that I go to school," I asked.

"Because you are a witch, and as such you need to know what impinges on you and how it impinges on you," she replied:

"Before you refuse something, you must understand why you refuse it.

"You see, the problem is that knowledge, in our day, is derived purely from reasoning things out.

"But women have a different track, never, ever taken into consideration.

"That track can contribute to knowledge, but it would have to be a contribution that has nothing to do with reasoning things out."

"What would it deal with, then?" I asked.

"That's for you to decide after you master the tools of reasoning and understanding."

I was very confused.

"What sorcerers propose," she explained, "is that men can't have the exclusive right to reason.

"Men seem to have it now simply because the ground where men apply reason is a ground where maleness prevails.

"Let us, then, apply reason to a ground where femaleness prevails; and that ground is, naturally, the inverted cone I described to you; women's connection with the spirit itself."

She tilted her head slightly to one side, considering what to say.

"That connection has to be faced with a different aspect of reasoning. An aspect never, ever used before: the feminine side of reasoning," she said.

"What is the feminine side of reason, **Esperanza**?"

"Many things. One of them is definitely dreaming." She regarded me questioningly, but I had nothing to say.

Her deep chuckle caught me by surprise. "I know what you expect from sorcerers.

"You want rituals, incantations. Odd, mysterious cults. You want to sing. You want to be one with nature. You want to commune with water spirits. You want paganism. Some romantic view of what sorcerers do.

Very Germanic.

"To jump into the unknown," she went on, "you need guts and mind. Only with them will you be able to explain to yourself and to others the treasures you might find."

She leaned toward me, eager, it seemed, to confide something.

She scratched her head and sneezed repeatedly, five times as the caretaker had. "You need to act on your magical side," she said.

"And what is that?"

"The womb." She said this so distantly and calmly, as if she were not interested in my reaction, that I almost missed hearing it.

Then suddenly, realizing the absurdity of her remark, I straightened up and looked at the others.

"The womb!" **Esperanza** repeated. "The womb is the ultimate feminine organ.

"It is the womb that gives women that extra edge; that extra force to channel their energy."

She explained that men, in their quest for supremacy, have succeeded in reducing woman's mysterious power, her womb, to a strictly biological organ, whose only function is to reproduce; to carry man's seed.

As if obeying a cue, **Nelida** rose, walked around the table, and came to stand behind me. "Do you know the story of the Annunciation?" she whispered in my ear.

Giggling, I turned to face her. "I don't."

In that same confidential whisper, she proceeded to tell me that in the **Judeo-Christian** tradition, men are the only ones who hear the voice of God.

Women have been excluded from that privilege, with the exception of the Virgin Mary.

Nelida said that an angel whispering to Mary was, of course, natural.

What **wasn't** natural was the fact that all the angel had to say to Mary was that she would bear the son of God.

The womb did not receive knowledge but rather the promise of God's seed.

A male god, who engendered another male god in turn.

I wanted to think, to reflect on all that I had heard, but my mind was in a confused whirl.

"What about male sorcerers?" I asked. "They don't have a womb, yet they are clearly connected to the spirit."

Esperanza regarded me with undisguised pleasure, then looked over her shoulder, as though she were afraid to be overheard, and whispered, "Sorcerers are able to align themselves to intent, to the spirit, because they have given up what specifically defines their masculinity, and they are no longer males."

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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The manner in which **Isidore Baltazar** was pacing about the room was different from the way he usually covered the length of his

rectangular studio. Before, I had always been soothed by his pacing.

This time, however, his steps rang with a disturbing, oddly menacing sound. The image of a tiger prowling in the bushes- not ready to pounce on a victim but sensing that something was not quite right- came to mind.

I turned away from my paper and was about to ask him what was the matter, when he said, "We are going to Mexico!"

The way he said it made me laugh. The gruffness and seriousness of his voice warranted my joking question, "Are you going to marry me there?"

Glaring at me, he came to an abrupt halt. "This is no joke," he snapped angrily. "This is the real thing."

No sooner had he spoken than he smiled and shook his head. "What am I doing?" he said, making a humorous, helpless gesture. "I am getting angry at you, as if I had time for that. What a shame! The **nagual Juan Matus** warned me that we are crap to the very end."

He hugged me fiercely, as if I had been gone for a long time and had just returned.

"I don't think it's such a good idea for me to go to Mexico," I said.

"Cancel anything pending. There is no more time." He sounded like a military man giving orders.

Since I was in a festive mood, I **couldn't** help retorting, "**jawohl, mein Gruppenfuhrer!**"

He lost his tightness and laughed.

As we drove through **Arizona**, a most peculiar feeling suddenly flooded me.

It was a bodily sensation something like a chill that extended from my womb to my entire body and brought goose bumps all over my skin; the knowledge that something was wrong.

There was in that feeling a new element I had not encountered before; absolute certainty, without a tinge of being right or wrong.

"I just had an intuition. Something is wrong!" I said, my voice rising against my will.

Isidore Baltazar nodded, then said in a matter-of-fact tone, "The sorcerers are leaving."

"When?" My cry was quite involuntary.

"Maybe tomorrow or the next day," he replied. "Or perhaps a month from now, but their departure is imminent." [* imminent- close in time; about to occur]

Sighing in relief, I slumped on my seat and consciously relaxed.

"They have been saying that they're leaving since the day I met them more than three years ago," I murmured, but I **didn't** really feel right about saying it.

Isidore Baltazar turned to glance at me, his face a mask of sheer contempt.

I could see the effort he was making to erase his dissatisfaction.

He smiled, then patted my knee and said softly, "In the sorcerers' world, we can't be that factual. If sorcerers repeat something to you until you're cynically bored with it, it is because they want to prepare you for it."

He fixed me momentarily with his hard, unsmiling eyes and added, "Don't confuse their magical ways with your **dumbo** ways."

I nodded wordlessly. His statement **didn't** anger me: I was too scared

for that. I kept quiet.

The journey **didn't** take any time at all, or so it seemed to me. We took turns sleeping and driving, and by noon of the following day we were at the witches' house.

The instant the car's engine had been shut off, we both jumped out of the car, slammed the doors shut, and ran up to the witches' house.

"What's the idea?" the caretaker said.

He was standing by the front door, seemingly bewildered by our abrupt and loud arrival. "Are you two fighting or chasing each other?"

He looked at **Isidore Baltazar** and then at me. "Gee! Running like this."

"When are you leaving? When are you leaving?" I repeated mechanically, unable to contain my growing anxiety and fear any longer.

Laughing, the caretaker patted my back reassuringly and said, "I'm not going anyplace. You're not going to get rid of me that easily."

His words sounded genuine enough, but they **didn't** relieve my anxiety.

I searched his face, his eyes, to see if I could detect a lie. All I saw was kindness and sincerity.

Upon realizing that **Isidore Baltazar** was no longer standing beside me, I tensed up again. He had vanished, as noiselessly and swiftly as a shadow.

Sensing my agitation, the caretaker pointed with his chin to the house.

I heard **Isidore Baltazar's** voice, rising as if he were protesting, and then I heard his laughter.

"Is everybody here?" I asked, trying to move past the caretaker.

"They are inside," he said, blocking my way with his outstretched arms. "They can't see you at the moment."

Seeing that I was about to protest, he added, "They were not expecting you. They want me to talk to you before they do."

He took my hand and led me away from the door. "Let's go to the back and pick up some leaves," he proposed. "We'll burn them and leave the ashes for the water fairies. Perhaps they'll turn them into gold."

We **didn't** talk at all as we gathered pile after pile of leaves, but the physical activity and the sound of the rake scratching the ground soothed me.

It seemed we had been gathering and burning leaves for hours when suddenly I knew that there was someone else in the yard.

I turned my head quickly and saw **Florinda**.

Dressed in white pants and jacket, sitting on the bench under the **zapote** tree, she was like an apparition. Her face was shaded by a wide-brimmed straw hat, and in her hand she held a lace fan. She seemed not quite human and so remote that I just stood motionless, absolutely amazed.

Wondering whether she was going to acknowledge me, I took a few hesitant steps toward her.

Upon noticing that she **didn't** in any way register my presence, I waited, undecided.

It **wasn't** that I was trying to protect myself against being refused or being slighted by her, but rather, some undetermined yet unconsciously understood rule kept me from demanding that she pay attention to me.

However, when the caretaker joined **Florinda** on the bench, I reached for the rake propped against a tree and inched my way toward them.

Grinning absentmindedly, the caretaker looked up at me, but his attention was on what **Florinda** was saying.

They spoke in a language I **didn't** understand, yet I listened to them, entranced.

Whether it was the language or her affection for the old man, I **didn't** know; but her raspy voice was unusually soft and strange, and hauntingly tender.

Abruptly, she rose from the bench.

As if she were propelled by some hidden spring, she zigzagged across the clearing like a hummingbird; pausing for an instant beside each tree; touching a leaf here and a blossom there.

I raised my hand to call her attention, but I was distracted by a bright blue butterfly weaving blue shadows in the air.

It flew toward me and alighted on my hand.

The wide, quivering wings fanned out and their shadow fell darkly over my fingers. It rubbed its head with its legs, and after opening and closing its wings several times, it took off again, leaving on my middle finger a ring in the shape of a triangular butterfly.

Certain that it was but an optical illusion, I shook my hand repeatedly. "It's a trick, **isn't** it?" I asked the caretaker in a shaky voice. "It's an optical illusion?"

The caretaker shook his head, and his face crinkled into a most radiant smile. "It's a lovely ring," he said, holding my hand in his. "It's a magnificent gift."

"A gift," I repeated. I had the briefest flash of insight, but it disappeared, leaving me lost and bewildered.

"Who put the ring on my finger?" I asked, staring at the jewel. The antennae and the thin, elongated body dividing the triangle were fashioned in white gold filigree and were studded with tiny diamonds.

"**Didn't** you notice the ring before?" the caretaker asked.

"Before?" I repeated, baffled. "Before what?"

"You've been wearing that ring since **Florinda** gave it to you," he replied.

"But when?" I asked, then held my hand over my mouth to stifle my shock. "I can't remember **Florinda** giving me the ring," I said more to myself than to him. "And why haven't I noticed the ring before?"

The caretaker shrugged, at a loss to explain my oversight, then suggested that perhaps I **hadn't** noticed the ring because it fit so perfectly on my finger.

He seemed about to say something else but stopped himself, and instead suggested that we pick up some more leaves.

"I can't," I said. "I have to talk to **Florinda**."

"You do?" he mused, in the manner of one hearing a ridiculous and probably unsound idea.

But he **didn't** persuade me to the contrary, and said, "She's gone for her walk," pointing with his chin toward the path that led to the hills.

"I'll catch up with her," I stated. I could see her white-clad figure weaving in and out of the high chaparral in the distance.

"She goes far," the caretaker warned me.

"That's no problem," I assured him.

I ran after **Florinda**, then slowed down before I caught up with her. She had the most beautiful walk: She moved with a vigorous, athletic motion, effortlessly, her back erect.

Sensing my presence, she came to an abrupt halt, then turned and held out her hands in a gesture of greeting. "How are you, darling?" she said, gazing at me. Her raspy voice was light and clear, and very soft.

In my eagerness to learn about the ring, I **didn't** even greet her properly. Stumbling over my words, I asked her if she had put the ring on my finger. "Is it mine now?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "It's yours by right." There was something in her tone; a sense of certainty that both thrilled and terrified me. Yet it **didn't** even occur to me to refuse the no doubt expensive gift.

"Does the ring have magical powers?" I asked, holding up my hand against the light so that each stone sparkled with a dazzling radiance.

"No," she laughed. "It **doesn't** have powers of any sort.

"It is a special ring, though. Not because of its value or because it belonged to me, but because the person who made this ring was an extraordinary **nagual**."

"Was he a jeweler?" I inquired. "Was he the same person who built the odd-looking figures in the caretaker's room?"

"The same one," she replied. "He **wasn't** a jeweler, though. He **wasn't** a sculptor either.

"The mere thought that he might be considered an artist made him laugh. Yet anyone who saw his work **couldn't** help but see that only an artist could have executed the extraordinary things he did."

Florinda moved a few steps away from me and let her eyes roam across the hills, as if she were searching for memories in the distance.

Then she turned once more toward me and in a barely audible whisper said that whatever this **nagual** made, whether it was a ring, a brick wall, tiles for the floor, the mysterious inventions, or simply a cardboard box, it invariably turned out to be an exquisite piece; not only in terms of its superb craftsmanship, but because it was imbued with something ineffable. [* ineffable- defying expression or description]

"If such an extraordinary individual made this ring, then it has to have some kind of power," I insisted.

"The ring in itself has no power, regardless of who made it," **Florinda** assured me:

"The power was in the making.

"The **nagual** who made this ring was aligned so thoroughly with what sorcerers call intent that he was able to produce this lovely jewel without him being a jeweler.

"The ring was an act of pure intent."

Reluctant to sound stupid, I **didn't** dare admit that I had no inkling what she meant by intent.

So I asked her what had prompted her to make me such a marvelous gift. "I don't think I deserve it," I added.

"You will use the ring to align yourself with intent," she said.

A wicked grin spread across her face as she added, "But, of course, you already know about aligning yourself with intent."

"I know nothing of the sort," I mumbled defensively, then confessed I **didn't** really know what intent was.

"You might not know what the word means," she said off-handedly,

"but something in you intuits how to tap that force."

She brought her head close to mine and whispered that I had always used intent to move from dream to reality or to bring my dream- whatever it might have been- to reality.

She glanced at me expecting no doubt for me to draw the obvious conclusions.

Seeing my uncomprehending expression, she added, "Both the inventions in the the caretaker's room and the ring were made in dreams."

I still don't get it," I complained.

"The inventions frighten you," she said equably. "And the ring delights you. Since both are dreams, it can easily be the reverse..."

"You frighten me, **Florinda**. What do you mean?"

"This, dear, is a world of dreams. We are teaching you how to bring them about all by yourself."

Her dark, shiny eyes held mine for a moment, and then she added, "At the moment, all the sorcerers of the **nagual Mariano Aureliano's** party help you enter into this world and are helping you to stay in it now."

"Is it a different world? Or is it that I am different myself?"

"You are the same but in a different world." She was silent for a moment then conceded that I had more energy than before. "Energy that comes from your savings and from the loan all of us made you."

Her banking metaphor was very clear to me. What I still **didn't** grasp was what she meant by a different world.

"Look around you!" she exclaimed, holding her arms out wide. "This is not the world of everyday life."

She was silent for a long time, then in a voice that was but a low, gentle murmur, added, "Can butterflies turn into rings in the world of daily affairs; in a world that has been safely and rigorously structured by the roles assigned to all of us?"

I had no answer.

I looked around me; at the trees, at the bushes, at the distant mountains.

Whatever she meant by a different world still eluded me. The difference had to be a purely subjective one, was the thought that finally occurred to me.

"It **isn't!**" **Florinda** insisted, reading my thoughts. "This is a sorcerer's dream. You got into it because you have the energy."

She regarded me quite hopelessly, and said, "There is really no way to teach dreaming to women. All that can be done is to prop them up, so as to make them realize the enormous potential they carry in their organic disposition.

"Since dreaming for a woman is a matter of having energy at her disposal, the important thing is to convince her of the need to modify her deep socialization in order to acquire that energy.

"The act of making use of this energy is automatic; women dream sorcerers' dreams the instant they have the energy."

She confided that a serious consideration about sorcerers' dreams, stemming from her own shortcomings, was the difficulty of imbuing women with the courage to break new ground.

Most women- and she said she was one of them- prefer their safe shackles to the terror of the new.

"Dreaming is only for courageous women," she whispered in my ear.

Then she burst into loud laughter and added, "Or for those women who have no other choice because their circumstances are unbearable- a category to which most women belong, without even knowing it."

The sound of her raspy laughter had an odd effect on me.

I felt as if I had suddenly awakened from a deep sleep and remembered something quite forgotten while I had slept: "**Isidoro Baltazar** told me about your imminent departure. When are you leaving?"

"I'm not going anywhere yet." Her voice was firm, but it rang with a devastating sadness:

"Your dreaming teacher and I are staying behind. The rest are leaving."

I **didn't** quite understand what she meant, and to hide my confusion I made a joking comment.

"My dreaming teacher, **Zuleica**, **hasn't** said a single word to me in three years. In fact, she has never even talked to me. You and **Esperanza** are the only ones who have really guided me and taught me."

Florinda's gales of laughter reverberated around us, a joyous sound that brought me intense relief, and yet I felt puzzled.

"Explain something to me, **Florinda**," I began. "When did you give me this ring? How come I went from picking leaves with the caretaker to having this ring?"

Florinda's face was full of enjoyment as she explained that it could easily be said that picking leaves is one of the doors into a sorcerers' dream provided one has enough energy to cross that threshold.

She took my hand in hers and added, "I gave you the ring while you were crossing; therefore, your mind **didn't** record the act.

"Suddenly, when you were already in the dream, you discovered the ring on your finger."

I looked at her curiously. There was something in her elucidation I **couldn't** grasp; something so vague, so indistinct.

"Let's return to the house," she suggested, "and recross that threshold. Perhaps you'll be aware of it this time."

Leisurely, we retraced our steps, approaching the house from the back.

I walked a few steps ahead of **Florinda** so I could be perfectly aware of everything. I peered at the trees, the tiles, the walls; eager to detect the change or anything that might give me a clue to the transition.

I **didn't** notice anything, except that the caretaker was no longer there.

I turned around to tell **Florinda** that I most definitely had missed the transition, but she was not behind me.

She was nowhere in sight. She was gone and had left me all alone there.

I walked into the house.

It was, as had happened to me before, deserted.

This feeling of aloneness no longer frightened me; no longer gave me the sensation I had been abandoned.

Automatically, I went to the kitchen and ate the chicken **tamales** that had been left in a basket.

Then I went to my hammock and tried to put my thoughts in order.

I woke up and found myself lying on a cot, in a small, dark room. I looked desperately about me, searching for some inkling of what was going on.

I sat bolt upright as I saw big, moving shadows lurking by the door.

Eager to find out whether the door was open and the shadows were inside, I reached under the cot for the chamber pot- which somehow I knew to be there- and threw it at the shadows. The pot landed outside with an excessively loud clatter.

The shadows vanished.

Wondering whether I had simply imagined them, I went outside.

Undecided, I stared at the tall mesquite fence encircling the clearing, and then I knew in a flash where I was: I was standing in back of the small house.

All this went through my mind as I searched for the chamber pot, which had rolled all the way to the fence.

As I bent to pick it up, I saw a coyote squeeze through the mesquite fence.

Automatically, I threw the pot at the animal, but the pot hit a rock instead.

Indifferent to the loud bang and to my presence, the coyote crossed the clearing.

It turned its head audaciously several times to look at me.

Its fur shimmered like silver. Its bushy tail swept over the various rocks like a magic wand. Each rock it touched came to life. The rocks hopped about with shiny eyes and moved their lips, asking peculiar questions in voices too faint to be heard.

I screamed; the rocks moved appallingly fast toward me.

I immediately knew that I was dreaming.

"This is one of my usual nightmares," I mumbled to myself. "With monsters and fear and everything else."

Convinced that once I had recognized and voiced the problem, I had neutralized its effects on me, I was about to give in and settle down to live a nightmare terror when I heard a voice say, "Test the track of dreams."

I wheeled around.

Esperanza was standing under the ramada tending to a fire on a raised platform made of cane heavily coated with mud. She looked strange and remote in the gleaming, moving light of the fire, as if she were separated from me by a distance that had nothing to do with space.

"Don't be frightened," she ordered.

Then she lowered her voice to a murmur and said, "We all share one another's dreams, but now you are not dreaming."

Doubt must have been written all over my face. "Believe me, you are not dreaming," she assured me.

I stepped a bit closer.

Not only did her voice sound unfamiliar, but she herself was different.

From where I was standing she was Esperanza; nonetheless, she looked like Zuleica.

I moved very close to her. She was Zuleica!

Young and strong and very beautiful. She couldn't have been more than forty years old. Her oval face was framed by curly, black hair that was turning grey. Hers was a smooth, pale face, highlighted by liquid,

dark eyes set wide apart. Her gaze was indrawn, enigmatic, and very pure. Her short, thin upper lip hinted at severeness, while the full, almost voluptuous lower lip gave an indication of gentleness and also passion.

Fascinated by the change in her, I simply stared at her, enthralled.

I definitely must be dreaming, I thought.

Her clear laughter made me realize that she had read my thoughts.

She took my hand in hers and said softly, "You're not dreaming, my dear. This is the real me.

"I am your dreaming teacher. I am Zuleica.

Esperanza is my other self. Sorcerers call it the dreaming body."

My heart thumped so violently it made my chest ache.

I almost choked with anxiety and excitement. I tried to pull my hand away, but she was holding me with a firm grip that I couldn't break.

I pressed my eyes tightly shut. More than anything I wanted her to be gone when I opened them again.

She was there, of course, her lips parted in a radiant smile.

I closed my eyes again, then jumped up and down and stomped on the ground as if I had gone berserk. With my free hand, I slapped my face repeatedly, until it burned with pain.

All to no avail: I couldn't wake up. Every time I opened my eyes, she was there.

"I think you've got enough," she laughed, and I commanded her to hit me.

She readily obliged, striking two sharp blows on my upper arms with a long, hard walking stick.

"It's no use, dear." She spoke slowly, as if she were very tired.

She took a deep breath and let go of my hand.

Then she spoke again. "You're not dreaming. And I am Zuleica.

"But when I dream, I am Esperanza; and something else, too, but I am not going to go into that now."

I wanted to say something, anything, but I couldn't speak. My tongue was paralyzed and all I managed to produce was a whimpering, doglike sound.

I tried to relax with breathing I had learned in a yoga class.

She chuckled, seemingly taken with my antics: It was a reassuring sound that had a soothing effect on me: It radiated so much warmth, such deep confidence, that my body relaxed instantaneously.

"You're a stalker," she proceeded. "And you belong, by all rights, to Florinda."

Her tone brooked [*brook- put up with something or somebody unpleasant] no argument, no contradiction. "You're also a somnambulist and a great natural dreamer, and by virtue of your ability, you also belong to me."

One side of me wanted to laugh out loud and tell her that she was raving mad.

But another side of me was in complete agreement with her claim.

I asked hesitantly, "By which name do you want me to call you?"

"By which name?" she repeated, gazing at me as if it should have been self-evident. "I'm Zuleica. What do you think this is? A game? We don't play games here."

Taken aback by her vehemence, I could only mumble, "No, I don't think this is a game."

"When I dream, I am **Esperanza**," she continued, her voice sharp with intensity.

Her face was stern but radiant and open without pity all at the same time.

"When I don't dream, I am **Zuleica**."

"But whether I am **Zuleica** or **Esperanza** or anything else, it **shouldn't** matter to you. I am still your dreaming teacher."

All I could do was nod idiotically. Even if I had had something to say, I **wouldn't** have been able to do so.

A cold, clammy sweat of fear ran down my sides. My bowels were loose and my bladder about to burst. I wanted to go to the bathroom and relieve myself and puke.

I finally **couldn't** hold it any longer. It was a matter of disgracing myself right there or running to the outhouse.

I had enough energy to **opt** for the latter.

Zuleica's laughter was the laughter of a young girl: It followed me all the way to the outhouse.

When I returned to the clearing, she urged me to sit beside her on the nearby bench.

I automatically obeyed her and sat down heavily on the edge; nervously putting my hands over my closed knees.

There was an undeniable gleam of hardness but also of kindness in her eyes.

It came to me in a flash, as if I had known it before, that her ruthlessness was, more than anything else, an inner discipline.

Her relentless self-control had stamped her whole being with a most appealing elusiveness and secretiveness; not the secretiveness of overt and furtive behavior, but the secretiveness of the mysterious; the unknown.

That was the reason I followed her around, whenever I saw her, like a puppy dog.

"You **ve** had two transitions today," **Zuleica** explained. "One from being normally awake to dreaming-awake and the other from dreaming-awake to being normally awake."

"The first was smooth and unnoticeable: The second was nightmarish."

"That's the normal state of affairs. All of us experience those transitions just like that."

I forced a smile. "But I still don't know what I did," I said. "I am not aware of any steps. Things just happen to me, and I find myself in a dream, without knowing how I got there."

There was a glint in her eyes.

"What is ordinarily done," she said, "is to start dreaming by sleeping in a hammock or in some kind of a strapping contraption hanging from a roof beam or a tree. Suspended in that fashion, we don't have any contact with the ground."

"The ground grounds us: Remember that. In that suspended position, a beginning dreamer can learn how energy shifts from being awake to dreaming and from dreaming a dream to dreaming-awake."

"All this, as **Florinda** already told you, is a matter of energy. The moment you have it, off you go."

"Your problem now is going to be whether you'll be able to save

enough energy yourself since the sorcerers won't be able to lend it to you anymore."

Zuleica raised her brows in an exaggerated manner and added, "We'll see. I'll try to remind you, the next time we share one another's dreams."

Seeing the dismay on my face, she laughed with childlike abandon.

"How do we share one another's dreams?" I asked, gazing into her astonishing eyes: They were dark and shiny with beams of light **radiating** from the pupils.

Instead of answering, **Zuleica** dropped a few more sticks into the fire. Embers burst and spilled, and the light grew brighter.

For an instant she stood still, her eyes fixed on the flames as if she were gathering in the light.

She turned sharply and glanced briefly at me, then squatted and wrapped her strong, muscular arms around her shins.

Looking into the darkness, listening to the crackling fire, she rocked from side to side.

"How do we share one another's dreams?" I asked again.

Zuleica stopped rocking. She shook her head, then looked up, startled, as if suddenly awakened.

"That's something impossible for me to explain now," she stated.

"Dreaming is incomprehensible."

"One has to feel it, not discuss it."

"As in the everyday world, before one explains something and analyzes it, one has to experience it."

She spoke slowly and deliberately. She admitted that it was important to explain as one went along. "Yet, explanations sometimes are premature. This is one of those times."

"One day it will all make sense to you," **Zuleica** promised, seeing the disappointment in my face.

With a quick, light motion, she rose to her feet and went to stare at the flames, as if her eyes needed to feed on the light.

Her shadow, thrown by the fire, grew enormous against the wall and the ceiling of the **ramada**.

Without so much as a nod, she turned with a sweep of her long skirt and disappeared inside the house.

Unable to move, I stood rooted to the spot.

I could barely breathe as the clatter of her sandals grew fainter and fainter.

"Don't leave me here!" I yelled in a panic-stricken voice. "There are things I need to know."

Zuleica materialized by the door instantly. "What do you need to know?" she asked in a detached, almost distracted tone.

"I'm sorry," I gabbled, glancing into her shiny eyes.

I examined her, almost hypnotized. "I **didn't** mean to shout," I added apologetically. "I thought you had gone into one of the rooms."

I looked at her beseechingly, hoping she would explain something to me.

She **didn't**. All she did was ask me again what it was I wanted to know.

"Would you talk to me when I see you again?" I blurted out the first thing that came into my head; afraid she would leave if I **didn't** keep on

talking.

"When I see you again, we won't be in the same world as before," she said. "Who knows what we'll do there?"

"But a while ago," I insisted, "you yourself told me you are my dreaming teacher.

"Don't leave me in darkness. Explain things to me. The torment I experience is more than I can bear. I am split."

"You are," she admitted casually. "You certainly are split."

She looked at me, her eyes brimming with kindness. "But that's only because you don't let go of your old ways.

"You're a good dreamer. Somnambulist brains have formidable potential. That is... if you would cultivate your character."

I hardly heard what she said.

I tried to put my thoughts in order, but I couldn't.

A succession of images of events I didn't quite remember went through my mind with incredible speed.

My will exercised no control upon their order or their nature.

Those images were transformed into sensations that, however precise, refused to be defined; refused to be formulated into words, or even into thoughts.

Obviously aware of my incapacity, Zuleica's face lit up in an expansive grin.

"We have all helped the nagual Mariano Aureliano to push you into the second attention all along," she said slowly and softly:

"In there, we find fluency and continuity as we do in the world of everyday life.

"In both states, the practical is dominant. We act efficiently in both states.

"What we can't do in the second attention, however, is to break what we experience into pieces so we can handle it, so we can feel secure, so we can understand it."

While she talked, I was thinking to myself, 'She's wasting her time telling me all this. Doesn't she know that I am too stupid to understand her explanations?'

But she continued to speak, smiling broadly, obviously knowing that for me to admit that I was not too bright meant that I had changed somehow: Otherwise, I would never admit such a notion, even to myself.

"In the second attention," she continued, "or as I prefer to call it, when dreaming-awake, one has to believe that the dream is as real as the everyday world.

"In other words, one has to acquiesce.

"For sorcerers, all worldly or otherworldly pursuits are ruled by irreproachable acts, and in back of all irreproachable acts lies acquiescence.

"And acquiescence is not acceptance. Acquiescence involves a dynamic element: It involves action."

Her voice was very soft, and there was a feverish gleam in her eyes as she finished. "The moment one begins dreaming-awake, a world of enticing, unexplored possibilities opens up; a world where the ultimate audacity becomes a reality; where the unexpected is expected.

"That's the time when man's definitive adventure begins. The world becomes limitless with possibilities and wonder."

Zuleica was silent for a long time: She seemed to be debating what else to say.

"With the help of the nagual Mariano Aureliano, you once even saw the glow of the surem," she began, and her soft voice, turning wistful, became softer still:

"The surem are magical creatures that exist only in Indian legends; beings that sorcerers can see only while dreaming-awake at the deepest level.

"The surem are beings from another world: They glow like phosphorescent human beings."

She wished me good night, turned, and disappeared inside the house.

For a second I stood numbed, then I dashed after her.

Before I reached the threshold I heard Florinda behind me say, "Don't follow her!"

Florinda's presence was so unexpected that I had to lean against the wall, and wait for my heartbeat to return to normal.

"Come and keep me company," Florinda said. She was sitting on the bench, feeding the fire.

The elusive light in her eyes, and the ghostly whiteness of her hair was more like a memory than a vision.

I stretched out on the bench beside her, and, as if it were the most natural thing to do, I placed my head in her lap.

"Never follow Zuleica, or any one of us for that matter, unless you're asked to do so," Florinda said, combing her fingers through my hair:

"As you know now, Zuleica isn't what she appears to be. She's always more, much more than that.

"Never try to figure her out, because when you think you have covered all the possibilities, she'll flatten you out by being more than you can imagine in your wildest fantasies."

"I know," I sighed contentedly.

I could feel the tension draining from my face. I could feel it leaving my body.

"Zuleica is a surem from the Bacatete Mountains," I said with absolute conviction. "I've known about these creatures all along."

Seeing the astonishment in Florinda's face, I went on daringly, "Zuleica wasn't born like an ordinary human being. She was established. She's sorcery itself."

"No," Florinda contradicted me emphatically. "Zuleica was born. Esperanza wasn't."

She smiled down into my face and added, "This should be a worthy riddle for you."

"I think I understand," I murmured, "but I am too insensitive and can't formulate what I understand."

"You're doing fine," she chuckled softly. "Being as insensitive as you normally are, you must wait until you are really, really awake, 100 percent in order to understand. Now you are only 50 percent awake.

"The trick is to remain in heightened awareness. In heightened awareness, nothing is impossible to comprehend for us."

Feeling that I was about to interrupt her, she covered my lips with her hand and added, "Don't think about it now.

"Always remember that you're compulsive, even in heightened awareness, and your thinking is not thorough."

I heard someone moving in the shadows behind the bushes. "Who is there?" I asked, sitting up.

I looked all around me but **couldn't** see anyone.

Women's laughter echoed across the yard.

"You can't see them," **Florinda** said sleepily.

"And why are they hiding from me?" I asked.

Florinda smiled. "They are not hiding from you," she explained. "It's just that you can't see them without the **nagual Mariano Aurliano's** help."

I **didn't** know what to say to that. On one level, it made perfect sense, yet I found myself shaking my head. "Can you help me see them?"

Florinda nodded. "But your eyes are tired: They are tired from seeing too much. You need to sleep."

Purposefully I kept my eyes wide open; afraid to miss whoever was going to come out of the bushes the moment my attention slackened.

I stared at the leaves and the shadows, no longer knowing which was which, until I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 18

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 18

HTML EDITOR:

"It's very hard to teach something so unsubstantial as dreaming,"

Esperanza said. "Especially to women.

"We women are extremely coy and clever: After all, we've been slaves all our lives.

"We know how to precisely manipulate things when we don't want anything to upset what we have worked so hard to obtain: our status quo."

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Esperanza explained, "To reach a point of detachment, where the self is just an idea that can be changed at will, is a true act of sorcery; and the most difficult of all.

"When the idea of the self retreats, sorcerers have the energy to align themselves with intent and be more than what we believe is normal.

END **HTML** EDITOR

The caretaker was dozing on his favorite bench in the shade of the **zapote** tree.

That's all he had been doing for the past two days.

He no longer swept the patios or raked the leaves outside but instead sat for hours on that bench, dozing or staring into the distance, as if he had a secret understanding with something that only he could see.

Everything had changed in the house.

"Did I do wrong to come to see them?" I asked myself incessantly. I felt, as usual, guilty and defensive.

All I did was to sleep uninterrupted for hours on end.

When awake, however, I was disturbingly aware that nothing was the same.

Aimlessly, I wandered about the house, but it was to no avail.

Something seemed to have fled from the house.

The caretaker's long and loud sigh intruded on my thoughts.

Unable to contain my anxiety any longer, I pushed my book aside, rose to my feet, and covered the short distance between us.

"Won't you rake and burn some leaves today?" I asked.

He looked up, startled, but did not answer.

He was wearing sunglasses. I **couldn't** see the expression in his eyes through the dark lenses.

I **didn't** know whether to stay or to leave or to wait for his reply.

Afraid he might doze off again, I asked in a loud, impatient tone, "Is there a reason why you **aren't** raking and burning leaves any longer?"

He parried my question with one of his own, "Have you seen or heard a leaf fall for the past two days?"

His eyes seemed to drill through me as he lifted his glasses.

It was the seriousness of his tone and demeanor rather than his statement which I found ridiculous; that compelled me to answer. "No," I said.

He beckoned to me to sit beside him on the bench.

Leaning close to me, he whispered in my ear, "These trees know exactly when to let go of their leaves."

He glanced all around him, as if he were afraid we might be overheard, then added in that same confidential whisper, "And now the trees know that there's no need for their leaves to fall."

"Leaves wilt and fall, regardless of anything," I pronounced pompously. "It's a law of nature."

"These trees are utterly capricious," he maintained stubbornly. "They have a mind of their own. They don't follow the laws of nature."

"What has prompted the trees not to drop any leaves?" I asked, trying to keep an earnest expression.

"That's a good question," he mused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully:

"I'm afraid I don't know the answer yet. The trees haven't told me."

He smiled at me inane and added, "I've already told you, these trees are temperamental."

Before I had a chance to retort, he asked, out of the blue, "Did you make yourself your lunch?"

His abrupt change of subject took me by surprise.

"I did," I admitted, then hesitated for a moment.

An almost defiant mood took hold of me. "I don't care all that much about food. I'm quite used to eating the same food day in and day out. If it **weren't** for the fact that I get pimples, I would live on chocolates and nuts."

Throwing all caution to the winds, I began to complain.

I told the caretaker that I wished the women would talk to me. "I would appreciate if they'd let me know what is going on. Anxiety is taking its toll on me."

After I had said all I wanted to say, I felt much better; much relieved.

"Is it true that they are leaving forever?" I asked.

"They have already left forever," the caretaker said.

Seeing my **noncomprehending** expression, he added, "But you knew that, **didn't** you? You're just making conversation with me, **aren't** you?"

Before I had a chance to recover from my shock, he asked me in a genuinely puzzled tone, "Why should this be shocking to you?"

He paused for a moment, as if to give me time to think, then answered the question himself. "Ah, I've got it!

"You are furious because they took Isidore Baltazar with them." He patted me repeatedly on my back, as though to emphasize each word.

His gaze told me that he didn't care if I gave in to either anger or tears.

To know that I had no audience gave me an instantaneous sense of equanimity.

"I didn't know that," I murmured. "I swear, I didn't know it."

I stared at him in mute despair.

I felt all the blood drain from my face. My knees ached. My chest was so tight I couldn't breathe.

Knowing that I was about to faint, I held on to the bench with both hands.

I heard the caretaker's voice like a distant sound. "No one nows if he'll ever be back. Not even I know that."

Leaning toward me, he added, "My personal opinion is that he has gone with them temporarily, but he'll come back; if not right away, some day. That's my opinion."

I searched his eyes, wondering whether he was mocking me.

His cheerful face radiated sheer goodwill and honesty, and his eyes were as guileless as a child's.

"However, when he returns, he won't be Isidore Baltazar anymore," the caretaker warned me. "The Isidore Baltazar you knew, think is already gone.

"And do you know what's the saddest part?" He paused, then answered his own question. "You took him so for granted that you didn't even thank him for all his care; his help, his affection for you.

"Our great tragedy is to be buffoons, oblivious to anything else, except our buffoonery."

I was too devastated to say a word.

Abruptly, the caretaker rose to his feet.

Without another word, as if he were too embarrassed to stay with me, he walked toward the path that led to the other house.

"You can't just leave me here by myself," I shouted after him.

He turned, waved at me, and then began to laugh. It was a loud, joyful sound that raised echoes across the chaparral.

He waved once again, then vanished, as if the bushes had swallowed him.

Incapable of following him, I waited for him to return or to appear suddenly in front of me and scare me half to death. I was almost bracing myself for a fright I intuited in my body more than I anticipated in my mind.

As it had happened before, I didn't see or hear Esperanza approach, but I sensed her presence.

I turned around and there she was, sitting on the bench under the zapote tree.

I became elated just watching her.

"I thought I was never going to see you again," I sighed. "I had nearly resigned myself to it. I thought you were gone."

"Goodness gracious!" she chided me in mock consternation.

"Are you really Zuleica?" I blurted out.

"Not a chance," she retorted. "I am Esperanza."

"What are you doing? Driving yourself nuts with questions no one can answer?"

Never in my life have I been so close to a total breakdown as at that moment.

I felt that my mind was not going to take in all that pressure. I was going to be ripped apart by my anguish and turmoil.

"Brace yourself, girl," Esperanza said harshly. "The worst is yet to come.

"But we can't spare you. To stop the pressure now, because you're about to go bonkers, is unthinkable to sorcerers.

"It's your challenge to be tested today. You either live or you die; and I don't mean this metaphorically."

"I'll never see Isidore Baltazar?" I asked, hardly able to speak through my tears.

"I can't lie to you to spare your feelings.

"No, he'll never be back.

"Isidore Baltazar was only a moment of sorcery. A dream that passed after being dreamed. Isidore Baltazar, as the dream, is gone already."

A small, almost wistful smile curved her lips. "What I don't know yet," she continued, "is if the man, the new nagual, is gone forever as well.

"You understand, of course, that even if he returns, he won't be Isidore Baltazar. He'll be someone else you have to meet all over again."

"Would he be unknown to me?" I asked, not quite sure whether I wanted to know.

"I don't know, my child," she said with the weariness of uncertainty. "I simply don't know.

"I am a dream myself; and so is the new nagual."

"Dreams like us are impermanent, for it is our impermanence that allows us to exist.

"Nothing holds us, except the dream."

Blinded by my tears, I could barely see her.

"To ease your pain, sink deeper into yourself," she said softly:

"Sit up with your knees raised and grab your ankles with crossed arms, right ankle with the left hand. Put your head on your knees and let the sadness go.

"Let the earth soothe your pain. Let the earth's healing force come to you."

I sat on the ground in exactly the manner she prescribed.

Within moments my sadness vanished.

A deep bodily sensation of well-being replaced my anguish.

I lost sight of myself, in any context except the context of the moment at hand. Without my subjective memory I had no pain.

Esperanza patted the place beside her on the bench.

As soon as I was seated, she took my hand in hers and rubbed it for an instant as if she were massaging it, then said that it was quite a fleshy hand for being so bony.

She turned the palm up and studied it intently. She didn't say a word, but gently curled my hand into a fist.

We sat in silence for a long time. It was late afternoon. Nothing could be heard but the rhythmic sound of leaves moved by the breeze.

As I stared at her, a most uncanny certainty possessed me: I knew that **Esperanza** and I had already talked at length about my coming to the witches' house and the sorcerers' departure.

"What is it with me, **Esperanza**?" I asked. "Am I dreaming?"

"Well," she began slowly. There was a gleam in her eyes as she proposed I test the dream. "Sit on the ground and test it."

I did. All I felt was the coldness of the rock I had sat on. No feeling was sent back to me.

"I'm not dreaming," I asserted. "Then why do I feel that we've already talked?"

I searched her face to see if I could find a clue to my dilemma stamped on her features.

"This is the first time I've seen you since my arrival, but I feel we've been together every day," I mumbled, more to myself than to be heard. "It's been seven days now."

"It's been much longer. But you must resolve this puzzle yourself, with minimal help," **Esperanza** said.

I nodded in agreement.

There was so much I wanted to ask, but I knew and accepted that it would be useless to talk. I knew without knowing how I knew it that we had already covered all my questions. I was saturated with answers.

Esperanza regarded me thoughtfully, as if she doubted my realization.

Then, very slowly, enunciating her words carefully, she said, "I want you to know that the awareness you have gotten here, no matter how deep and permanent it may seem to you, is only temporary.

"You'll get back to your nonsense soon enough. That's our women's fate; to be especially difficult."

"I think you are wrong," I protested. "You don't know me at all."

"It's precisely because I know you that I'm saying this."

She paused for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice was harsh and serious. "Women are very cagey. Remember, being reared to be a servant makes you extremely shifty and clever."

Her explosive, resonant laughter erased any desire I might have had to protest.

"The best thing you can do is not to say anything," she declared.

Taking my hand, she pulled me up and suggested that we go to the small house for a long, much-needed talk.

We **didn't** go inside the house but sat down on a bench by the front door.

Silently, we just sat there for nearly an hour.

Then **Esperanza** turned toward me: She **didn't** seem to see me. In fact, I wondered if she had forgotten that I had come with her and was sitting beside her.

Without acknowledging my presence, she stood up and moved a few steps away from me and gazed at the other house, nestled among a clump of trees. It was quite a while before she said, "I'm going far."

I **couldn't** tell whether it was hope, excitement, or apprehension that gave me a strangely sickening sensation in the pit of my stomach.

I knew that she **wasn't** referring to distance in terms of miles but in terms of other worlds.

"I don't care how far we're going," I said with a bravado I was far

from feeling.

I desperately wished to know, but **didn't** dare ask, what would be at the end of our journey.

Esperanza smiled and opened her arms wide as if to embrace the setting sun.

The sky in the west was a fiery red; the distant mountains, a shadowy purple. A light breeze swept through the trees: The leaves shimmered and rustled.

A silent hour went by, and then all was still. The spell of twilight immobilized everything around us. Every sound and movement ceased: The contours of bushes, trees, and hills were so precisely defined, they appeared to have been etched against the sky.

I moved closer to **Esperanza** as the shadows crawled up on us and blackened the sky.

The sight of the other silent house, with its lights twinkling like **glowworms** in the dark, aroused some deeply buried emotion within me.

The emotion **wasn't** connected to any particular feeling of the moment, but to a vaguely sad, nostalgic memory buried in childhood.

I must have been totally engrossed in my reveries: Suddenly I found, myself walking alongside **Esperanza**.

My tiredness, my former anxiety, had all vanished.

Filled with an overwhelming sense of vigor, I walked in a kind of ecstasy, a silent happiness, my feet drawn forward but not by my volition alone.

The path we were walking on ended abruptly.

The ground rose and trees stretched high above us. Huge boulders were scattered here and there. From somewhere in the distance came the sound of running water, like a soft, comforting chant.

Sighing with sudden fatigue, I leaned against one of the boulders and wished that this was the end of our journey.

"We haven't reached our destination yet!" **Esperanza** shouted.

She was already halfway up some rocks and she moved with the agility of a goat.

She **didn't** wait for me. She **didn't** even look back to see if I was following her.

My short rest had robbed me of my last strength. Gasping for breath, I slipped repeatedly on the stones as I scrambled after her.

Halfway up, the trail continued around a huge boulder. The dry and brittle vegetation gave way to luscious growth, dark in the early evening light. The air, too, was no longer the same: It was humid and, for me, easier to breathe.

Esperanza moved unerringly along a narrow path: It was full of shadows, full of silences and **rustlings**.

She knew each of the night's mysterious sounds. She identified each of its pulsating croaks, cries, calls, and hisses.

The path came to an end in front of some steps cut into the rock. The steps led to a concealed mound of stones.

"Pick one," she ordered, "and put it in your pocket."

Worn as smooth as pebbles in a brook, the stones all looked the same at first.

Upon closer examination, however, I discovered that they were all different. Some were so smooth and shiny they appeared to have been

polished in a tumbler.

It took me quite some time until I found one I liked.

It was heavy, yet it fit easily in my palm. Its light brown, bulky mass was wedge-shaped and crisscrossed by almost translucent milky veins.

Startled by a noise, I almost dropped the stone. "Someone is following us," I whispered.

"Nobody is following us!" **Esperanza** exclaimed, with a look halfway between amusement and incredulity.

Seeing me draw back behind a tree, she giggled softly and said that it was probably a toad jumping through the underbrush.

I wanted to tell her that toads don't jump in the darkness, but I **wasn't** sure it was true. It surprised me that I **hadn't** just said it with the most absolute certainty; as was my habit.

"Something is wrong with me, **Esperanza**," I said in an alarmed tone of voice. "I'm not myself."

"There is nothing wrong with you, dear," she assured me absentmindedly. "In fact, you are more yourself than ever."

"I feel strange..." My voice trailed off.

I had begun to see a pattern in what had been happening to me since the first time I arrived at the witches' house.

"It's very hard to teach something so unsubstantial as dreaming,"

Esperanza said. "Especially to women."

"We women are extremely coy and clever: After all, we've been slaves all our lives.

"We women know how to precisely manipulate things when we don't want anything to upset what we have worked so hard to obtain: our status quo."

"Do you mean that men don't?"

"They certainly do, but they are more overt. Women fight underhandedly.

"Their preferred fighting technique is the slave's maneuver: to turn the mind off.

"They hear without paying attention. They look without seeing."

She added that to instruct women was an accomplishment worthy of praise.

"We like the openness of your fighting," she went on. "There is high hope for you.

"What we fear the most is the agreeable woman who **doesn't** mind the new, and does everything you ask her to do; then turns around and denounces you as soon as she gets tired or bored with the newness."

"I think I am beginning to understand," I mused uncertainly.

"Of course you have begun to understand!" Her assertion was so comically triumphant, I had to laugh:

"You have even begun to understand what intent is."

"You mean I am beginning to be a sorceress?" I asked.

My whole body shook as I tried to suppress a fit of giggles.

"Since you arrived here, you've been dreaming-awake on and off,"

Esperanza stated. "That's why you fall asleep so much."

There was no mockery; not even a trace of condescension in her smiling face.

We walked in silence for a while, and then she said that the difference between a sorcerer and an ordinary person was that the sorcerer could

enter into a state of dreaming-awake at will.

She tapped my arm repeatedly, as if to emphasize her point, and in a confidential tone added, "And you are dreaming-awake because, in order to help you hone your energy, we have created a bubble around you since the first night you arrived."

Esperanza went on to say that from the moment they first met me, they had nicknamed me **Fosforito**, little match. "You burn too fast and uselessly."

She gestured for me to remain quiet and added that I **didn't** know how to focus my energy.

"Your energy is deployed to protect and uphold the idea of yourself."

Again she motioned me to be silent, said that what we think is our personal self is, in actuality, only an idea: She claimed that the bulk of our energy is consumed in defending that idea.

Esperanza's eyebrows lifted a little, an elated grin spreading across her face.

Esperanza explained, "To reach a point of detachment, where the self is just an idea that can be changed at will, is a true act of sorcery; and the most difficult of all.

"When the idea of the self retreats, sorcerers have the energy to align themselves with intent and be more than what we believe is normal.

"Women, because they have a womb, can focus their attention with great facility on something outside their dreams while dreaming," she explained:

"That's precisely what you have been doing all along, unbeknownst to yourself. That object becomes a bridge that connects you to intent."

"And what object do I use?"

There was a flicker of impatience in her eyes. Then she said that it was usually a window or a light or even the bed.

"You're so good at it that it is second nature with you," she assured me:

"That's why you have nightmares.

"I told you all this when you were in a deep state of dreaming-awake, and you understood: As long as you refuse to focus your attention on any object prior to sleeping, you don't have bad dreams.

"You are cured, **aren't** you?" she asked.

My initial reaction, of course, was to contradict her.

However, upon a moment's thought, I could only agree with her: After my meeting with them in **Sonora**, I had been fairly free from nightmares.

"You'll never be really free from them as long as you persist in being yourself," she pronounced:

"What you should do, of course, is to exploit your dreaming talents deliberately and intelligently.

"That's why you're here. And the first lesson is that a woman must, through her womb, focus her attention on an object.

"Not an object from the dream itself, but an independent one, one from the world prior to the dream.

"Yet, it **isn't** the object that matters," she hastened to point out:

"What's important is the deliberate act of focusing on it, at will, prior to the dream and while continuing the dream."

She warned me that although it sounded simple enough, it was a formidable task that might take me years to accomplish.

"What normally happens is that one awakens the instant one focuses one's attention on the outside object," she said.

"What does it mean to use the womb?" I interjected. "And how is it done?"

"You are a woman," **Esperanza** said softly. "You know how to feel with your womb."

I wanted to contradict her, to explain that I **didn't** know anything.

Before I could do so, however, she went on to explain that in a woman, feelings originate in the womb.

"In men," she claimed, "feelings originate in the brain."

Esperanza poked me in the stomach and added, "Think about it.

"A woman is heartless except with her brood because her feelings are coming from her womb.

"In order to focus your attention with your womb, get an object and put it on your belly or rub it on your genitalia."

Esperanza laughed uproariously at my look of dismay, then, in between fits of laughter, chided me:

"I **wasn't** that bad. I could have said that you need to smear the object with your juices, but I **didn't**.

Her tone serious again, she continued, "Once you establish a deep familiarity with the object it will always be there to serve you as a bridge."

We walked in silence for a stretch, and **Esperanza** was seemingly deep in thought.

I was itching to say something, yet knew that I **didn't** have anything to say.

When **Esperanza** finally spoke, her voice was stern, demanding.

"There is no more time for you to waste," she said:

"It's very natural that in our stupidity we screw things up. Sorcerers know this better than anyone else.

"But sorcerers also know that there are no second chances.

"You must learn control and discipline because you have no more leeway for mistakes.

"You screwed up, you know. You **didn't** even know that **Isidore Baltazar** had left."

My ethereal dike that was holding the avalanche of feelings broke down.

My memory was restored and sadness overtook me.

My sadness became so intense that I **didn't** even notice I had sat and was sinking into the ground as if it were made out of sponge.

Finally, the ground swallowed me.

It was not a suffocating, claustrophobic experience because the sensation of sitting on the surface coexisted simultaneously with the awareness of being swallowed by the earth; a dual sensation that made me yell, "I **m** dreaming now!"

That loudly spoken announcement triggered something within me: A new landslide of different memories flooded in on top of me.

I knew what was wrong with me: I had screwed up and had no energy to dream.

Every night since my arrival, I had dreamt the same dream, which I had forgotten about until that very moment.

I dreamt that all the women sorcerers came to my room and drilled

me in the sorcerers' rationales.

They told me, on and on, that dreaming is the secondary function of the womb- the primary being reproduction and whatever is related to it.

They told me that dreaming is a natural function in women; a pure corollary of energy.

And given enough energy, the body of a woman by itself will awake the womb's secondary functions; and the woman will dream inconceivable dreams.

The dreaming energy needed, however, is like aid to an underdeveloped country: It never arrives.

Something in the overall order of our social structures prevents that energy from being free so women can dream.

Were that energy free, the women sorcerers told me, it would simply overthrow the 'civilized' order of things.

But women's great tragedy is that their social conscience completely dominates their individual conscience.

Women fear being different and don't want to stray too far from the comforts of the known. The social pressures put upon them not to deviate are simply too overpowering.

And rather than change, women acquiesce to what has been ordained: 'Women exist to be at the service of man.'

Thus, women can never dream sorcery dreams although they have the organic disposition for it.

Womanhood has destroyed women's chances: Whether it be tinted with a religious or a scientific slant, it still brands women with the same seal:

Women's main function is to reproduce, and whether they have achieved a degree of political, social, or economic equality is ultimately immaterial.

The women sorcerers told me all this every night.

The more I remembered and understood their words, the greater was my sorrow.

My grief was no longer for me alone, but for all of us; a race of schizoid beings trapped in a social order that has shackled us to our own incapacities.

If we ever break free, it is only momentarily; a **shortlived** clarity before we plunge willingly or forced back into the darkness.

"Stop this sentimental garbage," I heard a man's voice say. I looked up and saw the caretaker bending over; peering at me.

"How did you get here?" I asked. I was perplexed and a little flustered:

"You've been following us?" More than a question, it was accusation.

"Yes, I've been following you in particular," he leered at me.

I searched his face. I **didn't** believe him.

I knew he was poking at me, yet I was neither annoyed nor frightened by the intense glint in his eyes.

"Where is **Esperanza**?" I asked. She was nowhere in sight. "Where did she...?" I stammered nervously, unable to get the words out.

"She's around," he said, smiling:

"Don't worry. I'm also your teacher. You are in good hands."

Hesitantly, I put my hand in his. Effortlessly, he pulled me up to a flat boulder overlooking a large, oval-shaped pool of water.

The pool was fed by a murmuring stream trickling from somewhere in the darkness.

"And now, take off your clothes," he said. "It's time for your cosmic bath!"

"My what?" Certain that he was joking, I began to laugh.

But he was serious.

He tapped me repeatedly on the arm, just like **Esperanza** did, and urged me to take off my clothes.

Before I knew what he was doing, he had already untied the laces on my sneakers.

"We don't have all that much time," he admonished, then pressed me to get on with it.

The look he gave me was cold, clinical, impersonal: I might have been the toad **Esperanza** had claimed was jumping around.

The sheer idea of getting into that dark, cold water, infested, no doubt, with all sorts of slimy creatures, was appalling to me.

Eager to put an end to that preposterous situation, I sidled down the boulder and stuck my toes into the water.

"I don't feel a thing!" I cried out, shrinking back in horror. "What's going on? This is not water!"

"Don't be childish," the caretaker scolded me. "Of course it's water. You just don't feel it, that's all."

I opened my mouth to let out an imprecation but controlled myself in time. My horror had vanished.

"Why don't I feel the water?" I asked, trying hard to gain time.

I knew that stalling for time was a useless affair because I had no doubt that I was going to end up in the water whether I felt the water or not. However, I had no intention of giving in gracefully.

"Is this waterless water some kind of a purification liquid?" I asked.

After a long silence, charged with menacing possibilities, he said that I might call it a purification liquid.

He emphasized, "However, I should warn you that there **isn't** a ritual capable of purifying anyone.

"Purification has to come from within. It's a private and lonely struggle."

"Then why do you want me to get into this water, which is slimy even if I don't feel it?" I said with all the force I could invoke.

His lips twitched as if he were about to laugh, but seemingly reluctant to give in, his face grew grave again, and he said, "I'm going to dive into that pool with you."

And without any further hesitation he completely undressed.

He stood in front of me, barely five feet away, stark naked.

In that strange light that was neither day nor night, I could see with utter clarity every inch of his body.

He **didn't** make bashful attempts to cover his nakedness.

Quite the opposite; he seemed to be more than proud of his maleness and paraded it in front of me with defiant insolence.

"Hurry up and take off your clothes," he urged me. "We don't have much time."

"I'm not going to do that. It's insane!" I protested.

"You are going to do that.

"It's a decision you'll make all by yourself."

He spoke without vehemence, without anger, yet with quiet determination.

"Tonight, in this strange world, you will know that there is only one way to behave: the sorcerers' way."

He stared at me with a curious mixture of compassion and amusement.

With a grin that was meant to reassure me but **didn't**, the caretaker said that jumping into the pool would jolt me.

It would shift something within me. "This shift will serve you, at a later time, to understand what we are and what we do."

A fleeting smile lit up his face as he hastened to point out that jumping into the water would not give me the energy to dream-awake on my own.

He warned me that it would certainly take a long time to save and hone my energy, and that I might never succeed.

"There are no guarantees in the sorcerers' world," he said.

Then he conceded that jumping into the pool might shift my attention away from my everyday concerns: the concerns expected of a woman of my age; of my time.

"Is this a sacred pool?" I asked.

His brows shot up in obvious surprise. "It's a sorcerers' pool," he explained, gazing at me steadily.

He must have seen that my decision had been made, for he unfastened the watch around my wrist.

"The pool is neither holy nor evil."

He shrugged his thin shoulders and fastened my watch around his own wrist.

"Now look at your watch," he ordered me. "It's been yours for many years. Feel it on my wrist."

He chuckled as he started to say something and decided against it. "Well, go on, take off your clothes."

"I think I'll just wade in with my clothes on," I mumbled.

Although I **wasn't** prudish, I somehow resisted the idea of standing naked in front of him.

He pointed out that I would need dry clothes when I got out of the water. "I don't want you to catch pneumonia."

A wicked smile dawned in his eyes. "This is real water even though you don't feel it," he said.

Reluctantly, I took off my jeans and shirt.

"Your panties too," he said.

I walked around the grassy edge of the pool, wondering whether I should just dive in and get it over with or whether I should get wet little by little, cupping water in my hands, letting it trickle down my legs, my arms, my stomach, and, last, over my heart, as I remembered old women doing in Venezuela before wading into the sea.

"Here I go!" I cried out, but instead of jumping in I turned to look at the caretaker.

His immobility frightened me.

He seemed to have turned into stone, so still and erect did he sit on the boulder.

Only his eyes seemed to have life: They shone in a curiously compelling way, without any source of light to account for it.

It astounded more than saddened me to see tears trickling down his cheeks.

Without knowing why, I, too, began to weep, silently.

His tears made their way down, I thought, into my watch on his wrist.

I felt the eerie weight of his conviction, and suddenly my fear and my indecision were gone, and I dove into the pool.

The water was not slimy but transparent like silk; and green.

I **wasn't** cold. As the caretaker had claimed, I **didn't** feel the water.

In fact, I **didn't** feel anything: It was as if I were a disembodied awareness swimming in the center of a pool of water that did feel liquid but not wet.

I noticed that light emanated from the depths of the water.

I jumped up like a fish to gather impetus, then dove in search of the light.

I came up for air. "How deep is this pool?"

"As deep as the center of the earth." **Esperanza's** voice was clear and loud; it carried such certainty that, just to be myself, I wanted to contradict her.

But there was something uneasy in the air that stopped me; some unnatural stillness, some tension that was suddenly broken by a crisp, rustling sound all around us; a sort of warning whisper; a rushing, ominous warning that something was odd.

Standing on the exact same spot where the caretaker had stood was **Esperanza**. She was stark naked.

"Where is the caretaker?" I shouted in a panic-stricken voice.

"I am the caretaker," she said.

Convinced that those two were playing some horrendous trick on me, I propelled myself, with one great sidestroke, toward the overhanging boulder **Esperanza** was standing on.

"What's going on?" I demanded to know in a voice that was but a whisper, for I could hardly breathe.

Gesturing for me to remain still, she moved toward me with that boneless, uncoiling movement so characteristic of her.

She craned her neck to look at me, then stepped closer and showed me my watch strapped around her wrist.

"I am the caretaker," she repeated.

I nodded automatically.

But then, right there in front of me, instead of **Esperanza**, was the caretaker, naked as he had been before, pointing at my watch on his wrist.

I **didn't** look at the watch: All my attention was focused on his sexual organs.

I reached out to touch him, to see if perhaps he was a hermaphrodite. He **wasn't**.

With my hand still probing, I felt, more than saw, his body fold into itself, and I was touching a woman's vagina.

I parted the lips to make sure the penis was not hidden somewhere in there.

"**Esperanza**..." My voice faded as something clamped around my neck.

I was conscious of the water parting as something pulled me into the depths of the pool.

I felt cold. It **wasn't** a physical coldness but rather the awareness of the absence of warmth, of light, of sound; the absence of any human feeling in that world where that pool existed.

I awoke to the faint sound of snoring: **Zuleica** was sleeping beside me on a straw mat laid on the ground. She looked as beautiful as ever, young and strong, yet vulnerable- unlike the other women sorcerers- in spite of the harmony and power she exuded.

I watched her for a moment then sat up as all the events of the night came flooding into my mind. I wanted to shake her awake and demand that she tell me what had happened, when I noticed that we were not by the pool up in the hills but in the exact same spot where we had been sitting earlier, by the front door of the real witches' house.

Wondering whether it had all been a dream, I gently shook her by the shoulder.

"**Ah**, you finally woke up," she murmured sleepily.

"What happened?" I asked. "You have to tell me everything."

"Everything?" she repeated, yawning noisily.

"Everything that happened at the pool," I snapped impatiently.

Again she yawned, and then she giggled. Studying my watch, which was on her wrist, she said that something in me had shifted more than she had anticipated. "The sorcerers' world has a natural barrier that dissuades timid souls," she explained. "Sorcerers need tremendous strength to handle it. You see, it's populated by monsters, flying dragons, and demonic beings, which, of course, are nothing but impersonal energy. We, driven by our fears, make that impersonal energy into hellish creatures."

"But what about **Esperanza** and the caretaker?" I interrupted her. "I dreamt that both were really you."

"They are," she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I **ve** just told you. You shifted deeper than I anticipated and entered into what dreamers call dreaming in worlds other than this world.

"You and I were dreaming in a different world. That's why you **didn't** feel the water. That's the world where the **nagual Elias** found all his inventions. In that world, I can be either a man or a woman. And just like the **nagual Elias** brought his inventions to this world, I bring either **Esperanza** or the caretaker. Or rather, my impersonal energy does that."

I **couldn't** put my thoughts or feelings into words. An incredible urge to run away screaming took hold of me, but I **couldn't** put it into action. My motor control was no longer a volitional matter with me. Trying to rise and scream, I collapsed on the ground.

Zuleica wasn't in the least concerned or moved by my condition. She went on talking as if she **hadn't** seen my knees give, as if I **weren't** lying sprawled on the ground like a rag doll. "You **re** a good dreamer. After all, you **ve** been dreaming with monsters all your life. Now it's time you acquired the energy to dream like sorcerers do, to dream about impersonal energy."

I wanted to interrupt her, to tell her that there was nothing impersonal about my dream of **Esperanza** and the caretaker; that, in fact, it was worse than the monsters of my nightmares, but I **couldn't** speak.

"Tonight, your watch brought you back from the deepest dream you have ever had," **Zuleica** continued, indifferent to the weird sounds emerging from my throat. "And you even have a rock to prove it."

She came to where I lay openmouthed, staring at her. She felt in my pocket. She was right. There it was; the rock I had picked from the pile of stones.

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Chapter 19

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Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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Chapter 19

A loud, shattering noise woke me.

I sat up in my hammock, peering into the darkness, and saw that the wooden panels covering the windows were down.

A cold, sucking wind swirled up around me. Leaves rustled across the patio outside my room.

The rustling grew, then abruptly faded to a gentle swishing sound.

A dim brightness seeped into the room. Like mist, it clung to the bare walls.

For a moment, as if I were conjuring him up, **Isidore Baltazar** stood at the foot of my hammock.

"**Nagual!**" I cried out.

He looked real, yet there was something undefined about him like an image seen in water.

I cleared my throat to speak, but only a faint croak escaped my lips as the image dissolved in the mist.

Then the mist moved, restless and abrupt like the wind outside.

Too tense to sleep, I sat wrapped in my blanket, pondering whether I had done the right thing to come to the witches' house looking for the **nagual Isidore Baltazar**: I had not known anywhere else to go.

I had patiently waited for three months, then my anxiety had become so acute that it finally prompted me to act.

One morning- seven days ago- I had driven nonstop to the witches' house.

And there had been no question in my mind then about whether I had proceeded correctly- not even after I had to climb over the wall at the back of the house and let myself in through an unlocked window.

However, after seven days of waiting, my certainty had begun to falter.

I jumped out of my hammock onto the tiled floor, landing hard on the heels of my bare feet. Shaking myself that way had always helped me dispel my uncertainties.

It **didn't** work this time, and I lay down again in my hammock.

If there is one thing I should have learned in the three years I had spent in the sorcerers' world, it is that sorcerers' decisions are final; and my decision had been to live and die in the sorcerers' world.

Now it was time for me to prove it.

An unearthly sounding laughter startled me out of my reveries.

Eerily it reverberated throughout the house, then all was silent again.

I waited tensely, but there was no other sound except that of dry leaves being pushed by the wind on the patio. The leaves sounded like a faint, raspy whisper.

Listening to that sound not only lulled me to sleep but pulled me into

the same dream I had been dreaming for the past seven nights.

I am standing in the **Sonoran** desert. It is noon.

The sun, a silvery disk so brilliant as to be almost invisible, has come to a halt in the middle of the sky.

There is not a single sound, not a movement around.

The tall saguaros, with their prickly arms reaching toward that immobile sun, stand like sentries guarding the silence and the stillness.

The wind, as if it has followed me through the dream, begins to blow with tremendous force.

It whistles between the branches of the mesquite trees and shakes them with systematic fury.

Red dust devils well up in powdery swirls all around me.

A flock of crows scatter like dots through the air then fall to the ground a bit farther away, softly, like bits of black veil.

As abruptly as it has begun, the wind dies down.

I head toward the hills in the distance.

It seems I walk for hours before I see a huge, dark shadow on the ground.

I look up. A gigantic bird hangs in the air with outstretched wings, motionless, as though it were nailed to the sky.

It is only when I gaze again at its dark shadow on the ground that I know that the bird is moving. Slowly, imperceptibly, its shadow glides ahead of me.

Driven by some inexplicable urge, I try to catch up with the shadow; but regardless of how fast I run, the shadow moves farther and farther away from me.

Dizzy with exhaustion, I stumble over my own feet and fall flat on the ground.

As I rise to dust off my clothes, I discover the bird perched on a nearby boulder.

Its head is slightly turned toward me, as though beckoning me.

Cautiously, I approach it.

It is enormous and tawny, with feathers that glisten like burnished copper. Its amber-colored eyes are hard and implacable and as final as death itself.

I step back as the bird opens its wide wings and takes off.

It flies high up until it is only a dot in the sky.

Yet its shadow on the ground is a straight dark line that stretches into infinity and holds together the desert and the sky.

Confident that if I summon the wind I will catch up with the bird, I invoke an incantation.

But there is no force; no power in my chant. My voice breaks into a thousand whispers that are quickly absorbed by the silence.

The desert regains its eerie calm.

It begins to crumble at the edges, then slowly fades all around me...

Gradually I became conscious of my body lying in the hammock.

I discerned, through a shifting haze, the book-lined walls of the room.

Then I was fully awake as the realization hit me, as it had hit me every time during the past week, that this had not been an ordinary dream; and that I knew what it meant.

The **nagual Mariano Aureliano** had once told me that sorcerers, when they talk among themselves, speak of sorcery as a bird: They call it

the bird of freedom.

They say that the bird of freedom only flies in a straight line and never comes around twice.

They also say that it is the **nagual** who lures the bird of freedom. It is he who entices the bird to shed its shadow on the warrior's path. Without that shadow, there is no direction.

The meaning of my dream was that I had lost the bird of freedom. I had lost the **nagual** and, without him, all hope and purpose.

What weighed the most on my heart was that the bird of free-flew away so fast it **didn't** give me time to thank them properly, **didn't** give me time to express my endless admiration.

I had assured the sorcerers all along that I never took their world or their persons for granted, but I did; in particular **Isidore Baltazar's**.

He surely was going to be with me forever, I thought.

Suddenly, they were gone, all of them, like puffs of air, like shooting stars; and they took **Isidore Baltazar** with them.

I had sat for weeks on end in my room, asking myself the same question: How can it be possible that they vanished like that?

A meaningless, superfluous question, considering what I had experienced and witnessed in their world.

All it revealed was my true nature: meek and doubting.

For the sorcerers had told me for years that their ultimate purpose was to burn; to disappear, swallowed by the force of awareness.

The old **nagual** and his party of sorcerers were ready, but I **didn't** know it.

They had been preparing themselves nearly all their lives for the ultimate audacity: to dream-awake that they sneak past death- as we ordinarily know death to be- and cross over into the unknown; enhancing and without breaking the unity of their total energy.

My regret was most intense upon recalling how my usual doubting self would emerge when I least expected it.

It was not that I **didn't** believe their stupendous, otherworldly, yet so practical aim and purpose.

Rather, I would explain them away; integrate them; make them fit into the everyday world of common sense- not quite, perhaps, but certainly coexisting with what was normal and familiar to me.

The sorcerers certainly tried to prepare me to witness their definitive journey; that they would one day vanish was something I was almost aware of.

But nothing could have prepared me for the anguish and despair that followed.

I sank into a well of sadness from which I knew I would never come out.

That part was for me alone to deal with.

Afraid I would only give in to more despair if I stayed a moment longer in my hammock, I got up and made breakfast.

Or rather, I warmed up last night's leftovers: **tortillas**, rice, and beans- my standard meal of the last seven days, except that for lunch I would add a can of Norwegian sardines.

I had found the sardines at a grocery store in the nearest town. I had bought all the cans they had.

The beans were also canned.

I washed the dishes and mopped the floor.

Then, with broom in hand, I went from room to room looking for some new dirt, a spider web in some forgotten corner.

From the day I had arrived, I had done nothing else but scrub floors, wash windows and walls, sweep patios and corridors.

Cleaning tasks had always distracted me from my problems; had always given me solace. Not this time.

Regardless of how eagerly I went about my chores, I **couldn't** still the anguish; the aching void within me.

A quick rustling of leaves interrupted my cleaning chores.

I went outside to look.

There was a strong wind blowing through the trees. Its force startled me.

I was ready to close the windows when the wind abruptly died out.

A profound melancholy settled over the yard, over the bushes and trees, over the flower and vegetable patches. Even the bright purple **bougainvillea** hanging over the wall added to the sadness.

I walked over to the Spanish colonial-motif fountain, built in the middle of the yard, and knelt on the wide stone ledge.

Absent-mindedly, I picked out the leaves and the blossoms that had fallen in the water.

Then, bending over, I searched for my image on the smooth surface.

Next to my face appeared the very beautiful, stark, and angular face of **Florinda**.

Dumbfounded, I watched her reflection, mesmerized by her large, dark, luminous eyes, which contrasted dazzlingly with her braided white hair.

Slowly, she smiled. I smiled back.

"I **didn't** hear you come," I whispered, afraid that her image might vanish; afraid that she might be only a dream.

She let her hand rest on my shoulder, then sat beside me on the stone ledge.

"I'm going to be with you only for a moment," she said. "I'll come back later, though."

I turned around and poured out all the anguish and despair that had accumulated in me.

Florinda stared at me.

Her face reflected an immeasurable sadness.

There were sudden tears in her eyes; tears that were gone as fast as they had come.

Where is **Isidoro Baltazar**?" I asked her.

I averted my face and gave free rein to my pent-up tears.

It **wasn't** self-pity or even sorrow that made me weep, but a deep sense of failure; of guilt and loss. It was drowning me.

Florinda had certainly warned me in the past about such feelings.

"Tears are meaningless for sorcerers," she said in her deep, husky voice:

"When you joined the sorcerers' world you were made to understand that the designs of fate, no matter what they are, are merely challenges that a sorcerer must face without resentment or self-pity."

She paused for a moment, then in her familiar, relentless manner she repeated what she had said to me on previous occasions.

"**Isidoro Baltazar** is no longer a man but a **nagual**.

"He may have accompanied the old **nagual**; in which case he'll never return. But then, he may not have."

But why did he..." My voice died away before I had asked the question.

"I really don't know at this time," **Florinda** said, raising her hand to forestall my protest:

"It is your challenge to rise above this; and as you know, challenges are not discussed or resented.

"Challenges are actively met.

"Sorcerers either succeed in meeting their challenges, or they fail at it.

"And it **doesn't** really matter which, as long as they are in command."

Irked by the prosaicness of her feelings and attitudes, I said resentfully, "How do you expect me to be in command when the sadness is killing me? **Isidoro Baltazar** is gone forever."

She retorted sternly, "Why don't you heed my suggestion; and behave impeccably regardless of your feelings,"

Her temper was as quick as her brilliant smile.

"How can I possibly do that? I know that if the **nagual** is gone the game is over."

"You don't need the **nagual** to be an impeccable sorceress," she remarked:

"Your impeccability should lead you to him even if he's no longer in the world.

"To live impeccably within your circumstances is your challenge.

"Whether you see **Isidoro Baltazar** tomorrow, in a year, or at the end of your life should make no difference to you."

Florinda turned her back to me.

She was silent for a long time.

When she faced me again, her face was calm and oddly bland, like a mask, as though she were making a great effort to control her emotions. There was something so sad about her eyes it made me forget my own anguish.

Let me tell you a story, young woman," she said in an unusually harsh voice, as if her tone was meant to cancel the pain in her eyes:

"I **didn't** go with the **nagual Mariano Aureliano** and his party; and neither did **Zuleica**. Do you know why?"

Numb with anticipation and fear, I stared at her, openmouthed. "No, **Florinda**. I don't," I finally managed to say.

Her voice now low and soft, she said, "We are here because we don't belong to that party of **sorcercers**. We do, but then we don't really.

"Our feelings are with another **nagual**, the **nagual Julian**, our teacher.

"The **nagual Mariano Aureliano** is our cohort, and the **nagual Isidoro Baltazar**, our pupil.

Like yourself, we've been left behind.

"You, because you were not ready to go with them.

"We, because we need more energy to take a greater jump; and join perhaps another band of warriors; a much older band. The **nagual Julian's**."

I could feel **Florinda's** aloneness and solitude like a fine mist settling all around me. I barely dared to breathe lest she stop talking.

At great length she told me about her teacher, the **nagual Julian**;

famous by all accounts.

Her descriptions of him were compressed, yet so evocative I could see him before my very eyes: the most dashing being that ever lived.

Funny, sharp-witted, and fast-thinking; an incorrigible prankster. A storyteller.

A magician who handled perception as a master baker handles dough, kneading it into any shape or form without ever losing sight of it.

To be with the **nagual Julian**, **Florinda** assured me, was something unforgettable. She confessed that she loved him beyond words, beyond feelings. And so did **Zuleica**.

Florinda was silent for a long time, her gaze fixed on the distant mountains, as if drawing strength from those sharp-edged peaks.

When she spoke again her voice was a barely audible whisper. "The world of sorcerers is a world of solitariness, yet in it, love is forever.

"Like my love for the **nagual Julian**.

"We move in the world of sorcerers all by ourselves, accounting only for our acts, our feelings, and our impeccability." She nodded, as if to underline her words:

"I've no longer any feelings. Whatever I had went away with the **nagual Julian**.

"All I have left is my sense of will, of duty, and of purpose.

"Perhaps you and I are in the same boat." She said this so smoothly that it passed before I realized what she had said.

I stared at her, and as always, I was dazzled by her splendid beauty and youthfulness which the years had left bewitchingly intact.

"Not me, **Florinda**," I finally said:

"You had the **nagual Isidoro Baltazar** and me and all the other disciples I've heard about. I have nothing. I don't even have my old world."

There was no self-pity in me, only a devastating knowledge that my life, as I had known it until now, had ended.

I said, "The **nagual Isidoro Baltazar** is mine, by right of my power. I'll wait, dutifully, a bit longer, but if he's not here in this world anymore, neither am I. I know what to do!"

My voice trailed off as I realized that **Florinda** was no longer listening to me.

She was absorbed in watching a small crow making its way toward us along the fountain ledge.

"That's Dionysus," I said, reaching into my pocket for his pieces of tortilla.

I had none with me.

I looked up at the marvelously clear sky.

I had been so engrossed in my sadness, I **hadn't** noticed that it was already past noon, the time this little crow usually came for its food.

Florinda said, "That fellow is quite upset."

She laughed at the bird's outraged **caws**, then looked me in the eye and said, "You and the crow are quite alike. You get easily upset; and you're both quite loud about it."

I could barely contain myself from blurting out that the same could be said about her.

Florinda chuckled, as though she knew the effort I was making not to weep.

The crow had perched on my empty hand and stared at me sidelong with its shiny, **pebblelike** eyes.

The bird opened its wings but **didn't** fly away. Its black feathers sparkled blue in the sun.

I calmly told **Florinda** that the pressures of the sorcerers' world were unbearable.

"Nonsense!" she chided, as if she were talking to a spoiled child:

"Look, we scared Dionysus away." Enraptured, **Florinda** watched the crow circle over our heads; then she fixed her attention back on me.

I averted my face.

I **didn't** know why, for there was nothing unkind in the gaze of those shiny, dark eyes.

Florinda's eyes were calm and utterly indifferent as she said, "If you can't catch up with **Isidore Baltazar**, then I and the rest of the sorcerers who taught you would have failed to impress you.

"We would have failed to challenge you.

"It's not a final loss for us, but it certainly will be a final loss for you."

Seeing that I was about to weep again, she challenged me, "Where is your impeccable purpose? What happened to all the things you've learned with us?"

"What if I never catch up with **Isidore Baltazar**?" I asked tearfully.

"Can you go on living in the sorcerers' world if you don't make an effort to find out?" she asked sharply.

"This is a time when I need kindness," I mumbled, closing my eyes to prevent my tears from spilling. "I need my mother. If I could only go to her."

I was surprised at my own words, yet I really meant them.

Unable to hold back my tears any longer I began to weep.

Florinda laughed: She **wasn't** mocking me.

There was a note of kindness, of sympathy in her laughter.

"You're so far away from your mother," she said softly, with a pensive, distant look in her eyes, "that you'll never find her again."

Her voice was but a soft whisper as she went on to say that the sorcerers' life builds impassable barriers around us.

Sorcerers, she reminded me, don't find solace in the sympathy of others or in self-pity.

"You think that all my torment is caused by self-pity, don't you, **Florinda**?"

"No. Not just self-pity but morbidity, too."

She put her arms around my shoulders and hugged me as if I were a small child.

"Most women are damn morbid, you know," she murmured. "You and I are among them."

I **didn't** agree with her, yet I had no desire to contradict her.

I was far too happy with her arms around me.

In spite of my somber mood, I had to smile. **Florinda**, like all the other women in the sorcerers' world, lacked the facility to express maternal feelings. And although I liked to kiss and hug the people I loved, I **couldn't** bear to be in someone's arms for more than an instant.

Florinda's embrace was not as warm and soothing as my mother's, but it was all I could hope to get.

Then she went into the house.

I came suddenly awake.

For a moment I simply lay there- on the ground at the foot of the fountain- trying to remember something **Florinda** had said before I fell asleep in the leaf-spotted sunlight.

I had obviously slept for hours. Although the sky was still bright, the evening shadows had already stolen into the yard.

I was about to look for **Florinda** in the house when an unearthly sounding laughter echoed across the yard: It was the same laughter I had heard during the night.

I waited and listened.

The silence around me was unsettling. Nothing chirped; nothing hummed; nothing moved.

Yet, still as it was, I could sense noiseless footsteps, silent as shadows, behind me.

I wheeled around. At the far edge of the yard, almost concealed by the blooming **hougainvillea**, I saw somebody sitting on a wooden bench. Her back was turned to me, but I immediately recognized her.

"**Zuleica**?" I whispered uncertainly, afraid that the sound of my voice might scare her away.

"How happy I am to see you again," she said, beckoning me to sit beside her.

Her deep, clear voice, vibrant with the briskness of the desert air, **didn't** seem to come from her body but from far away.

I wanted to embrace her, but I knew better. **Zuleica** never liked to be touched, so I just sat beside her and told her that I, too, was happy to see her again.

To my utter surprise, she clasped my hand in hers; a small, delicate hand.

Her pale, **copperish**-pink, beautiful face was oddly blank. All the life was concentrated in her incredible eyes: neither black nor brown but strangely in between; and oddly clear.

She fixed her eyes on me in a prolonged stare.

"When did you get here?" I asked.

"Just this moment," **Zuleica** replied, her lips curling into an angelic smile.

"How did you get here? Did **Florinda** come with you?"

"**Oh**, you know," **Zuleica** said vaguely, "women sorcerers come and go unnoticed:

"Nobody pays attention to a woman, especially if she's old.

"Now, a beautiful young woman, on the other hand, attracts everybody's attention.

"That's why women sorcerers should always be disguised if they are handsome.

"If they are averagely homely, they have nothing to worry about."

Zuleica's sudden light tap on my shoulder jolted me.

She clasped my hand again, as though to dispel my doubts, then gazed at me calmly and keenly and said, "To be in the sorcerers' world one has to dream superbly."

She looked away.

An almost full moon hung over the distant mountains.

"Most people don't have the wits nor the size of spirit to dream.

"They cannot help but see the world as ordinary and repetitious; and

do you know why?" she asked, fixing me with her keen gaze:

"Because if you don't fight to avoid it, the world is indeed ordinary and repetitious.

"Most people are so involved with themselves that they have become idiotic.

"Idiots have no desire to fight to avoid ordinariness and repetitiousness."

Zuleica rose from the bench and put on her sandals.

She tied her shawl around her waist so her long skirt **wouldn't** drag, and walked to the middle of the patio.

I knew what she was going to do before she even started. She was going to spin. She was going to perform a dance in order to gather cosmic energy. Women sorcerers believe that by moving their bodies they can get the strength necessary to dream.

With a barely perceptible gesture of her chin, she motioned me to follow her and imitate her movements.

She glided on the dark brown Mexican tiles and brown bricks that had been laid out in an ancient **Toltec** pattern by **Isidore Baltazar**; a **sorceric** design binding generations of sorcerers and dreamers throughout the ages in webs of secrets and feats of power- a design into which he had put himself, around and inside it, with all his strength, all his intent, willing myth and dream into reality.

Zuleica moved with the certainty and agility of a young dancer.

Her movements were simple, yet they required so much speed, balance, and concentration that they left me exhausted.

With uncanny agility and swiftness, she spun around, away from me.

For an instant she vacillated amidst the shadows of the trees, as though to make sure I was following her.

Then she headed toward the recessed, arched doorway built into the wall encircling the grounds behind the house.

She paused momentarily by the two citrus trees growing outside the walls; the ones that stood like two sentries on either side of the path leading to the small house across the chaparral.

Afraid of losing sight of her, I dashed along the narrow, dark trail.

Then, curious and eager, I followed her inside the house, all the way to the back room.

Instead of turning on the light, she reached for an oil lamp hanging from one of the rafters.

She lit it. The lamp cast a flickering glow all around us but left the corners of the room in shadows.

Kneeling in front of the only piece of furniture in the room; a wooden chest sitting under the window, she pulled out a mat and a blanket.

"Lie down, on your stomach," she said softly, spreading the mat on the tiled floor.

I heaved a deep sigh and gave in to a pleasant sense of helplessness as I lay, face down, on the mat.

A feeling of peace and well-being spread through my body.

I felt her hands on my back: She **wasn't** massaging me but tapping my back lightly.

Although I had often been in the small house, I still **didn't** know how many rooms it had or how it was furnished.

Florinda had once told me that that house was the center of their

adventure.

It was there, she said, where the old **nagual** and his sorcerers wove their magic web.

Like a spider's web, invisible and resilient, it held them when they plunged into the unknown, into the darkness and the light, as sorcerers do routinely.

She had also said that the house was a symbol.

The sorcerers of her group **didn't** have to be in the house or even in its vicinity when they plunged into the unknown through dreaming.

Everywhere they went, they carried the feeling; the mood of the house in their hearts.

And that feeling and mood, whatever they were for each of them, gave them the strength to face the everyday world with wonder and delight.

Zuleica's sharp tap on my shoulder startled me. "Turn on your back," she commanded.

I did so.

Her face, as she bent down, was radiant with energy and purpose.

"Myths are dreams of extraordinary dreamers," she said:

"You need a great deal of courage and concentration in order to maintain them.

"And above all, you need a great deal of imagination.

"You are living a myth, a myth that has been handed down to you for safekeeping."

She spoke in a tone that was almost reverent. "You cannot be the recipient of this myth unless you are irreproachable.

"If you are not, the myth will simply move away from you."

I opened my mouth to speak, to say that I understood all that, but I saw the hardness in her eyes.

She was not there to have a dialogue with me.

The repetitive sound of branches brushing against the wall outside died out and turned into a throb in the air; a pulsating sound that I felt rather than heard.

I was on the verge of falling asleep when **Zuleica** said that I should follow the commands of the repetitive dream I had had.

"How did you know I've been having that dream?" I asked, alarmed, trying to sit up.

"Don't you remember that we share one another's dreams?" she whispered, pushing me back onto the mat:

"I'm the one who brings you dreams."

"It was just a dream, **Zuleica**." My voice trembled because I was seized by a desperate desire to weep.

I knew it **wasn't** just a dream, but I wanted her to lie to me.

Shaking her head, she looked at me. "No. It **wasn't** just a dream," she said quietly. "It was a sorcerers' dream, a vision."

"What should I do?"

"**Didn't** the dream tell you what to do?" she asked in a challenging tone. "**Didn't Florinda?**"

She watched me with an inscrutable expression on her face.

Then she smiled, a shy, childlike smile.

"You have to understand that you cannot run after **Isidore Baltazar**. He's no longer in the world.

"There is nothing you can give him or do for him anymore.

"You cannot be attached to the **nagual** as a person, but only as a mythical being."

Her voice was soft yet commanding as she repeated that I was living a myth.

"The sorcerers' world is a mythical world separated from the everyday one by a mysterious barrier made out of dreams and commitments.

"Only if the **nagual** is supported and upheld by his fellow dreamers can he lead them into other viable worlds from which he can entice the bird of freedom."

Her words faded in the shadows of the room as she added that the support **Isidore Baltazar** needed was dreaming energy, not worldly feelings and actions.

After a long silence, she spoke again.

"You have witnessed how the old **nagual**, as well as **Isidore Baltazar**, by their mere presence, affect whoever is around them; be it their fellow sorcerers or just bystanders; making them aware that the world is a mystery where nothing can be taken for granted under any circumstances."

I nodded in agreement.

For a long time I had been at a loss to understand how **naguals** could, by their mere presence, make such a difference.

After careful observation, comparing opinions with others, and endless introspection, I concluded that their influence stemmed from their renunciation of worldly concerns.

In our daily world, we also have examples of men and women who have left worldly concerns behind. We call them mystics, saints, religious people.

But **naguals** are neither mystics nor saints and are certainly not religious men.

Naguals are worldly men without a shred of worldly concerns.

At a subliminal level, this contradiction has the most tremendous effect on whoever is around them.

The minds of those who are around a **nagual** can't grasp what is affecting them, yet they feel the impact in their bodies as a strange anxiety, an urge to break loose, or as a sense of inadequacy, as if something transcendental is taking place somewhere else, and they can't get to it.

But the **naguals'** built-in capacity to affect others **doesn't** only depend on their lack of worldly concerns or on the force of their personalities; but rather on the force of their unrepachable behavior.

Naguals are unrepachable [* unrepachable- not criticizing] in their actions and feelings; regardless of the ambushes- worldly or otherworldly- placed on their interminable path.

It **isn't** that **naguals** follow a prescribed pattern of rules and regulations in order to have unrepachable behavior, for there are no rules and regulations.

Rather, they use their imaginations for adopting or adapting to whatever it takes to make their actions fluid.

For their deeds, **naguals**, unlike average men, don't seek approval, respect, praise, or any kind of acknowledgment from anyone, including their fellow sorcerers.

All they seek is their own sense of flawlessness; of innocence, of integrity.

It is this that makes a **nagual's** company addictive.

Others become dependent on his freedom as one would to a drug.

To a **nagual**, the world is always brand new.

In his company, one begins to look at the world as if it had never happened before.

"That's because **naguals** have broken the mirror of self-reflection," **Zuleica** said, as if she had followed my train of thoughts.

"**Naguals** are able to see themselves in the mirror of fog which reflects only the unknown.

"It is a mirror that no longer reflects our normal humanity expressed in repetition; but reveals the face of infinity.

"Sorcerers believe that when the face of self-reflection and the face of infinity merge, a **nagual** is totally ready to break the boundaries of reality and disappear as though he **wasn't** made of solid matter.

"**Isidore Baltazar** had been ready for a long time."

"He can't leave me behind!" I cried out. "That would be too unfair."

"It's downright foolish to think in terms of fairness and unfairness,"

Zuleica said:

"In the sorcerers' world, there is only power.

"**Didn't** every one of us teach you that?"

"There are many things I learned," I conceded gloomily.

After a few moments, I mumbled under my breath, "But they are not worth anything at the moment."

"They are worth the most now," she contradicted me:

"If you have learned one thing, it's that at the bleakest moments warriors rally their power to carry on. A warrior **doesn't** succumb to despair."

"Nothing of what I've learned and experienced can alleviate my sadness and despair," I said softly:

"I've even tried the spiritual chants I learned from my nanny, and **Florinda** laughed at me. She thinks am an idiot."

"**Florinda** is right," **Zuleica** pronounced:

"Our magical world has nothing to do with chants and incantations; with rituals and bizarre behavior.

"Our magical world, which is a dream, is willed into being by the concentrated desire of those who participate in it.

"It is held intact at every moment by the sorcerers' tenacious wills; the same way the everyday world is held together by everybody's tenacious will."

She stopped abruptly.

She seemed to have caught herself in the middle of a thought that she **didn't** wish to express.

Then she smiled. Making a humorous, helpless gesture, she added, "To dream our dream, you have to be dead."

"Does that mean I have to drop dead right here and now?" I asked in a voice that was getting hoarse. "You know that I am ready for that, at a drop of a hat."

Zuleica's face lit up, and she laughed as though I had told the best of jokes.

Seeing that I was as serious as I could be, she hastened to clarify, "No,

no.

"To die means to cancel all your holdings; to drop everything you have, everything you are."

"That's nothing new," I said. "I did that the moment I joined your world."

"Obviously you didn't. Otherwise you wouldn't be in such a mess.

"If you had died the way sorcery demands, you would feel no anguish now."

"What would I feel, then?"

"Duty! Purpose!"

"My anguish has nothing to do with my sense of purpose," I shouted.

"It's apart, independent. I am alive and feel sadness and love. How can I avoid that?"

Zuleica clarified, "You're not supposed to avoid it, but to overcome it.

"If warriors have nothing, they feel nothing."

"What kind of an empty world is that?" I asked defiantly.

"Empty is the world of indulging, because indulging cuts off everything else except indulging."

She gazed at me eagerly, as if expecting me to agree with her statement. "So it's a lopsided world; boring, repetitious.

"For sorcerers, the antidote of indulging is dying. And they don't just think about it, they do it."

A cold shiver went up my back.

I swallowed and remained silent, looking at the splendid sight of the moon shining through the window.

"I really don't understand what you're saying, **Zuleica**."

"You understand me perfectly well," she maintained. "Your dream began when you met me.

"Now it's time for another dream. But this time, dream dead. Your error was to dream alive."

"What does that mean?" I asked restlessly:

"Don't torment me with riddles. You, yourself, told me that only male sorcerers drive themselves nuts with riddles. You're doing the same to me now."

Zuleica's laughter echoed from wall to wall. It rustled like dry leaves pushed by the wind.

"To dream alive means to have hope. It means that you hold on to your dream for dear life.

"To dream dead means that you dream without hope. You dream without holding on to your dream."

Not trusting myself to speak, all I could do was to nod.

Florinda had told me that freedom is a total absence of concern about oneself; a lack of concern achieved when the imprisoned bulk of energy within ourselves is untied.

She had said that this energy is released only when we can arrest the exalted conception we have of ourselves; of our importance; an importance we feel must not be violated or mocked.

Zuleica's voice was clear but seemed to come from a great distance as she added, "The price of freedom is very high.

"Freedom can only be attained by dreaming without hope; by being willing to lose all, even the dream.

"For some of us, to dream without hope; to struggle with no goal in

mind, is the only way to keep up with the bird of freedom."

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Florinda Donner - Being in Dreaming: Book Start

Version 2007.03.16

Being in Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World - 1991 by

Florinda Donner

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For all those who dream sorcerers' dreams.

And for the few who dreamt them with me.

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Version 2007.03.20

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by Taisha Abelar

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Arkana THE SORCERERS' CROSSING

Taisha Abelar is a member of the same informal society of sorcerers that includes Carlos Castaneda.

With affection for all
who journey into the unknown
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Foreword by Carlos Castaneda

HTML EDITOR

It is a sorcerer's idea that the parameters of our normal perception have been imposed upon us as part of our socialization, not quite arbitrarily, but laid down mandatorily nonetheless.

END HTML EDITOR

Taisha Abelar is one of a group of three women that were deliberately trained by some sorcerers from Mexico; under the guidance of Don Juan Matus.

I have written at length about my own training under him, but I have never written anything about this specific group, of which Taisha Abelar is a member.

It was a tacit agreement among all of those who were under don Juan's tutelage that nothing should be said about them.

For over twenty years we have upheld this agreement.

Even though we have worked and lived in close proximity, never have we talked with one another about our personal experiences.

In fact, never had there been an opportunity even to exchange our views about what specifically don Juan or the sorcerers of his group did to each one of us.

And such a condition was not contingent upon don Juan's presence.

After he and his group left the world, we continued to adhere to it, simply because we had no desire to use our energy to review any previous agreements.

All our available time and energy was employed in validating for ourselves what don Juan had so painstakingly taught us.

Don Juan had taught us sorcery as a pragmatic endeavor by means of which any of us can directly perceive energy.

He had maintained that in order to perceive energy in such a fashion, we need freedom from our normal capacity to perceive.

To free ourselves and directly perceive energy was a task that took all we had.

It is a sorcerer's idea that the parameters of our normal perception have been imposed upon us as part of our socialization, not quite arbitrarily, but laid down mandatorily nonetheless.

One aspect of these obligatory parameters is an interpretation system which processes sensory data into meaningful units; and renders the social order as a structure of interpretation.

Our normal functioning within the social order requires a blind and faithful adherence to all its precepts; none of which call for the possibility of directly perceiving energy.

For example, don Juan maintained that it is possible to perceive human beings as fields of energy; like huge, oblong, whitish luminous eggs.

In order to accomplish the feat of heightening our perception, we need internal energy.

Thus, the problem of making internal energy available to fulfill such a task becomes the key issue for students of sorcery.

Circumstances proper to our time and place have made it possible now for Taisha Abelar to write about her training, which was the same as mine, and yet thoroughly different.

The writing took her a long time, because, first, she had to avail herself of the sorcery means to write.

Don Juan Matus himself gave me the task of writing about his sorcery knowledge; and he himself set the mood of this by saying, "Don't write like a writer, but like a sorcerer."

He meant that I had to do it in a state of enhanced awareness which

sorcerers call 'dreaming.'

It took **Taisha Abelar** many years to perfect her dreaming to the point of making it the sorcery means to write.

In don **Juan**'s world, sorcerers, depending on their basic temperaments, were divided into two complementary factions: 'dreamers' and '**stalkers**'.

Dreamers are those sorcerers who have the inherent facility to enter into states of heightened awareness by controlling their dreams.

This facility is developed through training into an art: the art of dreaming.

Stalkers, on the other hand, are those sorcerers who have the innate facility to deal with facts and are capable of entering states of heightened awareness by manipulating and controlling their own behavior.

Through sorcery training, this natural capability is turned into the art of stalking.

Although everybody in don **Juan**'s party of sorcerers had a complete knowledge of both arts, they were arranged in one faction or the other.

Taisha Abelar was grouped with the **stalkers** and trained by them.

Her book bears the mark of her stupendous training as a stalker.

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Taisha Abelar - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Preface

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha**

Abelar

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Preface

I have devoted my life to the practice of a rigorous discipline which for lack of a more suitable name we have called sorcery.

I am also an anthropologist, having received my **Ph.D.** in that field of study.

I mention my two areas of expertise in this particular order because my involvement with sorcery came first.

Usually, one becomes an anthropologist and then one does fieldwork on an aspect of culture- for example, the study of sorcery practices.

With me, it happened the other way around: as a student of sorcery I went to study anthropology.

In the late sixties, while I was living in **Tucson, Arizona**, I met a Mexican woman by the name of **Clara Grau**, who invited me to stay in her house in the state of **Sonora**, Mexico.

There, she did her utmost to usher me into her world.

Clara Grau was a sorceress; part of a cohesive group of sixteen sorcerers.

Some of them were Yaqui Indians; others were Mexicans of various origins and backgrounds, ages and sexes. Most were women.

All of them pursued, single-heartedly, the same goal: breaking the perceptual dispositions and biases that imprison us within the boundaries of the normal everyday world and prevent us from entering other perceivable worlds.

For sorcerers, to break such perceptual dispositions enables one to cross a barrier and leap into the unimaginable.

They call such a leap "the sorcerers' crossing."

Sometimes they refer to it as 'the abstract flight,' because it entails

soaring from the side of the concrete; the physical, to the side of expanded perception and impersonal abstract forms.

These sorcerers were interested in helping me accomplish this abstract flight so that I could join them in their basic endeavors.

For me, academic training became an integral part of my preparation for the sorcerers' crossing.

The leader, or '**nagual**' as he is called, of the sorcerers' group with whom I am associated, is a person with a keen interest in formal academic erudition.

Hence, all those under his care were encouraged to develop their capacity for the abstract, clear thinking that he acquired in a modern university.

As a woman, I had an even greater obligation to fulfill this requirement.

Women in general are conditioned from early childhood to depend on the male members of our society to conceptualize and initiate changes.

The sorcerers that trained me had very strong opinions in this regard.

They felt that it is indispensable that women develop their intellects and enhance their capacity for analysis and abstraction in order to have a better grasp of the world around them.

Also, training the intellect is a **bona-fide** sorcerers' subterfuge.

By deliberately keeping the mind occupied in analysis and reasoning, sorcerers are free to explore, unimpeded, other areas of perception.

In other words, while the rational side is busy with the formality of academic pursuits, the energetic or nonrational side, which sorcerers call 'the double', is occupied with the fulfillment of sorcery tasks.

In this way, the suspicious and analytic mind is less likely to interfere or even notice what is going on at a nonrational level.

The counterpart of my academic development was the enhancement of my capacity for awareness and perception: together the two develop our total being.

Working together as a unit, they took me away from the taken-for-granted life that I had been born into and socialized for as a woman; to a new area of greater perceptual possibilities than what the normal world had in store for me.

That is not to say that solely my commitment to the world of sorcery was enough to assure my success.

The pull of the daily world is so strong and sustained that in spite of their most assiduous training, all practitioners find themselves again and again in the midst of the most abject terror, stupidity and indulging, as if they had learned nothing.

My teachers warned me that I was no exception, and that only a minute to minute relentless struggle can balance one's natural but stupefying insistence to remain unchanged.

After a careful examination of my final aims, I, in conjunction with my cohorts, arrived at the conclusion that I have to describe my training in order to emphasize to seekers of the unknown the importance of developing the ability to perceive more than we do with normal perception.

Such enhanced perception has to be a sober, pragmatic, new way of perceiving.

It cannot be, under any condition, merely the continuation of

perceiving the world of everyday life.

The events I narrate here depict the initial stages of sorcery training for a stalker.

This phase involves the cleansing of one's habitual ways of thinking, behaving and feeling by means of a traditional sorcery undertaking, one which all neophytes need to perform, called 'the recapitulation'.

To complement the recapitulation, I was taught a series of practices called 'sorcery passes', involving movement and breathing.

To give these practices an adequate coherence, I was instructed with the accompanying philosophical rationales and explanations.

The goal of everything I was taught was the redistribution of my normal energy, and the enhancement of it, so that it could be used for the out-of-the-ordinary feats of perception demanded by sorcery training.

The idea behind the training is that as soon as the compulsive pattern of old habits, thoughts, expectations and feelings is broken by means of the recapitulation, one is indisputably in the position to accumulate enough energy to live by the new rationales provided by the sorcery tradition- and to substantiate those rationales by directly perceiving a different reality.

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 1

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha](#)

[Abelar](#)

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Chapter 1

I had walked to an isolated spot away from the highway and people in order to sketch the early morning shadows on the unique lava mountains that fringe the [Gran Desierto](#), in southern [Arizona](#).

The dark brown jagged rocks sparkled as bursts of sunlight illuminated their peaks. Strewn on the ground around me were huge chunks of porous rocks, remnants of the lava flow from a gigantic volcanic eruption.

Making myself comfortable on a large clump of rock and oblivious to anything else, I had sunk into my work, as I often did in that rugged, beautiful place.

I had finished outlining the promontories and depressions of the distant mountains when I noticed a woman watching me.

It annoyed me no end that someone would disturb my solitude. I tried my utmost to ignore her, but when she moved nearer to look at my work, I turned around in anger to face her.

Her high cheekbones and shoulder-length black hair made her look Eurasian. She had a smooth, creamy complexion, so it was difficult to judge her age; she could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty. She was perhaps two inches taller than I, which would have made her five nine, but with her powerful frame, she looked twice my size. Yet, in her black silk pants and Oriental jacket, she seemed extremely fit.

I noticed her eyes. They were green and sparkling.

It was that friendly gleam that made my anger vanish, and I heard myself asking the woman an inane question, "Do you live around here?"

"No," she said, taking a few steps toward me. "I m on my way to the [U.S.](#) border checkpoint at [Sonoyta](#).

"I stopped to stretch my legs and ended up in this isolated spot.

"I was so surprised to see someone out here, so far away from everything, that I couldn't help intruding the way I have. Let me introduce myself. My name is [Clara Grau](#)."

She extended her hand and I shook it, and without the slightest hesitation I told her that I was given the name [Taisha](#) when I was born, but later, my parents didn't think the name was American enough and began calling me [Martha](#), after my mother. I detested that name and decided on Mary instead.

"How interesting!" she mused. "You have three names that are so different. I ll call you [Taisha](#), since it's your birth name."

I was glad she had selected that name. It was the one I had chosen nyself. Although at first I had agreed with my parents about the name being too foreign, I had disliked the name [Martha](#) so much that I ended up making [Taisha](#) my secret name.

In a harsh tone that she immediately concealed behind a benign smile, she bombarded me with a series of statements in the guise of questions. "You re not from [Arizona](#)," she began.

I responded to her truthfully, an unusual thing for me to do, accustomed as I was to being cautious with people, especially strangers.

"I came to [Arizona](#) a year ago to work."

"You couldn't be more than twenty."

"I ll be twenty-one in a couple of months."

"You have a slight accent. You don't seem to be an American, but I can't pinpoint your exact nationality."

"I am an American, but as a child I lived in Germany," I said. "My father is American and my mother, Hungarian. I left home when I went to college and never went back, because I didn't want to have anything more to do with my family."

"I take it you didn't get along with them?"

"No. I was miserable. I couldn't wait to leave home."

She smiled and nodded as if she was familiar with the feeling of wanting to escape.

"Are you married?" the woman asked.

"No. I don't have anyone in the world." I said that with the touch of self-pity I had always had whenever I talked about myself.

She didn't make any comment, but spoke calmly and precisely as if she wanted to put me at ease and at the same time convey as much information about herself as she could with each of her sentences.

As she talked, I put my drawing pencils in my case but without taking my eyes away from her. I didn't want to give her the impression I wasn't listening.

"I was an only child and both my parents are dead now," she said. "My father's family are Mexican from [Oaxaca](#). But my mother's family are Americans of German descent. They are from back east, but now live in Phoenix. I just returned from the wedding of one of my cousins."

"Do you also live in Phoenix?" I asked.

"I ve lived half my life in [Arizona](#) and the other half in Mexico," she replied. "But for the past years, my home has been in the state of [Sonora](#), Mexico."

I began to zip up my portfolio. Meeting and talking to this woman had so unsettled me that I knew I wouldn't be able to do any more work that

day.

"I've also traveled to the Orient," she said, regaining my attention.

"There, I learned acupuncture and the martial and healing arts. I've even lived for a number of years in a Buddhist temple."

"Really?" I glanced at her eyes. They had the look of a person who meditated a great deal. They were fiery, and yet tranquil.

"I'm very interested in the Orient," I said, "especially in Japan. I also have studied Buddhism and the martial arts."

"Really?" she said, echoing me. "I wish I could tell you my Buddhist name, but secret names **shouldn't** be revealed except under the proper circumstances."

"I told you my secret name," I said, tightening the straps of my portfolio.

"Yes, **Taisha**, you did, and that's very significant to me," she replied with undue seriousness. "But still, right now it's time only for introductions."

"Did you drive here?" I asked, scanning the area for her car.

"I was just going to ask you the same question," she said.

"I left my car about a quarter of a mile back, on a dirt road south of here. Where is yours?"

"Is your car a white **Chevrolet**?" she asked cheerfully.

"Yes."

"Well, mine is parked next to it." She giggled as if she had said something funny. I was surprised to find her laughter so irritating.

"I've got to go now," I said. "It's been very pleasant meeting you. Good-bye!"

I started to walk to my car, thinking that the woman would remain behind admiring the scenery.

"Let's not say good-bye yet," she protested. "I'm coming with you."

We walked together. Next to my one hundred and ten pounds, the woman was like a huge boulder. Her midsection was round and powerful. She projected the feeling that she could easily have been obese, but she **wasn't**.

"May I ask you a personal question, **Mrs. Grau**?" I said, just to break the awkward silence.

She stopped walking and faced me.

"I'm not anybody's **Mrs.**," she snapped. "I am **Clara Grau**."

"You can call me **Clara**, and, yes, go right ahead and ask me anything you wish."

"I take it you're not partial to love and marriage," I commented, reacting to her tone.

For a second, she gave me a fearsome look, but she softened it instantly, and said, "I'm definitely not partial to slavery, but not only for women."

"Now, what was it that you were going to ask me?"

Her reaction was so unexpected that I lost track of what I was going to ask and embarrassed myself by staring at her.

"What made you walk all the way to this place in particular?" I asked hurriedly.

"I came here because this is a place of energy." She pointed at the lava formations in the distance. "Those mountains were once spewed forth from the heart of the earth, like blood."

"Whenever I'm in **Arizona**, I always make a detour to come here. This place oozes a peculiar earthly energy."

"Now let me ask you the same question, what made you pick this spot?"

"I often come here. It's my favorite place to sketch." I **didn't** mean it as a joke, but she burst out laughing.

"This detail settles it!" she exclaimed, then continued in a quieter tone.

"I'm going to ask you to do something you may consider outlandish or even foolish, but hear me out."

"I'd like you to come to my house and spend a few days as my guest."

I raised my hand to thank her and say no, but she urged me to reconsider. She assured me that our common interest in the Orient and the martial arts warranted a serious exchange of ideas.

"Where exactly do you live?" I asked.

"Near the city of **Navojoa**."

"But that's more than four hundred miles from here."

"Yes, it's quite a distance. But it's so beautiful and peaceful there that I'm certain you would like it."

She kept silent for a moment as if waiting for my reply, then continued, "Besides, I have the feeling that there is nothing definite you're involved in at the moment, and you've been at a loss to find something to do. Well, this could be just the thing you've been waiting for."

She was right about my being completely at a loss as to what to do with my life.

I had just taken some time off from a secretarial job in order to catch up with my artwork, but I certainly **didn't** have the slightest desire to be anyone's house guest.

I looked around, searching the terrain for something that would give me an inkling of what to do next.

I had never been able to explain where I had gotten the idea that one could get help or clues from the surroundings, but I usually did get help that way.

I had a technique, which seemed to have come to me out of nowhere, by means of which I often found options previously unknown to me.

I usually let my thoughts wander away as I fixed my eyes on the southern horizon, although I had no idea why I always picked the south.

After a few minutes of silence, insights usually came to me to help me decide what to do or how to proceed in a particular situation.

I fixed my gaze on the southern horizon while we walked, and suddenly I saw the mood of my life stretched out before me like the barren desert.

I can truthfully say that although I knew that the whole area of southern **Arizona**, a bit of California, and half of the state of **Sonora**, Mexico, is the **Sonoran** Desert, I had never before noticed how lonely and desolate this wasteland was.

It took a moment for the impact of my realization that my life was as empty and barren as that desert to register.

I had broken off with my family, and I had no family of my own. I **didn't** even have any prospects for the future. I had no job. I had lived off a small inheritance left to me by the aunt I was named after, but this

income had run out.

I was utterly alone in the world. The vastness that stretched all around, harsh and indifferent, summoned up in me an overwhelming sense of self-pity. I felt in need of a friend, someone to break the solitude of my life.

I knew it would be foolish to accept **Clara**'s invitation and jump into an unknown situation over which I had no control, but there was something about the directness of her manner and about her physical vitality that aroused in me both curiosity and a feeling of respect.

I found myself admiring and even envying her beauty and strength.

I thought that she was a most striking and powerful woman, independent, self-reliant, indifferent, yet not hard or humorless. She possessed the exact qualities I had always wanted for myself.

But above all, her presence seemed to dispel my barrenness. She made the space around her energetic, vibrant, full of endless possibilities.

Yet still, it was my unbending policy never to accept invitations to people's houses, and certainly not from someone whom I had just met in the wilderness.

I had a small apartment in **Tucson** and to accept invitations meant to me that I had to reciprocate; a thing that I **wasn't** prepared to do.

For a moment, I stood there motionless, not knowing which way to turn.

"Please say that you **ll** come," **Clara** urged. "It would mean a great deal to me."

"All right, I suppose I could visit with you," I said lamely, wanting to say the exact opposite.

She looked at me elated and I immediately disguised my panic with a conviviality I was far from feeling. "It **ll** be good for me to change scenery," I said. "It **ll** be an adventure!"

She nodded approvingly. "You won't regret it," she said with an air of confidence that helped to dispel my doubts. "We can practice martial arts together."

She delivered a few brisk movements with her hand that were at once graceful and powerful. It seemed incongruous to me that this robust woman could be so agile.

Noticing that she easily adopted the stance of a long-pole fighter, I asked, "What specific style of martial arts did you study in the Orient?"

"In the Orient, I studied all the styles, and yet none of them in particular," she replied, with just a hint of a smile. "When we are at my house, I **ll** be happy to demonstrate them."

We walked the rest of the way in silence.

When we reached the place where the cars were parked, I locked my gear in the trunk and waited for **Clara** to say something.

"Well, let's get started," she said. "I **ll** lead the way. Do you drive fast or slow, **Taisha**?"

"At a crawl."

"Me too. Living in China cured me from hurrying."

"May I ask you a question about China, **Clara**?"

"Of course. I **ve** already said that you may ask anything you want without asking permission first."

"You must have been in China before the Second World War. **Isn't** that so?"

"**Oh**, yes. I was there a lifetime ago. I gather that you **ve** never been to mainland China, yourself."

"No. I **ve** only been to Taiwan and Japan."

"Of course things were different before the war," **Clara** mused. "The line to the past was still intact then. Now everything is severed."

I **didn't** know why I was afraid to ask her what she meant by her remark, so I asked instead how long would the drive to her house be.

Clara was disturbingly vague: She only warned me to be prepared for an arduous trip. She softened her tone and added that she found my courage extremely rewarding.

"To go so nonchalantly with a stranger," she said, "is either utterly foolish or tremendously daring."

"Usually I **m** very cautious," I explained, "but this time I **m** not myself at all."

This was the truth, and the more I thought about my inexplicable behavior, the greater became my discomfort.

"Please tell me a little more about yourself," she asked pleasantly.

As if to put me at ease, she came and stood by the door of my car.

Again I found myself conveying true information about myself. "My mother is Hungarian but from an old Austrian family," I said.

"She met my father in England during the Second World War, when the two of them worked in a field hospital. After the war, they moved to the United States and then they went to South Africa."

"Why did they go to South Africa?"

"My mother wanted to be with her relatives that lived there."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have two brothers, a year apart in age. The oldest is twenty-six now."

Her eyes were focused on me.

With an unprecedented ease, I unburdened painful feelings I had kept bottled up all my life.

I told her that I grew up lonely. My brothers never paid attention to me because I was a girl.

When I was little, they used to tie a rope around me and hook me to a post like a dog while they ran around the yard and played soccer. All I could do was tug at my rope and watch them having a good time.

Later, when I was older, I **d** run after them. But by that time they both had bicycles and I could never keep up with them.

When I used to complain to my mother, her usual reply was that boys will be boys, and that I should play with dolls and help around the house.

"Your mother raised you in the traditional European way," she said.

"I know it. But that's no consolation."

Once I had started, it seemed that there was no way for me to stop telling this woman more about my life.

I said that whereas my brothers went on trips and, later, away to school, I had to stay at home.

I wanted to have adventures like the boys, but according to my mother, girls had to learn to make beds and to iron clothes.

"It's adventure enough to take care of a family," my mother used to say. "Women are born to obey."

I was on the verge of tears when I told **Clara** that I had three male masters to serve as far back as I could remember: my father and my two

brothers.

"That sounds like an armful," **Clara** remarked.

"It was terrible. I left home to get as far away from them as I could," I said. "And to have adventures too.

"But so far, I haven't had all that much fun and excitement. I suppose I just **wasn't** brought up to be happy and light-hearted."

Describing my life to a total stranger made me extremely anxious.

I stopped talking and looked at **Clara**, waiting for a reaction that would either alleviate my anxiety or would increase it to the point of making me change my mind and not go with her after all.

"Well, it seems that there's only one thing you know how to do well, so you may as well make the most of it," she said.

I thought she was going to say I could draw or paint, but to my utter chagrin, she added, "All you know how to do is to feel sorry for yourself."

I tightened my fingers on the handle of the car door. "That's not true," I protested. "Who are you to say that?"

She burst out laughing and shook her head. "You and I are very alike," she said:

"We **ve** been taught to be passive, subservient and to adapt to situations; but inside we **re** seething.

We **re** like a volcano ready to erupt; and what makes us even more frustrated is that we have no dreams or expectations except the one of someday finding the right man who will take us out of our misery."

She left me speechless.

"Well? Am I right? Am I right?" she kept asking. "Be honest, am I right?"

I clenched my hands, getting ready to tell her off.

Clara smiled warmly, exuding vigor and a sense of well-being that made me feel that I **didn't** need to lie or hide my feelings from her.

"Yes, you have me pegged," I agreed.

I had to admit that the only thing that gave meaning to my dreary existence, besides my artwork, was the vague hope that someday I would meet a man who would understand me and appreciate me for the special person I was.

"Maybe your life will change for the better," she said in a promissory tone.

She got into her car and signaled me with her hand to follow her.

I became aware then that she had never asked me if I had my passport or enough clothes or money or had other obligations.

That **didn't** frighten or discourage me. I **didn't** know why, but as I released the **handbrake** and began moving, I was certain I had made the right decision. Perhaps my life was going to change after, all.

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Taisha Abelar - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 2

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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Chapter 2

After more than three hours of continuous driving, we stopped for lunch in the city of **Guaymas**.

As I waited for our food to arrive, I glanced out the window at the

narrow street flanking the bay.

A group of shirtless boys were kicking a ball; elsewhere, workers were laying bricks at a construction site; others were taking their noon break, leaning against piles of unopened sacks of cement, sipping **sodas** from bottles.

I **couldn't** help but think that in Mexico everything seemed extra loud and dusty.

"In this restaurant, they serve the most delicious turtle soup," **Clara** said, regaining my attention.

Just then a smiling waitress with a silver front tooth placed two bowls of soup on the table.

Clara politely exchanged a few words with her in Spanish before the waitress hurried off to serve other customers.

"I **ve** never had turtle soup before," I said, picking up a spoon and examining it to see if it was clean.

"You **re** in for a real treat," **Clara** said, watching me wipe my spoon with a paper napkin.

Reluctantly, I tasted a spoonful. The bits of white meat floating in a creamy tomato base were indeed delicious.

I took several more spoonfuls of soup, then asked, "Where do they get the turtles?"

Clara pointed out the window. "Right from the bay."

A handsome, middle-aged man sitting at the table next to ours turned to me and winked.

His gesture, I thought, was more an attempt at being humorous than a sexual innuendo.

He leaned toward me as if we had been addressing him. "The turtle you **re** eating now was a big one," he said in accented English.

Clara looked at me and raised an eyebrow as if she **couldn't** believe the audacity of the stranger.

"This turtle was big enough to feed a dozen hungry people," the man went on. "They catch the turtles in the sea. It takes several men to haul one in."

"I suppose they harpoon them like whales," I remarked.

The man deftly moved his chair to our table. "No, I believe they use large nets," he said. "Then they club them to render them unconscious before slitting open their bellies. That way, the meat **doesn't** get too tough."

My appetite flew out the window. The last thing I wanted was for an insensitive assertive stranger to join us at our table, yet I **didn't** know how to handle the situation.

"Since we **re** on the subject of food, **Guaymas** is famous for its jumbo shrimp," the man continued with a disarming smile. "Let me order some for the two of you."

"I **ve** already done that," **Clara** said cuttingly.

Just then our waitress returned bringing a plate of the largest shrimp I had ever seen. It was enough for a banquet, certainly much more than **Clara** and I could possibly eat, no matter how hungry we were.

Our unwanted companion looked at me waiting to be invited to join our meal.

If I had been alone, he would have succeeded in attaching himself to me against my will.

But **Clara** had other plans and reacted in a decisive manner. She jumped up with feline agility, loomed over the man and looked straight down into his eyes.

"Buzz off, you creep!" she yelled in Spanish. "How dare you sit at our table. My niece is no frigging whore!"

Her stance was so powerful and her tone of voice so shocking that everything in the room came to a halt.

All eyes were focused on our table.

The man cowered so pitifully that I felt sorry for him. He just slid out of the chair and half crawled out of the restaurant.

"I know that you're trained to let men get the best of you, just because they're men," **Clara** said to me after she had sat down again:

"You've always been nice to men, and they've milked you for everything you had. Don't you know that men feed off women's energy!"

I was too embarrassed to argue with her. I felt every eye in the room was on me.

"You let them push you around because you feel sorry for them," **Clara** continued:

"In your heart of hearts you're desperate to take care of a man, any man.

"If that idiot had been a woman, you yourself would never have let her sit down at our table."

My appetite was spoiled beyond repair. I became moody, pensive.

"I see I've hit a sore spot," **Clara** said with a smirk.

"You made a scene; you were rude," I said reproachfully.

"Definitely," she replied, laughing. "But I also scared him half to death."

Her face was so open and she seemed to be so happy that I finally had to laugh, remembering how shocked the man had been.

"I'm just like my mother," I grumbled. "She succeeded in making me a mouse when it comes to men."

The moment I voiced that thought, my depression vanished and I felt hungry again. I polished off almost the whole plate of shrimp.

"There's no feeling comparable to starting a new turn with a full stomach," **Clara** declared.

A pang of fear made the shrimp sit heavy in my stomach.

Because of all the excitement, it **hadn't** occurred to me to ask **Clara** about her house. Maybe it was a shack, like the ones I had seen earlier while driving through the Mexican towns.

What kind of food would I be eating? Perhaps this was going to be my last good meal.

Would I be able to drink the water? I envisioned myself coming down with acute intestinal problems.

I **didn't** know how to ask **Clara** about my accommodations without sounding insulting or ungrateful. **Clara** looked at me critically. She seemed to sense my turmoil.

"Mexico is a harsh place," she said. "You can't let your guard down for an instant. But you'll get used to it.

"The northern part of the country is even more rugged than the rest. People flock to the north in search of work or as a stopping place before crossing the U.S. border.

"They come by **trainloads**. Some stay, others travel inland in boxcars

to work in the huge agricultural enterprises owned by private corporations.

"But there just **isn't** enough food or work for everyone, so the majority go as **braceros** to the United States."

I finished every drop of the soup, feeling guilty about leaving anything behind.

"Tell me more about this area, **Clara**."

"All the Indians here are **Yaquis** who were relocated in **Sonora** by the Mexican government."

"Do you mean they have not always been here?"

"This is their ancestral homeland," **Clara** said, "but in the twenties and thirties, they were uprooted and sent by the **tens** of thousands to central Mexico. Then in the late forties, they were brought back to the **Sonoran** Desert."

Clara poured some mineral water into her glass and then filled mine.

"It's hard to live in the **Sonoran** Desert," she said. "As you saw while driving, the land here is rugged and inhospitable.

"Yet the Indians had no choice but to settle around the shambles of what was once the Yaqui River. There, in ancient times, the original **Yaquis** built their sacred towns and lived in them for hundreds of years until the Spaniards came."

"Will we drive by those towns?" I asked.

"No. We don't have time. I want to get to **Navojoa** before dark. Maybe someday we can take a trip to visit these sacred towns."

"Why are those towns sacred?"

"Because for the Indians the location of each town along the river symbolically corresponds to a spot in their mythical world. These sites, like the lava mountains in **Arizona**, are places of power.

"The Indians have a very rich mythology. They believe they can step in and out of a dream world at a moment's notice. You see, their concept of reality is not like ours.

"According to the Yaqui myths, those towns also exist in the other world," **Clara** went on, "and it is from that ethereal realm that they receive their power. They call themselves the people without reason, to differentiate themselves from us, the people with reason."

"What sort of power do they get?" I asked.

"Their magic, their sorcery, their knowledge: All of that comes down to them directly from the dream world.

"That world is described in their legends and stories. The Yaqui Indians have a rich, extensive oral history."

I looked around the crowded restaurant. I wondered which of the people sitting at the tables, if any, were Indians, and which were Mexican.

Some of the men were tall and wiry, while others were short and stocky. All the people looked foreign to me, and I felt secretly superior and distinctly out of place.

Clara finished the shrimp along with the beans and rice. I felt bloated myself, but in spite of my protests, she insisted on ordering caramel custard for dessert.

"You'd better fill up," she said with a wink. "You never know when you'll have your next meal or what it will consist of. Here in Mexico we always eat the kill of the day."

I knew she was teasing me, and yet I sensed truth in her words.

Earlier I had seen a dead donkey hit by a car on the highway. I knew that the rural areas lack refrigeration and therefore people eat whatever meat is available.

I **couldn't** help wondering what my next meal would be. Silently, I decided to limit my stay with **Clara** to only a couple of days.

In a more serious tone, **Clara** continued her discussion. "Things went from bad to worse for the Indians here," she said. "When the government built a dam as part of a hydroelectric project, it changed the course of the Yaqui River so drastically that the people had to pack up and settle elsewhere."

The harshness of this kind of life clashed with my own upbringing where there was always enough food and comfort. I wondered if coming to Mexico **wasn't** the expression of a deep desire, on my part, for a complete change.

All my life I had been searching for adventure, yet now that I was in its clutches, a dread of the unknown filled me.

I took a bite of the caramel custard and put out of my mind that dread which had sprouted since meeting **Clara** in the **Arizona** desert.

I was glad to be in her company. At the moment, I was well-fed on jumbo shrimp and turtle soup, and even though, as **Clara** herself had intimated, this might be my last good meal, I decided I would have to trust her and allow the adventure to unfold.

Clara insisted on paying the bill.

We filled up the cars with gasoline and were on the road again.

After driving for several more hours, we arrived at **Navojoa**. We **didn't** stop but went through it, leaving the Pan American Highway to turn onto a gravel road heading east.

It was **midafternoon**. I **wasn't** tired at all: In fact, I had enjoyed the remainder of the trip.

The further south we drove, the more a sense of happiness and well-being replaced my habitual neurotic and depressed state.

After more than one hour of a bumpy ride, **Clara** veered off the road and signaled for me to follow.

We coasted on hard ground along a high wall topped by a flowering bougainvillea.

We parked in a clearing of well-packed earth at the end of the wall.

"This is where I live," she called to me as she eased herself out of the driver's seat.

I walked to her car. She looked tired and seemed to have grown bigger. "You look as fresh as when we started," she commented. "**Ah**, the marvels of youth!"

On the other side of the wall, completely hidden by trees and dense shrubs, loomed a huge house with a tile roof, barred windows and several balconies.

In a daze, I followed **Clara** through a wrought-iron gate, past a brick patio and through a heavy wooden door into the back of the house.

The terra-cotta tile floor of the cool, empty hall enhanced the starkness of the whitewashed walls and the dark natural wood beams of the ceiling.

We walked through it into a spacious living room.

The white walls were bordered with exquisitely painted tiles.

Two immaculate beige couches and four armchairs were arranged in

a cluster around a heavy wooden coffee table.

On top of the table were some open magazines in English and Spanish.

I had the impression that someone had just been reading them, sitting in one of the armchairs, but had left in a hurry when we entered through the back door.

"What do you think of my house?" **Clara** asked, beaming proudly.

"It's fantastic," I said. "Who would have thought there'd be such a house way out here in the wilderness?"

Then my envious self reared its head and I became utterly ill at ease. The house was the kind of house I had always dreamed of owning, yet knew I would never be able to afford.

Clara said, "You can't imagine how accurate you are in describing this place as fantastic.

"All I can tell you about the house is that, like those lava mountains we saw this morning, it is imbued with power. A silent exquisite power runs through the house like an electric current runs through wires."

Upon hearing this, an inexplicable thing happened: My envy disappeared. It vanished totally with the last word she said.

"Now I'll show you to your bedroom," she announced. "And I'll also set up some ground rules you must observe while you're here as my guest.

"Any part of the house which is to the right and to the back of this living room is yours to use and explore, and that includes the grounds.

"But you must not enter any of the bedrooms, except of course, yours. There you can use anything you want. You can even break things in fits of anger or love them in outbursts of affection.

"The left side of the house, however, is not accessible to you at any time, in any way, shape or form. So stay out of it."

I was shocked by her bizarre request yet I assured her that I understood perfectly, and I would acquiesce to her wishes.

My real feelings were that her request was rude and arbitrary. In fact, the more she warned me to stay away from certain parts of the house, the more curious I became to see them.

Clara seemed to have thought of something else and added, "Of course, you can use the living room: You can even sleep here on the sofa if you're too tired or lazy to go to your bedroom.

"Another part you can't use, however, is the grounds in front of the house and also the main door. It's locked for the time being, so always enter the house through the back door."

Clara didn't give me time to respond. She ushered me down a long corridor past several closed doors, which she said were bedrooms and therefore forbidden to me, to a large bedroom.

The first thing I noticed upon entering was the ornate wooden double bed. It was covered with a beautiful crocheted off-white bedspread.

Next to a window on the wall facing the back of the house stood a hand-carved, mahogany **etagere** filled to capacity with antique objects, porcelain vases and figurines, cloisonne boxes and tiny bowls.

On the other wall was a matching armoire, which **Clara** opened. Hanging inside were women's vintage dresses, coats, hats, shoes, parasols, canes; all of them seemed to be exquisite hand-picked items.

Before I could ask **Clara** where she had gotten those beautiful things,

she closed the doors.

"Feel free to use anything you wish," she said. "These are your clothes, and this is your room for as long as you stay in this house."

She then glanced over her shoulder as if someone else were in the room and added, "And who can tell how long that will be!"

It appeared that she was talking about an extended visit.

I felt my palms sweat as I awkwardly told her that I could, at best, stay for only a few days.

Clara assured me that I would be perfectly safe with her there; much safer, in fact, than anywhere else. She added that it would be foolish for me to pass up this opportunity to broaden my knowledge.

"But I ve got to look for a job," I said by way of an excuse. "I don't have any money."

"Don't worry about money," she said. "I'll lend you whatever you need or give it to you. It's no problem."

I thanked her for her offer, but informed her that I had been brought up to believe that to accept money from a stranger was highly improper no matter how well-meaning the offer was.

She rebuffed me, saying, "I think what's the matter with you, Taisha, is that you got angry when I requested that you don't use the left side of the house or the main door.

"I know that you felt I was being arbitrary and excessively secretive. Now you don't want to stay more than a polite day or two. Maybe you even think I'm an eccentric old woman with a few bats in the belfry?"

"No, no, Clara, it's not that. I've got to pay my rent. If I don't find a job soon I won't have any money, and to accept money from anyone is out of the question for me."

"Do you mean that you didn't get offended by my request to avoid certain parts of the house?"

"Of course not."

"Didn't you get curious to know why I made the request?"

"Yes, I was curious."

"Well, the reason is that other people live on that side of the house."

"Your relatives, Clara?"

"Yes. We are a large family. There are, in fact, two families living here."

"Are they both large families?"

"They are. Each has eight members, making sixteen people all together."

"And they all live on the left side of the house, Clara?" In all my life I had never heard of such an odd arrangement.

"No. Only eight live there. The other eight are my immediate family and they live with me on the right side of the house."

"You are my guest, so you must stay on the right side. It's very important that you understand this. It may be unusual, but it's not incomprehensible."

I marveled at her power over me. Her words put my emotions at ease, but they didn't calm my mind.

I understood then that in order to react intelligently in any situation, I needed a conjunction of both an alarmed mind and unsettled emotions.

Otherwise, I remained passive, waiting for the next external impulse to sway me.

Being with Clara had made me understand that in spite of my protest to the contrary; in spite of my struggle to be different; independent, I was incapable of thinking clearly or of making my own decisions.

Clara gave me a most peculiar look, as if she were following my unvoiced thoughts. I tried to mask my confusion by hurriedly saying, "Your house is beautiful, Clara. Is it very old?"

"Of course," she said, but didn't explain whether she meant that it was a beautiful house or that it was very old.

With a smile she added, "Now that you've seen the house- that is, half of it- we have a little business to take care of."

She removed a flashlight from one of the cabinets, and from the armoire she took out a padded Chinese jacket and a pair of hiking boots. She told me that I had to put them on after we had a snack, because we were going for a walk.

"But we just got here," I protested. "Won't it be dark soon?"

"Yes. But I want to take you to a look-out point in the hills from where you can see the entire house and grounds."

"It's best to first see the house at this time of the day. We all had our first glimpse of it in the twilight."

"Who do you mean when you say 'we'?" I asked.

"The sixteen people that live here, naturally, All of us do exactly the same things."

"All of you have the same professions?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

"Good gracious, no," she said, bringing her hand to her face as she laughed:

"I mean that whatever any one of us has to obligatorily do, the rest of us have to do too. Each one of us had to first see the house and grounds in the twilight, so that is the time you must view it, too."

"Why are you including me in this, Clara?"

"Let's just say for now it's because you are my guest."

"Am I going to meet your relatives later on?"

"You'll get to know all of them," she assured me. "At the moment, there is no one in the house except the two of us, and a guard dog."

"Are they away on a trip?"

"Exactly, all of them have left for an extended journey and here I am guarding the house with the dog."

"When are you expecting them back?"

"It'll be a matter of weeks yet, maybe even months."

"Where did they go?"

"We are always on the move. Sometimes I leave for months at a time, and someone else stays behind to look after the property."

I was about to ask again where they went, but she answered my question. "They all went to India," she said.

"All fifteen of them?" I asked incredulously.

"Isn't that remarkable? It'll cost a fortune!" She said that in a tone of voice that was such a caricature of me and my inner feelings of envy that I had to laugh in spite of myself.

Then the thought struck me that it wouldn't be safe to be alone in such a remote, empty house with only Clara for company.

"We are alone but there's nothing to fear in this house," she said with a curious finality. "Except maybe the dog."

"When we return from our walk, I'll introduce you to him.

"You've got to be very calm to meet him. He'll see right through you, and attack if he senses any hostility, or that you're afraid."

"But I am afraid," I blurted out. I was already starting to shake.

I hated dogs ever since I was a child, when one of my father's Doberman **pinschers** jumped on me and pushed me to the ground.

The dog **didn't** actually bite me, she just growled and showed me her pointed teeth.

I screamed for help, for I was too terrified to move. I was so frightened I wet my pants. I still remember how my brothers made fun of me when they saw me, calling me a baby that should be wearing diapers.

"I don't like dogs one bit, myself," **Clara** said, "but the dog we have is not really a dog. He is something else."

She had sparked my interest, but that **didn't** dispel my sense of foreboding.

"If you want to freshen up first, I'll accompany you to the outhouse just in case the dog is prowling around," she said.

I nodded. I was tired and irritable. The impact of the long drive had finally caught up with me.

I wanted to wash the dust of the road from my face and comb the tangles out of my stringy hair.

Clara led me through a different corridor, then out to the back. There were two small buildings some distance from the main house.

"That's my gymnasium," she said, pointing at one of them. "It is off limits to you, too, unless I care to invite you in someday."

"Is that where you practice martial arts?"

"It is," **Clara** said dryly. "The other building is the outhouse.

"I'll wait for you in the living room, where we can have some sandwiches.

"But don't bother about fixing your hair," she said, as if noticing my preoccupation, "there are no mirrors here.

"Mirrors are like clocks. They record the passage of time. And what's important is to reverse it."

I wanted to ask her what she meant by reversing time, but she prodded me toward the outhouse.

Inside, I found several doors. Since **Clara hadn't** made any stipulations about the left and right sides of this building, and since I **didn't** know where the toilet was, I explored all of it.

On one side of the central hall, there were six small water closets, each with a low wooden toilet the height for squatting.

What made them unusual was that I **didn't** notice the distinct odor of a septic tank, nor the overpowering stench of lime-filled dirt holes.

I could hear water running underneath the wooden toilets, but I **couldn't** tell how or from where it was led in.

On the other side of the hall, there were three identical beautifully tiled rooms.

Each contained a free-standing antique tub and a long chest on top of which sat a pitcher filled with water and a matching porcelain basin.

There were no mirrors in those rooms, or any stainless-steel fixtures on which I could have caught my reflection. In fact, there was no plumbing at all.

I poured water into a basin, splashed my face with it, then ran my wet

fingers through my tangled hair.

Instead of using one of the soft white Turkish towels for fear I would dirty it, I wiped my hands with some tissues that were in a box on the chest.

I took several deep breaths and rubbed my tense neck before going out to face **Clara** again.

I found her in the living room arranging flowers in a blue and white Chinese vase. The magazines that had been open earlier were neatly stacked and next to them was a plate of food.

Clara smiled when she saw me. "You look as fresh as a daisy," she said. "Have a sandwich.

"Soon it will be twilight. We have no time to lose."

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha Abelar](#)

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Chapter 3

After I had gobbled down half of a ham sandwich, I hurriedly put on the jacket and boots **Clara** had given me.

We left the house; each carrying a heavy-duty flashlight.

The boots were too tight and the left one rubbed against my heel. I was certain I was going to get a blister.

But I was glad I had the jacket because the evening was cold. I pulled up the collar and fastened the toggle at the neck.

"We are going to walk around the grounds," **Clara** said. "I want you to see this house from a distance and in the twilight.

"I'll be pointing out things for you to remember, so pay close attention."

We followed a narrow trail.

In the distance, I could see the dark, jagged silhouette of the eastern mountains against the purple sky.

When I commented on how sinister they looked, **Clara** replied that the reason those mountains seemed so ominous was because their ethereal essence was ancient.

She told me that everything in the realms of the visible and invisible has an ethereal essence; and that one must be receptive to it in order to know how to proceed.

What she said reminded me of my tactic of looking at the southern horizon to gain insights and direction.

Before I could ask her about it, she continued talking about the mountains and trees and the ethereal essence of rocks.

It seemed to me that **Clara** had internalized Chinese culture to the point that she spoke in riddles the way enlightened men were depicted in Oriental literature.

I became aware, then, that at an underlying level I had been humoring her all day.

This was an odd feeling, for **Clara** was the last person I would want to treat in a condescending manner. I was used to humoring weak or overbearing people at my job or in school, but **Clara** was neither weak nor overbearing.

"That is the place," **Clara** said, pointing to a level clearing on higher ground. "You'll be able to see the house from there."

We left the trail and walked to the flat area she had pointed out.

From there we had a breath-taking view of the valley below. I could see a large clump of tall green trees surrounded by darker brown areas, but not the house itself, for it was completely camouflaged by the trees and shrubs.

"The house is perfectly oriented according to the four directions," **Clara** said, pointing to a mass of greenery:

"Your bedroom is on the north side; and the forbidden part of the house is on the south side. The main entrance is to the east. The back door and the patio area are to the west."

Clara pointed with her hand where all those sections were, but for the life of me, I **couldn't** see them. All I was able to make out was the dark green patch.

"You'd need X-ray vision to see the house," I grumbled. "It's totally hidden by trees."

Ignoring my disagreeable mood, **Clara** said amiably, "And very important trees, too. Every one of those trees is an individual being with a definite purpose in life."

"**Doesn't** it go without saying that every living being on this earth has a definite purpose?" I said, peeved.

Something in the enthusiastic way that **Clara** was showing off her property annoyed me.

The fact that I **couldn't** see what she was pointing at made me even more irritable.

A strong gust of wind made my jacket balloon at my waist, and then the thought occurred to me that my irritation might be born out of sheer envy.

"I **didn't** mean it to sound trivial," **Clara** apologized:

"What I wanted to say was that everything and everyone in my house is there for a specific reason; and that includes the trees, myself, and of course also you."

I wanted to change the subject, so for lack of anything better to say, I asked, "Did you buy this house, **Clara**?"

"No. We inherited it. It has been in the family for generations, although given the turmoils Mexico has been through, the house has been destroyed and rebuilt many times."

I realized that I felt most at ease when I asked simple, direct questions, and **Clara** gave me direct answers.

Her discussion about ethereal essences had been so abstract that I needed the respite of talking about something mundane, but to my chagrin **Clara** cut our commonplace exchange short, and lapsed into her mysterious insinuations again.

"That house is the blueprint of all the actions of the people who live there," she said almost reverently:

"Its best feature is that it's concealed. It is there for anyone to see, but no one sees it. Keep that in mind. It's very important!"

How could I not remember it, I thought: For the past twenty minutes I had been straining my eyes in the semidarkness trying to see the house. I wished I had a pair of binoculars so that I could have satisfied my curiosity.

Before I could comment, **Clara** began walking down the hill.

I would have liked to stay there a while longer by myself, to breathe in the fresh night air; but I was afraid I would not be able to find my way back in the dark.

I made a mental note to return to that spot during the day, and determine for myself whether it was really possible to see the house the way **Clara** had said.

On our return trek, we were at the back entrance of her property in no time at all.

It was pitch black. I could see only the small area illuminated by our flashlights.

She beamed hers onto a wooden bench, and told me sit and take off my boots and jacket, then hang them on the rack next to the door.

I was famished. Never in my life could I remember being so hungry; yet I thought it would be rude to ask **Clara** outright whether or not we were going to eat dinner.

Perhaps she expected that the sumptuous meal we had in **Guaymas** would last us for the day.

Yet judging from **Clara**'s size, she was not one that would skimp on food.

She volunteered, "Let's go to the kitchen and see what we can find to eat."

"But first, I'm going to show you where the dynamo is kept and how to turn it on."

She guided me with her flashlight along a path leading around a wall to a brick shed, roofed with corrugated steel.

The shed housed a small diesel generator.

I knew how to turn it on because I had lived in a house in the country that had a similar generator in case of electrical failure.

When I pulled the lever, I noticed from the shed window that only one side of the main house and part of the hall seemed to be wired for electric lights: There lights were lit, while everything else remained in darkness.

"Why **didn't** you wire the whole house?" I asked **Clara**. "It **doesn't** make sense to leave most of the house dark."

On an impulse, I added, "If you like, I can wire it for you."

She looked at me, surprised, "Is that right? Are you sure you **wouldn't** burn the place down?"

"Positive. They used to tell me at home that I'm a wizard with wires."

"I worked as an electrician's apprentice for a while, until the electrician started getting fresh with me."

"Then what did you do?" **Clara** asked.

"I told him where he could shove his wires, and quit."

Clara let out a guttural laugh.

I **didn't** know what she found humorous; that I worked as an electrician or that one had made passes at me.

"Thanks for the offer," **Clara** said after regaining her voice. "But the house is wired exactly the way we want it. We use electricity only where it's needed."

I surmised that it was needed mostly in the kitchen and that this must be the part of the house that had light.

Automatically I started toward the area that was lit. **Clara** tugged at my sleeve to stop me.

"Where are you going?" she asked,

"To the kitchen."

"You're heading the wrong way," she said. "This is rural Mexico.

Neither the kitchen nor the bathroom is inside the main house. What do you think we have? Electric refrigerators and gas stoves?"

She led me along the side of the house past her gymnasium to another small building I **hadn't** seen before.

It was almost totally hidden by pungent flowering trees.

The kitchen was actually one enormous room, with a terra-cotta tile floor, freshly whitewashed walls and a bright row of track lights overhead.

Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble installing modern fixtures. But the appliances were old- in fact, they looked like antiques.

On one side of the room stood a gigantic iron wood-burning stove that, surprisingly, seemed to be lit.

It had a foot bellow and an exhaust pipe that vented through a hole in the ceiling.

On the other side of the room, there were two long picnic-style tables with benches placed on either side.

Next to them was a work table with a three-inch-thick butcher-block top. The surface of the wood looked used, as if it had seen a lot of chopping.

Hanging from strategically placed hooks along the walls were baskets, iron pots and pans and a variety of cooking utensils.

The whole place had the look of a rustic but comfortable well-stocked kitchen that one sees featured in certain magazines.

On the stove were three earthen pots with lids. **Clara** told me to sit down at one of the tables. She went to the stove, and with her back toward me busied herself; stirring and ladling.

In a few minutes, she had placed a meal of meat stew, rice and beans in front of me.

"When did you prepare all this food?" I asked, genuinely curious, for she had had no time in which to do it.

"I just whipped all this up, and put it on the stove before we left," she said lightly.

'How gullible does she think I am?' I thought. 'This food must have taken hours to prepare.'

She laughed self-consciously at my stare of disbelief.

"You're right," she said as if she wanted to give up the pretense.

"There's a caretaker that prepares food for us sometimes."

"Is the caretaker here now?"

"No, no. The caretaker must have been here in the morning, but is gone now.

"Eat your food and don't worry about such unimportant details as where it came from."

'**Clara** and her house are full of surprises,' was the thought that crossed my mind, but I was too tired and hungry to ask any more questions, or to ponder about anything that **wasn't** immediate.

I ate voraciously: The jumbo shrimp I had stuffed myself with at lunch was totally gone and forgotten.

For someone who was a finicky eater, I was wolfing down my food.

As a child, I had always been too nervous to relax and enjoy our

meals. I was always anticipating all the dishes I would have to wash afterward.

Every time one of my brothers used an extra plate or a needless spoon, I'd cringe. I was certain that they deliberately used as many dishes as they could just so I would have more to wash up.

On top of that, at every meal, my father would take the opportunity to argue with my mother.

He knew her manners prevented her from leaving the table until everyone had finished eating; so he poured out to her all his complaints and grievances.

Clara said that it **wouldn't** be necessary for me to wash dishes, although I offered my help.

We went to the living room, one of the rooms she apparently felt needed no electricity, for it was pitch black.

Clara lit a gasoline lantern.

I had never in my life seen the light of such a lamp. It was bright and eerie, yet at the same time soft and mellow.

Shimmering shadows were everywhere. I felt I was in a dream world, far from the reality lit up by electric lights.

Clara, the house, and the room all seemed to belong to another time; to a different world.

"I promised you that I would introduce you to our dog," **Clara** began; sitting down on the couch:

"The dog is an authentic member of the household. You must be very careful with what you feel or say around him."

I sat down next to her. "Is it a sensitive, neurotic dog?" I asked, dreading the encounter.

"Sensitive, yes. Neurotic, no.

"I seriously think this dog is a highly evolved creature; but being a dog makes it difficult, if not impossible, for that poor soul to transcend the idea of the self."

I laughed out loud at the preposterous notion of a dog having an idea of itself.

I confronted **Clara** with the absurdity of her statement.

"You're right," she conceded. "I **shouldn't** use the word 'self.' I should rather say, he is lost in feeling important."

I knew that she was poking fun at me. My laughter became more guarded.

"You may laugh, but I'm actually quite serious," **Clara** said in a low tone:

"I'll let you be the judge."

She leaned closer, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Behind his back, we call him **sapo**, which means 'toad' in Spanish; because he looks like a huge toad.

"But don't you dare call him that to his face. He'll attack you and rip you to shreds.

"Now, if you don't believe me, or if you're daring or stupid enough to try it and the dog gets mad, there's only one thing you can do."

"What's that?" I asked, humoring her again, although this time with a genuine touch of fear.

"You say very quickly that 'I' am the one who looks like a white toad. He loves to hear that."

I **wasn't** about to fall for her tricks.

I thought I was too sophisticated to believe such nonsense.

"You **ve** probably trained your dog to react negatively to the word **sapo**," I argued:

"I **ve** had experience with dog training. I **m** certain dogs **aren't** intelligent enough to know what people are saying about them let alone get offended by it."

"Then let's do the following," **Clara** proposed. "Let me introduce you to him. Then we **ll** look in a zoology book for pictures of toads and comment on them.

"Then at one point you say to me, very quietly, 'He certainly looks like a toad,' and we **ll** see what happens."

Before I could accept or reject her proposition, **Clara** went out through a side door and left me alone.

I assured myself that I had the situation well under control and that I **wouldn't** let this woman talk me into believing absurdities such as dogs in possession of a highly evolved consciousness.

I was giving myself a mental **pep** talk to be more assertive, when **Clara** came back with the hugest dog I had ever seen.

It was a male dog, massive, with fat paws the size of coffee saucers. His hair was lustrous, black. He had yellow eyes with the look of someone bored to death with life. His ears were rounded and his face bulged and wrinkled on the sides.

Clara was right: He had a definite resemblance to a giant toad.

The dog came right up to me and stopped, then looked at **Clara** as if waiting for her to say something.

"**Taisha**, may I introduce you to my friend **Manfred**."

"**Manfred**, this is **Taisha**."

I felt like extending my hand and shaking its paw, but **Clara** gave me a don't-do-it signal with a movement of her head.

"Very pleased to meet you, **Manfred**," I said trying not to laugh or sound afraid.

The dog moved closer and began to sniff my crotch.

Disgusted, I jumped back; but at that instant, he turned around and hit me with his hindquarters directly behind my knee joint so that I lost my balance.

The next thing I knew, I was on my knees; then on all fours on the floor, and the beast was licking the side of my face.

Then before I could get up or even roll over, the dog farted right in my nose.

I jumped up screaming.

Clara was laughing so hard she **couldn't** talk.

I could have sworn that **Manfred** was laughing too.

He was so elated that he had propped himself behind **Clara**, and was looking at me askance, scratching the floor with his huge front paws.

I was so outraged that I yelled, "Damn you, stinking toad-dog!"

In one instant, the dog jumped and rammed me with his head.

I fell backward onto the floor with the dog on top of me.

His jaw was only inches from my face: I saw a look of fury in his yellow eyes.

The smell of his foul breath was enough to make anyone vomit, and I was definitely close to it.

The louder I screamed for **Clara** to get that damn dog off me, the more ferocious became his snarls.

I was about to faint from fright, when I heard **Clara** yell above the dog's growls and my screams, "Tell him what I told you, tell him quickly."

I was too terrified to speak.

Exasperated, **Clara** tried to move the dog off me by pulling him by his ears, but this only enraged the beast more.

"Tell him! Tell him what I said!" **Clara** yelled.

In my terror, I **couldn't** remember what I was supposed to say. Then as I was about to pass out, I heard my voice screeching, "I **m** sorry. **Clara** is the one who looks like a toad."

Instantly the dog stopped his snarling and moved off my chest.

Clara helped me up and guided me to the couch.

The dog followed beside us as if he were giving her a hand.

Clara had me drink some warm water, which made me even more nauseous.

I barely reached the outhouse before I became violently ill.

Later, when I was resting in the living room, **Clara** suggested that we look at the book about toads with **Manfred** to give me a chance to reiterate that it was **Clara** who looked like a white toad.

She said that I had to erase any confusion from **Manfred**'s mind.

"Being a dog makes him very petty," she explained. "Poor soul.

"He **doesn't** want to be that way, he just can't help it. He flares up whenever he feels someone is making fun of him."

I told her that in my state, I was a poor subject for further experiments in dog psychology.

But **Clara** insisted that I play it out to the end.

As soon as she opened the book, **Manfred** came over to look at the pictures.

Clara teased and joked about how strange toads looked, that some of them were even downright ugly.

I held up my end and played along.

I said the word 'toad,' and the Spanish word '**sapo**,' as often and as loudly as I could in the context of our absurd conversation.

But there was no reaction from **Manfred**. He seemed as bored as he was the first time I laid eyes on him.

When, as we had agreed upon, in a loud voice I said that **Clara** certainly looked like a white toad, **Manfred** immediately began wagging his tail and showed signs of true animation.

I repeated the key phrase several times, and the more I repeated it, the more excited the dog became.

I had then a flash of insight, and said that I was a skinny toad working her way to being just like **Clara**.

At that, the dog jumped up as if prodded by an electric shock.

Then when **Clara** said, "You're carrying this a bit too far, **Taisha**," I truly thought **Manfred** was so elated that he **couldn't** take it any longer. He ran out of the room.

I leaned back against the couch dazed.

Down in the depth of me, and in spite of all the circumstantial evidence supporting it, I still **couldn't** believe that a dog could react to a derogatory nickname the way **Manfred** had.

"Tell me, **Clara**," I said, "what is the trick? How did you train your dog

to react that way?"

"What you saw is not a trick," she replied:

"**Manfred** is mysterious; an unknown being.

"There is only one man in the world who can call him **sapo** or **sapito**, little toad, to his face without inciting his wrath.

"You'll meet that man one of these days.

"He's the one who's responsible for **Manfred**'s mystery, so he's the only person who can explain it to you."

Clara stood up abruptly. "You've had a long day," she said, handing me the gasoline lantern. "I think it's time for you to go to bed."

She took me to the room she had assigned to me. "You'll find everything you need inside," she said:

"The chamber pot is under the bed, in case you are afraid to go to the outhouse.

"I hope you'll be comfortable."

With a pat on my arm, she disappeared down the dark corridor.

I had no idea where her bedroom was. I wondered if it could perhaps be in the wing of the house I was not allowed to set foot in.

She had said good night in such a strange fashion that for a moment I just stood there holding on to the doorknob, inferring all sorts of things.

I entered my room.

The gasoline lantern splashed shadows everywhere.

On the floor was a pattern of swirls cast from the vase of flowers that had been in the living room, which **Clara** must have brought in and set on the table.

The carved wood chest was a mass of shimmering grays.

The posts of the bed were lines that curved up the wall like snakes.

Instantly I grasped the reason for the presence of the mahogany **etagere** filled with figurines and cloisonne objects.

The light of the lantern had completely transformed them creating a fantasy world. Cloisonne and porcelain are not suited for electric lights, was the thought that came to mind.

I wanted to explore the room, but I was bone tired.

I set the lantern on a small table next to the bed and undressed.

Laid over the back of a chair was a white muslin nightgown which I put on. It seemed to fit; at least it **didn't** drag on the floor.

I climbed into the soft bed and lay with my back propped against the pillows.

I **didn't** douse the lantern immediately: I became intrigued watching the surreal shadows.

I remembered that as a child I used to play a game at bedtime: I would count how many shadow objects I could recognize on the walls of my room.

The breeze from the half-open window made the shadows on the walls flutter.

In my exhausted state, I imagined I could see shapes of animals, trees and flying birds.

Then in a mass of gray light I saw the faint outline of a dog's face. It had rounded ears and a flat, wrinkled snout.

It seemed to be winking at me. I knew it was **Manfred**.

Strange feelings and questions began to flood my mind.

How could I ever arrange the events of the day? I **couldn't** explain

any of them to my satisfaction.

The one thing that was most remarkable was that I knew for certain that my last remark- that I was a skinny toad on my way to being like **Clara**- had established a bond of empathy between **Manfred** and myself.

I also knew for certain that I **couldn't** think of him as an ordinary dog, and that I was no longer afraid of him.

In spite of my disbelief, he seemed to possess a special intelligence that made him aware of what **Clara** and I were saying.

The wind suddenly made the curtains open; dissolving the shadows in an array of shimmering fluff.

The dog's face began to merge with the other markings on the wall that I fancied to be charms that would give me the power to meet the night.

How remarkable, I thought, that the mind can project its experiences onto a blank wall, as if it were a camera that had stored endless footage of film.

The shadows flickered as I lowered the wick of the lantern and the last bit of light faded from the room leaving me in pitch blackness.

I **wasn't** afraid of the darkness. The fact that I was in a strange bed; in a strange house **didn't** distress me.

Earlier, **Clara** had said this was my room, and after being in it for only a short while, I felt completely at home. I had a strong feeling that I was protected.

As I stared at the blackness in front of me, I noticed the air in the room become effervescent.

I remembered what **Clara** had said about the house being charged with an imperceptible energy, like an electric current flowing through wires.

I **hadn't** been aware of it earlier because of all the activity, but now in absolute silence, I distinctly heard a mild humming sound.

Then I saw the minutest bubbles jumping all around the room at a tremendous speed.

They were frantically bumping into one another giving off a buzzing sound like the drone of thousands of bees.

The room; the entire house seemed to be charged with a subtle electric current that filled my very being.

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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"Did you sleep well?" **Clara** asked me as I entered the kitchen.

She was about to sit down at the table to eat.

I noticed there was a place set for me, although she **hadn't** told me the night before at what time breakfast would be.

"I slept like a bear," I said truthfully.

She asked me to join her and dished some spicy shredded meat onto my plate.

I told her that waking up in an unknown bed had always been a difficult moment for me.

My father had changed jobs often and the family had to move to wherever there was a position available.

I dreaded the morning jolt of awakening disoriented in a new house, but that dread **hadn't** materialized this time.

The feeling I had upon awakening was that the room and the bed had always been mine.

Clara listened intently and nodded. "That's because you are in harmony with the person to whom the room belongs," she said.

"Whose room is it?" I asked, curious.

"You **ll** find out some day," she said, placing a hefty portion of rice next to the meat on my plate.

She handed me a fork. "Eat up. You **ll** need all your strength today."

She **didn't** let me talk until I had finished everything on my plate.

"What are we going to do?" I asked as she put the dishes away.

"Not we," she corrected me. "You will be going to a cave to begin your recapitulation."

"My what, **Clara**?"

"I told you last night that everything and everyone in this house has a reason for being here, including you."

"Why am I here, **Clara**?"

"Your reason for being here has to be explained to you in stages," she said:

"On the simplest level, you **re** here because you like it here regardless of what you may think.

"A second, and more complex, reason is that you **re** here to learn and practice a fascinating exercise called the recapitulation."

"What is this exercise? What does it consist of?"

"I **m** going to tell you about it when we get to the cave."

"Why can't you tell me now?"

"Bear with me, **Taisha**.

"I can't answer all your questions at this point, because you don't have enough energy yet to handle the answers.

"Later on, you yourself will realize why it's so difficult to explain certain things.

"Put on your hiking boots, and let's go now."

We left the house and climbed the low hills toward the east, following the same trail we had taken the previous night.

After a short hike, I spotted the flat clearing on high ground that I had intended to revisit.

Without waiting for **Clara** to take the initiative, I headed toward it because I was eager to find out if I could see the house during the daytime.

I peered down into a bowl-like depression squeezed between hills and covered with green foliage, but although it was clear and sunny, I **couldn't** see any signs of the buildings.

One thing was evident; there were more huge trees than I remembered seeing at night.

"Surely you can recognize the outhouse," **Clara** said. "It's that reddish spot by that clump of mesquite trees."

I jumped inadvertently because I had been so absorbed gazing into the valley that I **hadn't** heard **Clara** come up behind me.

To help direct my attention, she pointed to a particular section of the

greenness below.

I thought of telling her out of politeness that I was seeing it; the way I always agreed with people, but I **didn't** want to start my day by humoring her.

I kept silent. Besides, there was something so exquisite in that hidden valley that it took my breath away.

I stared at it so totally absorbed that I became drowsy: Leaning against a boulder, I let whatever was in the valley carry me away.

"And it did transport me. I felt that I was at a picnic ground where a party was going full force. I heard the laughter of people ...

My reverie ended when **Clara** lifted me to my feet by my armpits.

"My goodness, **Taisha!**" she exclaimed. "You **re** stranger than I thought. For a moment there, I thought I **d** lost you."

I wanted to tell her what I dreamt because I was certain that I had dozed off for an instant. But she **didn't** seem interested and started walking away. ^

Clara had a firm and purposeful stride, as if she knew exactly where she was going.

I, on the other hand, walked aimlessly behind her trying to keep up without stumbling.

We walked in total silence.

After a good half hour, we were by a particular formation of rocks I was certain we had passed earlier.

"**Weren't** we here before?" I asked, breaking the silence.

She nodded. "We **re** going in circles," she admitted. "Something is stalking you and if we don't lose it, it will follow us to the cave."

I turned around to see if someone was behind us.

I could distinguish only the shrubs and the twisted branches of trees.

I hurried to catch up with **Clara** and tripped over a stump.

Startled, I shrieked as I fell forward.

With incredible speed, **Clara** caught me by the arm and broke my fall by placing her leg in front of me.

"You **re** not very good at walking, are you," she commented.

I told her I had never been a good outdoor person; that I grew up believing hiking and camping were for country folks; unsophisticated backwoods people, but not for educated urbanites.

Walking in the foothills of the mountains was not an experience I found enjoyable. And except for the view of her property, scenery that others would find breathtaking left me indifferent.

"Just as well," **Clara** said. "You **re** not here to look at the scenery. You have to keep your mind on the trail. And watch out for snakes."

Whether there were snakes in the area or not, her admonition certainly kept my attention on the ground.

As we continued walking, I became increasingly out of breath. The boots **Clara** had equipped me with were like lead weights on my feet. I had a hard time lifting my thighs to put one foot in front of the other.

"Is this nature walk really necessary?" I finally asked.

Clara stopped in her tracks and faced me. "Before we can talk about anything meaningful, you **ll** have to be at least aware of your elaborate entourage," she said. "I **m** doing my best to help you do just that."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. "What entourage?" My habitual moodiness had gotten hold of me again.

"I'm referring to your barrage of habitual feelings and thoughts; your personal history," **Clara** explained:

"Everything that makes you into what you think you are; a unique and special person."

"What's wrong with my habitual feelings and thoughts?" I asked. Her incomprehensible assertions were definitely annoying me.

"Those habitual feelings and thoughts are the source of all our troubles," she declared.

The more she spoke in riddles, the greater became my frustration.

At that moment, I could have kicked myself for succumbing to this woman's invitation to spend some time with her.

It was a delayed reaction. Fears that had been kindling inside me now flared up full force.

I imagined that she might be a psychopath who at any moment might pull out a knife and kill me.

On second thought, having been trained in martial arts as she obviously had been, she **wouldn't** need a knife.

One kick from her muscular leg could have been the end of me. I was no match for her. She was older than I, but infinitely more powerful.

I saw myself ending up as just another statistic; a missing person never heard from again. I deliberately slowed down my pace to increase the distance between us.

"Don't get into such a morbid frame of mind," **Clara** said, definitely intruding into my thoughts:

"By bringing you here, all I wanted to do was to help prepare you to face life with a little more grace.

"But it seems that all I succeeded in doing is to start a landslide of ugly suspicions and fears."

I felt genuinely embarrassed for having had such morbid thoughts.

It was bewildering how she had been so absolutely right about my suspicions and fears, and how she had with one stroke soothed my internal turmoil.

I wished it would have been possible for me to apologize and reveal to her what was going through my mind, but I **wasn't** prepared to do that: It would have put me at even more of a disadvantage.

"You have a strange power to soothe the mind, **Clara**," I said instead. "Did you learn to do this in the Orient?"

"It's no great feat," she admitted, "not because your mind is easy to soothe, but because all of us are alike.

"To know you in detail, all I have to do is to know myself.

"And this, I promise you, I do.

"Now, let's keep on walking. I want to reach the cave before you collapse completely."

"Tell me again, **Clara**, what are we going to do in that cave?" I asked, unwilling to start walking again.

"I'm going to teach you unimaginable things."

"What unimaginable things?"

"You'll know soon," she said, looking at me with wide eyes.

I craved more information, but before I could engage her in conversation, she was already halfway up the next slope.

I dragged my feet and followed her for another quarter of a mile or so until we finally sat down by a stream.

There, the foliage of the trees' was so dense I could no longer see the sky.

I took off the boots. I had a blister on my heel.

Clara picked up a hard-pointed stick and poked my feet in between the big and the second toe.

Something like a mild current of electricity shot up my calves and ran along my inner thighs.

Then she made me kneel on all fours and, taking each foot at a time, turned my soles up and poked me at the point just below the protuberance of my big toe. I yelled with pain.

"That **wasn't** so bad," she said in the tone of someone accustomed to treating sick people:

"Classical Chinese doctors used to apply that technique to jolt and revive the weak, or to create a state of unique attention.

"But today such classical knowledge is dying out."

"Why is that, **Clara**?"

"Because the emphasis on materialism has led man to move away from esoteric pursuits."

"Is that what you meant when you told me in the desert that the line to the past was severed?"

"Yes. A great upheaval always brings about deep changes in the energy formation of things; changes that are not always for the better."

She ordered me to place my feet into the stream and feel the smooth rocks along the bottom.

The water was ice cold and made me shiver involuntarily.

"Move your feet at the ankles in a clockwise circle," she suggested.

"Let the running water draw away your fatigue."

After a few minutes of circling my ankles, I felt refreshed but my feet were nearly frozen.

"Now try to feel all your tension flow down to your feet, then throw it out with a sideward snap of your ankles," **Clara** said. "This way you'll also get rid of the coldness."

I continued flicking the water with my feet until they were numb. "I don't think this is working, **Clara**," I said, pulling my feet out.

"That's because you're not directing the tension away from you," she said, "Flowing water takes away tiredness, coldness, illness and every other unwanted thing.

"But in order for this to happen, you must intend it, otherwise, you can flick your feet until the stream runs dry with no results."

She added that if one did the exercise in bed, one would have to use the imagination to visualize a running stream.

"What exactly do you mean by 'intend it'?" I asked, drying my feet with the sleeves of the jacket. After a vigorous rubbing, they finally warmed up.

"Intent is the power that upholds the universe," she said. "It is the force that gives focus to everything. It makes the world happen."

I **couldn't** believe that I was listening to her every word.

Some major change had definitely taken place, transforming my habitual bored indifference into a most unusual alertness.

It **wasn't** that I understood what **Clara** was saying, because I **didn't**. What struck me was the fact that I could listen to her without fretting or becoming distracted. '

"Can you describe this force more clearly?" I asked.

"There's really no way to talk about it, except metaphorically," she said.

She brushed the ground with the sole of her shoe, sweeping dry leaves aside. "Underneath the dry leaves is the ground; the enormous earth. Intent is the principle underneath everything."

Clara put her cupped hands in the water, and splashed her face.

I again marveled that her skin had no wrinkles. This time I commented on her youthful appearance.

"The way I look is a matter of keeping my inner being in balance with the surroundings," she said, shaking the water off her hands. "Everything we do hinges on that balance.

We can be young and vibrant like this stream, or old and ominous like the lava mountains in **Arizona**. It's up to us."

I surprised myself by asking her, as if I believed what she was saying, if there was a way I could gain that balance.

She nodded. "You most certainly can," she said. "And you will, by practicing the unique exercise I'm going to teach you: the recapitulation."

"I can't wait to practice it," I said excitedly, putting on my boots.

Then for no explicable reason, I became so agitated that I jumped up and said, "**Shouldn't** we be on our way again?"

"We've already arrived," **Clara** announced, and pointed to a small cave on the side of a hill.

As I gazed at it, my excitement drained out of me.

There was something ominous and foreboding about the gaping hole; but inviting, too. I had a definite urge to explore it, yet at the same time I was afraid of what I might find inside.

I suspected we were somewhere in the proximity of her house; a thought I found comforting.

Clara informed me that this was a place of power, a spot the ancient **geomancers** from China, the practitioners of **feng-shui**, would have undoubtedly picked as a temple site.

"Here, the elements of water, wood and air are in perfect harmony," she said. "Here, energy circulates in abundance.

"You'll see what I mean when you get inside the cave.

"You must use the energy of this unique spot to purify yourself."

"Are you saying that I have to stay here?"

"**Didn't** you know that in the ancient Orient, monks and scholars used to retreat to caves?" she asked. "Being surrounded by the earth helped them to meditate."

She urged me to crawl inside the cave.

Daringly, I eased myself in, putting all thoughts of bats and spiders out of my mind.

It was dark and cool, and there was room for only one person.

Clara told me to sit cross-legged, leaning my back against the wall.

I hesitated, not wanting to dirty my jacket, but once I leaned back, I was relieved to be able to rest.

Even though the ceiling was close to my head and the ground pressed hard against my **tailbone**, it **wasn't** claustrophobic.

A mild, almost imperceptible current of air circulated in the cave.

I felt invigorated, just as **Clara** had said I would. I was about to take off my jacket and sit on it when **Clara**, squatting at the mouth of the cave,

spoke.

"The apex of the special art I want to teach you," she began, "is called the abstract flight, and the means to achieve it we call the recapitulation."

She reached inside the cave and touched the left and right sides of my forehead. "Awareness must shift from here to here," she said:

"As children, we can easily do this, but once the seal of the body has been broken through wasteful excesses, only a special manipulation of awareness, right living, and celibacy can restore the energy that has drained out; energy needed to make the shift."

I definitely understood everything she said.

I even felt that awareness was like a current of energy that could go from one side of the forehead to the other, and I visualized the gap in between the two points as a vast space; a void that impedes the crossing.

I listened intently as she continued talking. "The body must be tremendously strong," she said, "so that awareness can be keen and fluid in order to jump from one side of the abyss to the other in the blink of an eye."

As she voiced her statements, something extraordinary happened.

I became absolutely certain that I would be staying with **Clara** in Mexico.

What I wanted to feel was that I would be returning to **Arizona** in a few days; but what I actually felt was that I would not be going back.

I also knew that my realization was not merely the acceptance of what **Clara** had had in mind from the start; but that I was powerless to resist her intentions because the force that was maneuvering me was not hers alone.

"From now on, you have to lead a life in which awareness has top priority," she said, as if she knew I had made the tacit commitment of remaining with her:

"You must avoid anything that is weakening and harmful to your body or your mind.

"Also, it is essential, for the time being, to break all physical and emotional ties with the world."

"Why is that so important?"

"Because before anything else, you must acquire unity."

Clara explained that we are convinced that a dualism exists in us; that the mind is the insubstantial part of ourselves, and the body is the concrete part. This division keeps our energy in a state of chaotic separation, and prevents it from coalescing.

"Being divided is our human condition," she admitted. "But our division is not between the mind and the body, but between the body, which houses the mind or the self, and the double, which is the receptacle of our basic energy."

She said that before birth, man's imposed duality **doesn't** exist, but that from birth on, the two parts are separated by the pull of mankind's intent.

One part turns outward and becomes the physical body; the other, inward and becomes the double.

At death the heavier part, the body, returns to the earth to be absorbed by it, and the light part, the double, becomes free.

But unfortunately, since the double was never perfected, it experiences freedom for only an instant, before it is scattered into the

universe.

"If we die without erasing our false dualism of body and mind, we die an ordinary death," she said.

"How else can we die?"

Clara peered at me with one eyebrow raised.

Rather than answer my question, she revealed in a confiding tone that we die because the possibility that we could be transformed **hasn't** entered our conception.

She stressed that this transformation must be accomplished during our lifetime, and that to succeed in this task is the only true purpose a human being can have.

All other attainments are transient since death dissolves them into nothingness.

"What does this transformation entail?" I asked.

"It entails a total change," she said. "And that is accomplished by the recapitulation: the cornerstone of the art of freedom.

"The art I am going to teach you is called the art of freedom; an art infinitely difficult to practice, but even more difficult to explain."

Clara said that every procedure she was going to teach me, or every task she might ask me to perform, no matter how ordinary it might seem to me, was a step toward fulfilling the ultimate goal of the art of freedom: the abstract flight.

"What I'm going to show you first are simple movements that you must do daily," she continued. "Regard them always as an indispensable part of your life.

"First, I'll show you a breath that has been a secret for generations. This breath mirrors the dual forces of creation and destruction, of light and darkness, of being and not-being."

She told me to move outside of the cave, then directed me, by gentle manipulation, to sit with my spine curved forward and to bring my knees to my chest as high as I could.

While keeping my feet on the ground, I was to wrap my arms around my calves and firmly clasp my hands in front of my knees, or if I wished I could clasp each elbow. She gently eased my head down until my chin touched my chest.

I had to strain the muscles of my arms to keep my knees from pushing out sideways. My chest was constricted and so was my abdomen. My neck made a cracking sound as I tucked my chin in.

"This is a powerful breath," she said. "It may knock you out or put you to sleep.

"If it does, return to the house when you wake up.

"By the way, this cave is just behind the house. Follow the path and you'll be there in two minutes."

Clara instructed me to take short, shallow breaths.

I told her that her request was redundant since that was the only way I could breathe in that position.

She said that even if I only partially released the arm pressure I was creating with my hands, my breath would return to normal.

But this **wasn't** what she was after. She wanted me to continue the shallow breaths for at least ten minutes.

I stayed in that position for perhaps half an hour, all the while taking shallow breaths as she had instructed.

After the initial cramping in my stomach and legs subsided, the breaths seemed to soften my insides and dissolve them.

Then after an excruciatingly long time, **Clara** gave me a push that made me roll backward so I was lying on the ground, but she **didn't** permit me to release the pressure of my arms.

I felt a moment of relief when my back touched the ground, but it was only when she instructed me to unclasp my hands and stretch out my legs that I felt complete release in my abdomen and chest.

The only way of describing what I felt is to say that something inside me had been unlocked by that breath and had been dissolved or released.

As **Clara** had predicted, I became so drowsy that I crawled back inside the cave and fell asleep.

I must have slept for at least a couple of hours in the cave. And judging from the position I was lying in when I woke up, I **hadn't** moved a muscle.

I believed that that was probably because there **wasn't** any room in the cave for me to toss and turn in my sleep, but it could also have been because I was so totally relaxed, I **didn't** need to move.

I walked back to the house, following **Clara's** directions.

She was on the patio, sitting in a rattan armchair.

I had the impression that another woman had been sitting there with her, and when she heard me coming, she had quickly gotten up and left.

"**Ah**, you look much more relaxed now," **Clara** said. "That breath and posture does wonders for us."

Clara said that if this breath is performed regularly, with calmness and deliberation, it gradually balances our internal energy.

Before I could tell her how invigorated I felt, she asked me to sit down because she wanted to show me one other body maneuver crucial for erasing out false dualism.

She asked me to sit with my back straight and my eyes slightly lowered so that I would be gazing at the tip of my nose.

"This breath should be done without the constraints of clothing," she began. "But rather than having you strip naked in the patio in broad daylight, we'll make an exception.

"First, you inhale deeply, bringing in the air as if you were breathing through your vagina. Pull in your stomach and draw the air up along your spine, past the kidneys, to a point between the shoulder blades. Hold the air there for a moment, then raise it even further up to the back of the head, then over the top of your head to the point between your eyebrows."

She said that after holding it there for a moment, I was to exhale through the nose as I mentally guided the air down the front of my body, first to the point just below the navel, and then to my vagina, where the cycle had begun.

I began to practice the breathing exercise.

Clara brought her hand to the base of my spine, then traced a line up my back, over my head, and gently pressed the spot between my eyebrows.

"Try to bring the breath here," she said. "The reason you keep your eyes halfway open is so that you can concentrate on the bridge of your nose as you circulate the air up your back and over your head to this point; and also so you can use your gaze to guide the air down the front

of your body, returning it to your sexual organs."

Clara said that circulating the breath in such a fashion creates an impenetrable shield that prevents outside disruptive influences from piercing the body's field of energy: It also keeps vital inner energy from dispersing outwardly.

She stressed that the inhalation and exhalation should be inaudible, and that the breathing exercise could be done while one is standing, sitting or lying down; although in the beginning it is easier to do it while sitting on a cushion or on a chair.

"Now," she said, pulling her chair closer to mine, "let's talk about what we began discussing this morning: the recapitulation."

A shiver went through me.

I told her that although I had no conception of what she was talking about, I knew it was going to be something monumental and I **wasn't** sure I was prepared to hear it.

She insisted that I was nervous because some part of me sensed that she was about to disclose perhaps the most important technique of self-renewal.

Patently she explained that the recapitulation is the act of calling back the energy we have already spent in past actions.

To recapitulate entails recalling all the people we have met, all the places we have seen, and all the feelings we have had in our entire lives; starting from the present and going back to the earliest memories; then sweeping them clean, one by one, with the sweeping breath.

I listened, intrigued, although I **couldn't** help feeling that what she said was more than nonsensical to me.

Before I could make any comments at all, she firmly took my chin in her hands and instructed me to inhale through the nose as she turned my head to the left, and then exhale as she turned it to the right.

Next, I was to turn my head to the left and right in a single movement without breathing. She said that this is a mysterious way of breathing and the key to the recapitulation, because inhaling allows us to pull back energy that we lost; while exhaling permits us to expel foreign, undesirable energy that has accumulated in us through interacting with our fellow men.

"In order to live and interact, we need energy," **Clara** went on. "Normally, the energy spent in living is gone forever from us.

"Were it not for the recapitulation, we would never have the chance to renew ourselves. Recapitulating our lives and sweeping our past with the sweeping breath work as a unit."

Recalling everyone I had ever known and everything I had ever felt in my life seemed to me an absurd and impossible task. "That can take forever," I said, hoping that a practical remark might block **Clara's** unreasonable line of thought.

"It certainly can," she agreed. "But I assure you, **Talsha**, you have everything to gain by doing it, and nothing to lose."

I took a few deep breaths, moving my head from left to right imitating the way she had shown me to breathe in order to placate her, and let her know I had been paying attention.

With a **wry** smile, she warned me that recapitulating is not an arbitrary or capricious exercise.

"When you recapitulate, try to feel some long stretchy fibers that

extend out from your midsection," she explained:

"Then align the turning motion of your head with the movement of these elusive fibers. They are the conduits that will bring back the energy that you've left behind.

"In order to recuperate our strength and unity, we have to release our energy trapped in the world and pull it back to us."

She assured me that while recapitulating, we extend those stretchy fibers of energy across space and time to the persons, places and events we are examining.

The result is that we can return to every moment of our lives and act as if we were actually there.

This possibility sent shivers through me.

Although intellectually I was intrigued by what **Clara** was saying, I had no intention of returning to my disagreeable past, even if it was only in my mind.

If nothing else, I took pride in having escaped an unbearable life situation. I was not about to go back and mentally relive all the moments I had tried so hard to forget.

Yet **Clara** seemed to be so utterly serious and sincere in explaining the recapitulation technique to me, that for a moment, I put my objections aside, and concentrated on what she was saying.

I asked her if the order in which one recollects the past matters. She said that the important point is to **re**-experience the events and feelings in as much detail as possible, and to touch them with the sweeping breath, thereby releasing one's trapped energy.

"Is this exercise part of the Buddhist tradition?" I asked.

"No, it **isn't**," she replied solemnly. "This is part of another tradition. Someday, soon, you'll find out what that tradition is."

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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In the middle of our conversation on the patio, **Clara** suddenly had a vacant, far-away look as if she had caught sight of something or someone at the side of the house.

She hurriedly got up and excused herself, leaving me to ponder the importance of all the things she had said.

I **didn't** see **Clara** again until the following morning at breakfast.

As we sat to eat our morning meal of shredded meat and rice, I told **Clara** that on my return trip from the cave yesterday, I had confirmed her statement that it was only a short distance from the house.

"Why did we really meander so much to get there, **Clara**?" I asked.

Clara burst out laughing. "I was trying to get you to take off your boots, so we passed by the stream," she replied.

"Why did I have to take off my boots? Was it because of my blister?"

"It **wasn't** your blister," **Clara** said emphatically. "I needed to poke very crucial points on the soles of your feet to awaken you from your lifelong lethargy. Otherwise, you would have never listened to me."

"**Aren't** you exaggerating, **Clara**? I would have listened to you even if

you **didn't** poke my feet."

She shook her head and gave me a knowing smile. "All of us were brought up to live in a sort of limbo where nothing counts except petty, immediate gratifications," she said. "And women are the masters of that state.

"Not until we recapitulate can we overcome our upbringing. And talking about recapitulating ..." **Clara** noticed my pained expression and laughed.

"Do I have to go back to the cave, **Clara**?" I interrupted, anticipating what I thought she was going to tell me. "I'd much rather stay here with you. If you pose for me, I can make a few sketches of you, and then paint your portrait."

"No, thank you," she said, uninterested. "What I am going to do is give you some preliminary instructions on how to proceed with the recapitulation."

When we had finished eating, **Clara** handed me a writing pad and pencil. I thought she had changed her mind about my sketching her portrait.

But as she pushed the writing materials toward me, she said that I should begin making a list of all the people I had met, starting from the present and going back to my earliest memories.

"That's impossible!" I gasped. "How on earth am I going to remember everyone I've ever come into contact with from day one?"

Clara moved the plates aside to give me room to write.

"Difficult, true, but not impossible," she said. "It's a necessary part of the recapitulation. The list forms a matrix for the mind to hook on to."

She said that the initial stage of the recapitulation consists of two things.

The first is the list, the second is setting up the scene, and setting up the scene consists of visualizing all the details pertinent to the events that one is going to recall.

"Once you have all the elements in place, use the sweeping breath. The movement of your head is like a fan that stirs everything in that scene," she said:

"If you're remembering a room, for example, breathe in the walls, the ceiling, the furniture, the people you see.

And don't stop until you have absorbed every last bit of energy you left behind."

"How will I know when I've done that?" I asked. "Your body will tell you when you've had enough," she assured me:

"Remember, intend to inhale the energy that you left in the scene you're recapitulating, and intend to exhale the extraneous energy thrust into you by others."

Overwhelmed by the task of making the list and beginning to recapitulate, I **couldn't** think at all. A perverse and involuntary reaction of my mind was to go absolutely blank.

Then a deluge of thoughts flooded in, making it impossible for me to know where to start.

Clara explained that we must start the recapitulation by first focusing our attention on our past sexual activity.

"Why do you have to begin there?" I asked suspiciously.

"That's where the bulk of our energy is caught," **Clara** explained.

"That's why we must free those memories first!"

"I don't think my sexual encounters were all that important."

"It **doesn't** matter. You could have been staring up at the ceiling bored to death, or seeing shooting stars or fireworks- someone still left his energy inside you and walked off with a ton of yours."

I was totally put off by her statement. To go back to my sexual experiences now seemed repugnant.

"It's bad enough," I said, "to relive my childhood memories, but I won't hash up what happened with men."

Clara looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"Besides," I argued, "you'll probably expect me to confide in you. But really, **Clara**, I don't think what I did with men is anyone's business."

I thought I had made my point.

Clara resolutely shook her head and said, "Do you want those men you had to continue feeding from your energy? Do you want those men to get stronger as you get stronger? Do you want to be their source of energy for the rest of your life?"

"No. I don't think you understand the importance of the sexual act or the scope of the recapitulation."

"You're right, **Clara**. I don't understand the reason for your bizarre request.

"And what's this business of men getting stronger because I'm their source of energy? I'm nobody's source or provider. I promise you that."

She smiled and said that she had made a mistake in forcing a confrontation of ideologies at this time. "Bear with me," she begged:

"This is a belief I have chosen to uphold. As you progress with your recapitulation, I will tell you about the origin of this belief.

"Suffice it to say that it is a critical part of the art I'm teaching you."

"If it's as important as you claim, **Clara**, perhaps you'd better tell me about it now," I said. "Before we go any further with the recapitulation, I'd like to know what I'm getting into."

"All right, if you insist," she said, nodding.

She poured some camomile tea into our mugs and added a spoonful of honey to hers.

In the authoritative voice of a teacher enlightening a neophyte, she explained that women, more so than men, are the true supporters of the social order, and that to fulfill this role, they have been reared uniformly the world over to be at the service of men.

"It makes no difference whether women are bought right off the slave block, or they are courted and loved," she stressed. "Their fundamental purpose and fate is still the same: to nourish, shelter and serve men."

Clara looked at me, I believed, to assess if I was following her argument.

I thought I was, but my gut reaction was that her entire premise seemed wrong.

"That may be true in some cases," I said, "but I don't think you can make such sweeping generalizations to include all women."

Clara disagreed vehemently. "The diabolical part of women's servile position is that it **doesn't** appear to be merely a social prescription," she said, "but a fundamental biological imperative."

"Wait a minute, **Clara**," I protested. "How did you arrive at that?"

She explained that every species has a biological imperative to

perpetuate itself, and that nature has provided tools in order to ensure that the merging of female and male energies takes place in the most efficient way.

She said that in the human realm, although the primary function of sexual intercourse is procreation, it also has a secondary and covert function, which is to ensure a continual flow of energy from women to men.

Clara put such a stress on the word 'men' that I had to ask, "Why do you say it as if it were a one-way street? **Isn't** the sexual act an even exchange of energy between male and female?"

"No," she said emphatically. "Men leave specific energy lines inside the body of women. They are like luminous tapeworms that move inside the womb, sipping up energy."

"That sounds positively sinister," I said, humoring her.

She continued her exposition in utter seriousness. "The energy lines are put there for an even more sinister reason," she said, ignoring my nervous laughter, "which is to ensure that a steady supply of energy reaches the man who deposited them."

"Those lines of energy, established through sexual intercourse, collect and steal energy from the female body to benefit the male who left them there."

Clara was so adamant in what she was saying that I **couldn't** joke about it but had to take her seriously.

As I listened, I felt my nervous smile turn into a snarl.

"Not that I accept for a minute what you're saying, **Clara**," I said, "but just out of curiosity, how in the world did you arrive at such a preposterous notion? Did someone tell you about this?"

"Yes, my teacher told me about it."

"At first, I **didn't** believe him either," she admitted, "but he also taught me the art of freedom, and that means that I learned to see the flow of energy."

"Now I know he was accurate in his assessments, because I can see the worm-like filaments in women's bodies for myself. You, for example, have a number of them, all of them still active."

"Let's say that's true, **Clara**," I said uneasily. "Just for the sake of argument, let me ask you why should this be possible? **Isn't** this one-way energy flow unfair to women?"

"The whole world is unfair to women!" she exclaimed. "But that's not the point."

"What is the point, **Clara**? I know I'm missing it."

"Nature's imperative is to perpetuate our species," she explained. "In order to ensure that this continues to take place, women have to carry an excessive burden at their basic energy level, and that means a flow of energy that taxes women."

"But you still haven't explained why this should be so," I said, already becoming swayed by the force of her convictions.

"Women are the foundation for perpetuating the human species," **Clara** replied. "The bulk of the energy comes from them, not only to gestate, give birth and nourish their offspring, but also for ensuring that the male plays his part in this whole process."

Clara explained that ideally this process ensures that a woman feeds her man energetically through the filaments he left inside her body, so

that the man becomes mysteriously dependent on her at an ethereal level.

This is expressed in the overt behavior of the man returning to the same woman again and again to maintain his source of sustenance.

That way, **Clara** said, nature ensures that men, in addition to their immediate drive for sexual gratification, set up more permanent bonds with women.

"These energy fibers left in women's wombs also become merged with the energy makeup of the offspring, should conception take place," **Clara** elaborated:

"It may be the rudiments of family ties, for the energy from the father merges with that of the fetus, and enables the man to sense that the child is his own."

"These are some of the facts of life a girl's mother never tells her."

"Women are reared to be easily seduced by men, without the slightest idea of the consequences of sexual intercourse in terms of the energy drainage it produces in them. This is my point and this is what is not fair."

As I listened to **Clara** talk, I had to agree that some of what she said made sense to me at a deep bodily level.

She urged me not just to agree or disagree with her, but to think this through and evaluate what she had said in a courageous, unprejudiced and intelligent manner.

"It's bad enough that one man leaves energy lines inside a woman's body," **Clara** went on, "although that is necessary for having offspring and ensuring their survival."

"But to have the energy lines of ten or twenty men inside her feeding off her luminosity is more than anyone can bear. No wonder women can never lift up their heads."

"Can a woman get rid of those lines?" I asked, more and more convinced that there was some truth to what **Clara** was saying.

"A woman carries those luminous worms for seven years," **Clara** said, "after which time they disappear or fade out."

"But the wretched part is that when the seven years are about to be up, the whole army of worms, from the very first man a woman had to the very last one, all become agitated at once so that the woman is driven to have sexual intercourse again."

Then all the worms spring to life stronger than ever to feed off the woman's luminous energy for another seven years. It really is a never-ending cycle."

"What if the woman is celibate?" I asked. "Do the worms just die out?"

"Yes, if she can resist having sex for seven years."

"But it's nearly impossible for a woman to remain celibate like that in our day and age, unless she becomes a nun, or has money to support herself."

"And even then she still would need a totally different rationale."

"Why is that, **Clara**?"

"Because not only is it a biological imperative that women have sexual intercourse, but it is also a social mandate."

Clara gave me then a most confusing and distressing example.

She said that since we are unable to see the flow of energy, we may be needlessly perpetuating patterns of behavior or emotional interpretations associated with this unseen flow of energy.

For instance, for society to demand that women marry or at least offer themselves to men is wrong, as it is wrong for women to feel unfulfilled unless they have a man's semen inside them.

It is true that a man's energy lines give women purpose; make them fulfill their biological destinies of feeding men and their offspring.

But human beings are intelligent enough to demand of themselves more than merely the fulfillment of the reproduction imperative.

She said that, for example, to evolve is an equal if not a greater imperative than to reproduce; and that, in this case, evolving entails the awakening of women to their true role in the energetic scheme of reproduction.

She then turned her argument to the personal level and said that I had been reared, like every other woman, by a mother who regarded as her primary function raising me to find a suitable husband so I would not have the stigma of being a spinster.

I was really bred, like an animal, to have sex, no matter what my mother chose to call it.

"You, like every other woman, have been tricked and forced into submission," **Clara** said. "And the sad part is that you're trapped in this pattern, even if you don't intend to procreate."

Her statements were so distressing that I laughed out of sheer nervousness.

Clara wasn't fazed at all.

"Perhaps all this is true, **Clara**," I said, trying not to sound condescending. "But in my case, how can remembering the past change anything? **Isn't** it all water under the bridge?"

"I can only tell you that to wake up, you must break a vicious circle," she countered, her green eyes assessing me curiously.

I reiterated that I **didn't** believe in her theories about diabolic biological imperatives or **vampirelike** males leeching off women's energy, and argued that just sitting in a cave remembering **isn't** going to change anything.

"There are certain things I just don't want to think about ever again," I snapped and banged my fist on the kitchen table.

I stood up ready to leave and told her that I **didn't** want to hear any more about the recapitulation, the list of names, or any biological imperatives.

"Let's make a deal," **Clara** said, with the air of a merchant getting ready to cheat a customer. "You're a fair person; you like to be honorable. So I'll propose that we reach an agreement."

"What kind of an agreement?" I asked with mounting anxiety.

She tore off a sheet from the writing pad and handed it to me. "I want you to write and sign a promissory voucher stating that you're going to try the recapitulation exercise for one month only.

If, after a month, you don't notice any increase in energy, or any improvement in how you feel toward yourself or toward life in general, you will be free to go back home, wherever home is.

If this turns out to be the case, you can simply write off the entire experience as the bizarre request of an eccentric woman."

I sat down again to calm myself. As I took a few sips of tea, the thought struck me that it was the least I could do after all the trouble **Clara** had gone to for me.

Besides, it was apparent that she **wasn't** going to let me off the hook that easily.

I could always go through the motions of recapitulating my memories: After all, who is to know if, in the cave, I did the visualization and breathing, or if I just daydreamed or took a nap?

"It's only one month," she said sincerely. "You won't be signing your life away. Believe me, I'm really trying to help you."

"I know that," I said. "But why would you bother doing all this for me? Why me, **Clara**?"

"There is a reason," she replied, "but it's so farfetched that I can't spring it on you now.

"The only thing I can tell you is that by helping you, I'm fulfilling a worthy purpose; paying off a debt.

"Would you accept my repaying a debt as a reason?"

Clara looked at me so hopefully that I picked up the pencil and wrote the voucher, deliberately fussing over the wording so that there would be no confusion about the one-month time frame.

She bargained with me for not including in that month the time it took me to draw up the list of names. I agreed and made an addendum to that effect.

Then, in spite of my better judgement, I signed it.

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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It took weeks of brain-racking work to compile the list. I hated myself for having let **Clara** talk me into not including that time in the voucher.

During those long days, I worked in absolute solitude and silence.

I only saw **Clara** at breakfast and at dinner, which we ate in the kitchen; but we hardly spoke.

She would rebuff all my attempts at cordial conversation, saying that we would talk again when I had finished my list.

When I had completed it, she put down her sewing and immediately accompanied me to the cave. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and according to **Clara**, early morning and late afternoon were the most propitious times to begin such a vast undertaking.

At the entrance of the cave, she gave me some instructions.

"Take the first person on your list", **Clara** said, "and work your memory to recall everything you experienced with that person from the moment you two met to the last time you interacted. Or, if you prefer, you can work backward, from the last time you had dealings with that person to your first encounter."

Armed with the list, I went to the cave every day.

At first, recapitulating was painstaking work.

I **couldn't** concentrate because I dreaded dredging up the past.

My mind would wander from what I considered to be one traumatic event to the next, or I would simply rest or daydream.

But after a while, I became intrigued with the clarity and detail that my recollections were acquiring. I even began to be more objective about

experiences I had always considered to be taboo.

Surprisingly, I also felt stronger and more optimistic.

Sometimes, as I breathed, it was as if energy were oozing back into my body, causing my muscles to become warm and to bulge.

I became so involved in my recapitulation task that I **didn't** need a whole month to prove its worth.

Two weeks after the starting time stipulated in the voucher, while we were eating dinner, I asked **Clara** to find someone to move me out of my apartment and to put my things in storage.

Clara had suggested this option to me several times before, but each time I had refused her offer because I was not ready to make the commitment.

Clara was delighted with my request.

"I'll have one of my cousins do it," she volunteered. "She'll take care of everything. I don't want any worries to keep you from concentrating."

"Now that you mention it, **Clara**," I said, "there is one other thing that's been bothering me."

Clara waited for me to speak. I told her that I found it very odd that our meals were always ready, although I had never seen her cooking or preparing food.

"That's because you're never in the house during the day," **Clara** said matter-of-factly. "And at night, you retire early."

It was true that I spent most of my time in the cave.

When I did go back to the house, it was to have a meal in the kitchen.

Afterward, I stayed in my room because the size of the house intimidated me.

It was enormous. It **didn't** look abandoned, for it was filled to capacity with furniture, books and various decorative objects made of ceramic, silver or cloisonne.

Every room was clean and dust free, as if a maid came regularly to tidy up.

Yet the house seemed empty because there were no people in it.

Twice **Clara** had disappeared on mysterious errands that she refused to discuss; during those times, the only other living being in the house beside myself was **Manfred**.

Those were also the times when **Manfred** and I hiked into the hills overlooking the house. I had mapped the house and its grounds from an observation point I thought I had found myself.

I **didn't** want to admit at that time that **Manfred** had guided me to it.

From my private promontory, I spent hours trying to figure out the orientation of the house.

Clara had indicated that it followed the cardinal points, but when I checked it with a compass, the house seemed to be on a slightly different alignment.

The grounds around the house were most disturbing because they defied any accurate mapping I tried to devise.

I could see from my observation post that the grounds seemed much more extensive than when measured from the house itself.

Clara had forbidden me to set foot in the front part of the house- the east- as well as the south side. But I had calculated, by walking around the periphery of the house, that the two areas were identical to the west and north sides to which I had access.

However, when seen from a distance, they **weren't** identical at all; and I was at a loss to explain the discrepancy.

I gave up trying to pin down the layout of the house and grounds, and began placing my attention on another mysterious problem: **Clara's** relatives.

Although she constantly referred to them in an oblique manner, I had not yet seen hide nor hair of them.

"When are your relatives coming back from India?" I asked **Clara** point-blank.

"Soon," she replied.

She picked up her rice bowl with one hand and held it the way the Chinese do. I had never seen her use chop-sticks before and marveled at the incredible precision with which she manipulated them.

"Why are you so concerned with my relatives?" she asked.

"To tell you the truth, **Clara**, I don't know why, but I'm very curious about them," I said. "I've been having **unsettling** feelings and thoughts in this huge house."

"Do you mean that you don't like the house?"

"On the contrary, I love it. It's just so big and haunting."

"What kind of thoughts and feelings unsettle you?" she asked, putting down her bowl.

"Sometimes I think I see people in the hallway, or I hear voices. And I'm always under the impression that someone is watching me, but when I look around there **isn't** anyone there."

"There's more to this house than meets the eye," **Clara** admitted, "but that **shouldn't** engender fear or worry.

"There is magic in this house, in the land, and in the mountains around this entire area. That's the reason we chose to live here.

"In fact, that's also the reason you decided to live here yourself, even though you don't have the slightest inkling of that being the reason for your choice.

"But this is the way it should be. You bring your innocence to this house and the house with all the intent it stores turns it into wisdom."

"It all sounds very beautiful, **Clara**, but what exactly does it mean?"

"I always talk to you with the hope that you will understand me,"

Clara said with a note of disappointment:

"Every one of my relatives, who, I assure you, will come into contact with you sooner or later, will speak to you in the same way. So don't think that we're talking nonsense just because you don't understand us."

"Believe me, **Clara**, I don't think that at all, and I am grateful that you are trying to help me."

"It's the recapitulation that's helping you, not me," **Clara** corrected me:

"Have you noticed any strange things about the house, other than what you have already told me?"

I told her about the disparity between my visual assessments of the house from the observation post and from the grounds. She laughed until she was coughing.

"I have to adjust my behavior to this new development," **Clara** said when she could talk again.

"Can you explain to me why the grounds seem to be lopsided, and why I get such different compass readings when I'm down here than

when I'm up on the hill?" I asked.

"I certainly can; but it won't make any sense to you. What's more, you may even get frightened."

"Does it have to do with the compass, **Clara**? Or is it me? Am I crazy or what?"

"It has to do with you, of course: You're the one making those measurements; but it's not that you're crazy. It's something else."

"What is it, **Clara**? Tell me. This whole thing is giving me the creeps. It's as if I were in a science fiction movie where nothing is real and anything can happen. I hate that genre!"

Clara didn't seem willing to divulge anything more. Instead she asked, "Don't you like the unexpected?"

I told her that having male siblings had been so devastating for me; that I became jaded, and as a matter of principle, I hated everything they liked.

They watched Twilight Zone on television, and raved about it. To me, it was a most manipulative and contrived show.

"Let's see how I can put this," **Clara** conceded:

"First of all, this is definitely not a science fiction house.

"It's rather a house of extraordinary intent. The reason why I can't explain its discrepancies is because I can't explain to you yet what intent is."

"Please don't talk in riddles, **Clara**," I begged. "It's not only frightening, but plainly infuriating."

"In order for you to understand this delicate matter, I have to talk in a roundabout way," **Clara** said:

"So let me first tell you about the man who was directly responsible for my being here in this house, and indirectly responsible for my relation with you.

"His name was Julian and he was the most exquisite being you could ever encounter.

"He found me one day when I had lost my way in those mountains in **Arizona** and he brought me here to this house."

"Wait a minute, **Clara**, I thought you said that this house has been in your family for generations," I reminded her.

"Five generations, to be exact," she replied.

"How can you make two contradictory statements with such nonchalance?"

"I'm not contradicting myself. It's you who are interpreting things without a proper foundation.

"The truth is that this house has been in my family for generations; but my family is an abstract family.

"It's a family in the same manner this house is a 'house,' and **Manfred** is a 'dog.'

But you already know that **Manfred isn't** a real dog; nor is this house real like any other house. Do you see what I mean?"

I **wasn't** in the mood for **Clara**'s riddles.

For a while, I sat quietly, hoping that she would change the subject.

Then I felt guilty for brooding and being short-tempered. "No, I don't see what you mean, I finally said.

"In order for you to understand all this, you have to change," **Clara** said patiently:

"But then, that's precisely why you are here: to change.

"And to change means that you will be able to succeed in making the abstract flight, at which time everything will be clear to you."

At my desperate urging, she explained that this unimaginable flight was symbolized by moving from the right side of the forehead to the left, but what it really meant was bringing the ethereal part of us, the double, into our daily awareness.

"As I've already explained to you," she went on, "the body-mind dualism is a false dichotomy.

"The real division is between the physical body, which houses the mind, and the ethereal body or the double, which houses our energy.

"The abstract flight takes place when we bring our double to bear on our daily lives.

"In other words, the moment our physical body becomes totally conscious of its energetic ethereal counterpart, we have crossed over into the abstract; a completely different realm of awareness."

"If it means I'll have to change first, I seriously doubt I'll ever be able to make that crossing," I said. "Everything seems so deeply ingrained in me that I feel I'm set for life."

Clara poured some water into my cup. She put down the ceramic pitcher and looked at me squarely.

"There is a way to change," she said, "and by now you are up to your ears in it. It's called the recapitulation."

She assured me that a deep and complete recapitulation enables us to be aware of what we want to change by allowing us to see our lives without delusion.

It gives us a moment's pause in which we can choose to accept our usual behavior, or to change it by intending it away before it fully entraps us.

"And how do you intend something away?" I asked. "Do you just say, 'Begone, Satan!'"

Clara laughed and took a sip of water. "To change, we need to meet three conditions," she said:

"First, we must announce out loud our decision to change so that intent will hear us.

Second, we must engage our awareness over a period of time: We can't just start something and give it up as soon as we become discouraged.

Third, we have to view the outcome of our actions with a sense of complete detachment. This means we can't get involved with the idea of succeeding or failing.

"Follow these three steps and you can change any unwanted feelings and desires in you," **Clara** assured me.

"I don't know, **Clara**," I said skeptically. "It sounds so simple the way you put it."

It **wasn't** that I **didn't** want to believe her: It was just that I had always been practical; and from a practical point of view, the task of changing my behavior was staggering in spite of her three-fold program.

We finished our meal in complete silence.

The only sound in the kitchen was the constant dripping of water as it passed through a limestone filter.

That gave me a concrete image of the gradual cleansing process of

recapitulating.

Suddenly, I had a surge of optimism.

Perhaps it was possible to change oneself; to become purified drop by drop, thought by thought, just like the water passing through the filter.

Above us, the bright track lights cast eerie shadows on the white tablecloth.

Clara put down her chopsticks and began curling her fingers as if she were making shadow pictures on the tablecloth. At any moment I expected her to do a rabbit or a turtle.

"What are you doing?" I asked, breaking the silence.

"This is a form of communication," she explained, "not with people though, but with that force we call intent."

She extended her little and index fingers, then made a circle by touching her thumb to the tips of the two remaining fingers. She told me that this was a signal to trap the attention of that force and to allow it to enter the body through the energy lines that end or originate in the fingertips.

"Energy comes through the index and little finger if they are extended like antennae," she explained, showing me the gesture again. "Then the energy is trapped and held in the circle made by the other three fingers."

She said that with this specific hand position we can draw sufficient energy into the body to heal or strengthen it, or to change our moods and habits.

"Let's go to the living room, where we can be more comfortable,"

Clara said. "I don't know about you, but this bench is beginning to hurt my bottom."

Clara stood up and we walked across the dark patio, through the back door and hall of the main house into the living room.

To my surprise, the gasoline lamp had already been lit and **Manfred** was asleep curled up next to an armchair.

Clara made herself comfortable in that chair, which I had always taken to be her favorite.

She picked up a piece of embroidery that she had been working on and carefully added a few more stitches by passing the needle through the cloth and pulling it out with a graceful sweeping motion of her hand.

Her eyes were steadfast; intent on her work.

To me it was so unusual to see this strong woman doing needle work that I glanced over curiously to see if I could catch a glimpse of her handicraft.

Clara noticed my interest and held up the cloth for me to see.

It was a pillowcase with embroidered butterflies perched on colorful flowers. It was too gaudy for my taste.

Clara smiled as if she sensed my critical opinion of her work.

"You might tell me that my work is sheer beauty or that I'm wasting my time," she said, taking another stitch, "but that **wouldn't** affect my inner serenity.

"This attitude is called 'knowing your worth.'"

She asked a rhetorical question that she answered herself: "And what do you think my worth is? Absolutely zero."

I told her that in my opinion she was magnificent, truly a most inspiring person. How could she say that she had no worth?

"It's all very simple," **Clara** explained. "As long as the positive and

negative forces are in balance, they cancel each other out and that means that my worth is zero.

"It also means that I cannot possibly be upset when someone criticizes me, nor can I be pleased when someone praises me."

Clara held up a needle and, in spite of the dim light, she quickly threaded it.

"Chinese sages of ancient times used to say that in order to know your worth, you have to slip through the eye of the dragon," she said, pulling the two ends of the thread together.

She said that those sages were convinced that the boundless unknown is guarded by an enormous dragon whose scales shine with a dazzling light.

They believed that the courageous seekers who dare to approach the dragon are awed by its blinding glare, by the power of its tail that with the minutest flicker crushes anything in its way, and by its burning breath that turns to ashes everything within its reach.

But they also believed that there is a way to slip by that unapproachable dragon.

Clara said that they were confident that by merging with the dragon's intent, one can become invisible and go through the dragon's eye.

"What does that mean, **Clara**?" I asked.

"It means that through the recapitulation we can become empty of thought and desire, which for those ancient seers meant to become one with the dragon's intent, therefore invisible."

I picked up an embroidered cushion, another sample of **Clara**'s work, and tucked it behind my back.

I took several deep breaths to clear my mind.

I wanted to understand what she was saying, but her insistence in using Chinese metaphors made it all the more confusing to me.

Yet there was such an urgency in everything she said, that I felt it would be my loss if I **didn't** at least try to understand her.

Watching **Clara** embroidering, I was suddenly reminded of my mother. Perhaps it was that memory that induced in me a monumental sadness; a longing that had no name.

Or perhaps it was listening to what **Clara** had said; or just being in her empty, hauntingly beautiful house, under that eerie light of the gasoline lamp.

Tears flooded my eyes and I began to weep.

Clara jumped up from her chair and stood beside me. She whispered in my ear so loudly that it sounded like a shout, "Don't you dare to give in to self-pity in this house.

"If you do, this house will reject you. It will spit you out, just like you spit out an olive pit."

Her admonition had the proper effect on me. My sadness instantly vanished.

I dried my eyes and **Clara** continued talking as if nothing had happened.

"The art of emptiness was the technique practiced by Chinese men of wisdom who wanted to go through the dragon's eye," she said, taking her seat again:

"Today, we call it the art of freedom. We feel it's a better term because that art really leads to an abstract realm where humanness

doesn't count."

"Do you mean, **Clara**, that it is an inhuman realm?"

Clara put her embroidery down in her lap and looked at me. "What I mean is that almost everything we have heard about this realm, from sages and seers who sought it, smacks of human concerns.

"But we, the ones who practice the art of freedom, have found out from firsthand experience that this is an inaccurate portrayal.

"In our experience, whatever is human in that realm is so unimportant that it is lost in the vastness."

"Wait a minute, **Clara**. What about that group of legendary personages called the Chinese immortals? **Didn't** they achieve freedom in the way you mean it?"

"Not in the way we mean it," **Clara** said. "Freedom to us is being free from humanness.

"The Chinese immortals were caught in their myths of immortality; of being wise, of having liberated themselves, of coming back to earth to guide others along the way.

"They were scholars, musicians; possessors of supernatural powers.

"They were righteous and whimsical very much like the classical Greek gods.

"Even nirvana is a human state, in which bliss is being free from the flesh."

Clara had succeeded in making me feel completely forlorn.

I told her that all my life I had been accused of lacking human warmth and understanding. In fact, I had been told that I was the coldest creature anyone could ever come across.

Now **Clara** was saying that freedom was being free from human compassion, and I had always felt I was missing something crucial by not possessing it.

I was on the verge of tears of self-pity again, but **Clara** came again to my rescue.

"Being free from humanness **doesn't** mean such an idiotic thing as not possessing warmth or compassion," she said.

"Even so, freedom the way you describe it is inconceivable to me, **Clara**," I insisted. "I'm not sure I would want any part of it."

"And I'm sure I want every part of it," she retorted:

"Although my mind cannot conceive it either, believe me, it does exist!

"And believe me, too, that someday you'll be saying to someone else whatever I am saying to you now about it. Perhaps you'll even be using the same words."

She winked at me as if she knew for certain that this was going to happen.

"As you continue to recapitulate, the entrance of the realm where humanness **doesn't** count will appear to you," **Clara** went on:

"That will be the invitation for you to go through the dragon's eye.

"This is what we call the abstract flight.

"It actually entails crossing a vast chasm into a realm that cannot be described because man **isn't** the measure of it."

I became numb with dread. I **didn't** dare take **Clara** lightly, for she always meant what she said.

The thought of losing my humanness, such as it was, and jumping into

a chasm was more than frightening.

I was about to ask her if she knew when that entrance was going to appear to me, but she continued her explanation.

"The truth of the matter is that the entrance is in front of us all the time," **Clara** said, "but only those whose minds are still and whose hearts are at ease can see or feel its presence."

She explained that to call it an entrance was not metaphorical because it actually appears sometimes as a plain door, a black cavern, a dazzling light or anything conceivable; even a dragon's eye. She said that, in this respect, the metaphors of China's early sages were not farfetched at all.

"Another thing the ancient Chinese seekers believed was that invisibility is the corollary of having attained a calm indifference," she said.

"What is a calm indifference, **Clara**?"

Instead of answering me directly, she asked if I had ever seen the eyes of fighting cocks.

"I've never seen a fighting cock in my life," I told her.

Clara explained that the look in the eyes of a fighting cock is not the look found in the eyes of ordinary people or animals because those eyes mirror warmth, compassion, rage, fear.

"The eyes of a fighting cock are filled with none of these," **Clara** informed me:

"Instead, they reflect an indescribable indifference, something also found in the eyes of beings who have made the great crossing.

"Instead of looking outwardly at the world, they have turned inwardly to gaze at that which is not yet present.

"The eye that gazes inwardly is immovable," **Clara** went on. "It reflects not human concerns or fears, but the vastness.

"Seers who have gazed at the boundless have attested that the boundless stares back with a cold, unyielding indifference."

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Taisha Abelar - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 7
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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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Chapter 7

HTML EDITOR

Clara concluded that my being terrified was a product of the conflict between what I really saw, and what I had already been told was possible and permissible to see.

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One afternoon just before dark, **Clara** and I were taking the long scenic route to the house from the cave when she suggested that we sit and rest in the shade of some trees.

We were watching the shadows that the trees cast on the ground, when suddenly a gust of wind made the leaves quiver.

The leaves began to shimmer in a flurry of light and dark, causing ripples in the patterns on the ground.

When the wind passed, the leaves once again became still and so did the shadows.

"The mind is like these shadows," **Clara** said softly. "When our breathing is even, our minds are still. If our breathing is erratic, the mind quivers like stirred leaves."

I tried to notice if my breathing was even or disturbed, but I honestly **couldn't** tell.

"If your breath is agitated, your mind becomes restless," **Clara** continued:

"To quiet the mind, it's best to begin by quieting your breathing."

She told me to keep my back erect and to concentrate on my breathing until it was soft and rhythmic, like that of an infant.

I pointed out that if a person is physically active as we had just been, hiking over hills, one's breathing **couldn't** possibly be as soft as an infant's who just lies around and does nothing.

"Besides," I said, "I don't know how infants breathe. I haven't been around many of them, and when I was, I **didn't** pay attention to their breathing."

Clara moved closer and put one hand on my back and the other on my chest.

To my dismay, she pressed until I was so constricted that I felt I was going to suffocate. I tried to move away but she held me down with an iron grip.

To compensate, my stomach began moving in and out rhythmically as air again entered my body.

"This is how infants breathe," she said. "Remember the sensation of your stomach popping out so you can reproduce it regardless of whether you are walking, exercising or lying around doing nothing."

"You probably won't believe this, but we are so civilized that we have to relearn how to breathe properly."

She removed her hands from my chest and back. "Now let the breath rise to fill your chest cavity," she instructed. "But don't let it flood your head."

"There is no way for the air to get into my head," I laughed.

"Don't take me so literally," she scolded. "When I say air, I'm really talking about energy derived from the breath, which enters the abdomen, the chest and then the head."

I had to laugh at her seriousness. I braced myself for another barrage of Chinese metaphors.

She smiled and winked. "My seriousness is a corollary of my size," she said with a chuckle. "We big people are always more serious than petite jovial ones. **Isn't** that right, **Taisha**?"

I **didn't** know why she was including me when she talked of big people. I was at least two inches shorter than her and a good thirty-five pounds lighter.

I thoroughly resented being called big, and even more so her intimation that I was overly serious, but I **didn't** voice this because I knew she would make an issue out of it, and tell me to do a deep recapitulation on the subject of my size.

Clara looked at me as if to gauge my reaction to her statement.

I smiled and pretended it **hadn't** fazed me in the least.

Upon seeing my attentiveness, she became serious again and continued to explain that our emotional well-being is directly linked to the rhythmic flow of our breathing.

"The breathing of a person who is upset," she said, leaning closer, "is rapid and shallow and is localized in the chest or head."

"The breathing of a relaxed person sinks to the abdomen."

I tried to lower my breathing to my stomach so that **Clara wouldn't** suspect that I had been upset.

She smiled knowingly and added, "It's harder for big people to breath from the abdomen because their center of gravity is just a bit higher. It's therefore even more important that we remain calm and unperturbed."

She went on to explain that the body is divided into three main chambers of energy: the abdomen, chest and head. She touched my stomach just below my navel, then my solar plexus and then the center of my forehead.

She explained that these three points are the key centers of the three chambers. The more relaxed the mind and body are, the more air a person can take into each of the three body divisions.

"Infants take in a vast amount of air for their size," **Clara** said.

"However, as we grow older we become constricted, especially around the lungs, and we take in less air."

Clara took a deep breath before continuing. "Since emotions are directly linked to the breath," she said, "a good way to calm ourselves is by regulating our breathing."

"For example, we can train ourselves to absorb more energy by deliberately elongating each breath we take."

She stood up and asked me to observe her shadow carefully.

I noticed that it was perfectly still.

Then she told me to stand and look at my own shadow.

I **couldn't** help detecting a slight quiver, like the shadow of the trees when the leaves were touched by a breeze.

"Why is my shadow shaking?" I asked. "I thought I was standing perfectly still."

"Your shadow quivers because the winds of emotion are blowing through you," **Clara** replied. "You're more quiet than when you first began to recapitulate, but there is still a great deal of agitation left inside you."

She told me to stand on my left leg with my right leg raised and bent at the knee.

I wobbled as I tried to keep my balance.

I marveled that she stood on one leg as easily as she had stood on two, and her shadow was absolutely motionless.

"You seem to have a hard time keeping your balance," **Clara** noted, setting down her leg and raising the other one:

"That means that your thoughts and feelings are not at ease, and neither is your breathing."

I raised my other leg to try the exercise again.

This time my balance was better, but when I saw how still **Clara's** shadow was, I experienced a sudden pang of envy and I had to lower my leg to keep from falling.

"Whenever we have a thought," **Clara** explained, setting down her leg again, "our energy moves in the direction of that thought."

"Thoughts are like scouts; they cause the body to move along a certain path."

"Now, look at my shadow again," she ordered. "But try not to regard it

as merely my shadow. Try to see into the essence of **Clara** as shown in her shadow-picture."

Immediately I tensed. I was on trial and my performance was going to be evaluated. My childhood competitive feelings of having to outdo my brothers surfaced.

"Don't tense up," **Clara** said sternly. "This is not a contest. This is merely a delight. Do you understand? A delight!"

I had been thoroughly conditioned to react to words. The word 'delight' threw me into total confusion, and finally into panic.

She's not using the word correctly, was all I could think. She must mean something else.

But **Clara** repeated the word over and over, as if she wanted it to sink in.

I kept my eyes on her shadow.

I had the impression that it was beautiful, serene, full of power.

It **wasn't** merely a dark area, it seemed to have depth, intelligence and vitality.

Then suddenly I thought I saw **Clara's** shadow move independent of any movement of **Clara's** body.

The movement was so incredibly fast that it almost went unnoticed.

I waited, holding my breath, peering at it, pouring on it all my attention.

Then it happened again, and this time I was certainly prepared for it.

It quivered and then stretched, as if its shoulders and chest had suddenly been inflated. The shadow seemed to have come alive.

I let out a shriek and jumped up. I shouted to **Clara** that her shadow was alive.

I was ready to run away, terrified that the shadow would run after me, but **Clara** restrained me by holding my shoulder.

When I had calmed down enough to talk again, I told her what I had seen, all the while keeping my eyes averted from the ground for fear of catching another glimpse of **Clara's** sinister shadow.

"To see the movement of shadows means that you have obviously freed a huge portion of energy with your recapitulation," **Clara** remarked.

"Are you sure I **didn't** just imagine this, **Clara**?" I said, hoping she would say I had.

"It was your intent that made it move," she said authoritatively.

"But don't you think that recapitulating also disturbs the mind?" I asked. "I must be very disturbed in order to see shadows moving by themselves."

"No. The purpose of the recapitulation is to break basic assumptions we have accepted throughout our lives," **Clara** explained patiently:

"Unless they are broken, we can't prevent the power of remembering from clouding our awareness."

"What exactly do you mean by the power of remembering, **Clara**?"

"The world is a huge screen of memories. If certain assumptions are broken," she said, "the power of remembering is not only held in check, but even canceled out."

I **didn't** understand what she was saying and I resented her being so obscure.

"It probably was the wind that stirred the dirt on which your shadow

was projected," I said, offering a reasonable explanation.

Clara shook her head. "Try looking at it again and find out for sure," she suggested.

I felt goose bumps on my arms. Nothing was going to make me stare at her shadow again.

"You insist that shadows of people don't move by themselves," **Clara** said, "because that's what your ability to remember tells you.

"Do you remember ever seeing them move?"

I replied, "No. I certainly do not."

"There you are. What happened to you just now is that your normal ability to remember was held in check for an instant and you saw my shadow move."

Clara shook a finger at me and chuckled. "And it **wasn't** the wind stirring the dirt, either," she said.

Then she hid her head with her arm, as if she were a timid child.

It struck me as odd that even though she was a grown woman, she never looked ridiculous performing childish gestures.

"I have news for you," **Clara** continued. "You've seen shadows move before as a child, but then you were not yet rational so it was all right to see them move.

"As you grew up, your energy was harnessed by social constraints, and so you forgot you had seen them moving, and only remember what you think is permissible to remember."

I was trying to appreciate the scope of what **Clara** was saying when I suddenly remembered that as a child I used to see shadows wiggle and twist on the sidewalks; especially on hot, clear days.

I always thought they were trying to pull themselves free from people they belonged to.

It terrified me to see the shadows curl sideways to peek behind them.

It always seemed odd that adults would be so totally oblivious of their shadows' antics.

I mentioned this to her.

Clara concluded that my being terrified was a product of the conflict between what I really saw, and what I had already been told was possible and permissible to see.

"I don't think I follow you, **Clara**," I said.

"Try to imagine yourself as a giant memory warehouse," she suggested:

"In that warehouse, someone other than yourself has stored feelings, ideas, mental dialogues and behavior patterns.

"Since it is your warehouse, you can go in there and rummage around any time you want and use whatever you find there.

"The problem is that you have absolutely no say over the inventory, for it was already established before you came into possession of the warehouse.

"Thus you are drastically limited in your selection of items."

She added that our lives seem to be an uninterrupted time line because in our warehouses the inventory never changes.

She stressed that unless this storehouse is cleared out, there is no way for us to be what we really are.

Overwhelmed by my memories and by what **Clara** was explaining, I sat down on a large rock.

From the corner of my eye, I saw my shadow and experienced a jolt of panic as I asked myself, What if my shadow **wouldn't** quite sit the way I do?

"I can't take this, **Clara**," I said, jumping up. "Let's go back to the house."

Clara ordered me to stay put. "Calm the mind," she said, staring at me, "and the body too will become tranquil; otherwise you're going to burst."

Clara held her left hand in front of her body with the wrist resting just above her navel and her palm faced sideways. The fingers were pressed together, pointed downward to the ground.

She told me to adopt this hand position and gaze at the tip of my middle finger.

I looked over the bridge of my nose, which forced me to look downward while slightly crossing my eyes.

She explained that to gaze fixedly in that manner places our awareness outside of us onto the ground, thus diminishing our inner agitation.

Then she said I was to inhale deeply while pointing at the ground; intending to get from it a sparkle of energy, like a drop of glue, on my middle finger.

Next, I was to rotate my hand up at the wrist until the base of my thumb touched my breastbone.

I was to gaze at the tip of my middle finger for a count of seven and then shift my awareness immediately to my forehead, to a spot in between the eyes and just above the bridge of the nose.

This shift, she said, must be accompanied by the intent of transferring the sparkle of energy from the middle finger to that spot between the eyes.

If the transfer is accomplished, a light appears on the dark screen behind the closed eyes.

She said that we can send this luminous spot of energy to any part of our body to counteract pain, disease, apprehension or fear.

She then moved her hand and gently pressed my solar plexus. "If you need a quick surge of energy, as you do now, do the power breath I am about to show you and I guarantee that you will feel recharged."

I watched **Clara** do a series of short **inhalations** and exhalations through her nose in rapid succession, vibrating her diaphragm. I imitated her and after twenty or so breaths, contracting and relaxing my diaphragm, I felt warmth spreading throughout my midsection.

"We're going to sit here doing the power breath and gazing at the light behind the eyes," she said, "until you're no longer frightened."

"I **wasn't** really that scared," I lied.

"You **didn't** see yourself," **Clara** retorted. "From where I'm sitting, I saw someone who was just about to faint."

She was absolutely right. Never had I experienced such total fright as when I saw **Clara's** shadow stretching itself out.

Lost memories had surfaced from such forgotten depths that, for a second or two, I had felt I was actually a child again.

I held my palm sideways and gazed at my fingertip the way **Clara** had recommended.

I kept my eyes fixed, and then shifted my attention to the center of my

forehead.

I **didn't** see any light, but I gradually became calm.

It was almost dark. I could see **Clara's** silhouette outlined beside me.

Clara's voice was soothing as she said, "Let's remain here for a while longer to allow that sparkle of energy to settle in your body."

"Did you learn this technique in China, **Clara**?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I told you that I had a teacher here in Mexico," she said.

Clara then added reverently, "My teacher was an extraordinary man who dedicated his life to learning, and then to teaching us the art of freedom."

"But **isn't** this method of breathing Oriental in origin?"

She seemed to deliberate before answering me.

I thought her hesitation was due to her desire to remain secretive, so I probed, "Where did your teacher learn it? Was he also in China?"

"He learned everything he knew from his teacher," **Clara** said evasively.

When I asked her to tell me more about her teacher and what he had taught her, **Clara** apologized for not being at liberty to discuss the subject further at this time.

"In order to understand it," she explained, "you need to acquire a special kind of energy, which at the moment you don't have."

She patted my hand. "Don't rush things," she said sympathetically:

"We intend to teach you all we know, so why the hurry?"

"I'm always so intrigued when you say 'we,' **Clara**, because I get the impression that there are other people in the house, and I begin to see and hear things that my reason tells me can't possibly be true."

Clara laughed until I thought she was going to fall off the boulder on which she sat.

Her sudden and exaggerated outburst annoyed me even more than her refusal to tell me about her teacher.

"You don't know how funny your dilemma is to me," she said by way of an explanation:

"It proves to me, just like when you saw the shadows moving, that you're freeing your energy.

"You are beginning to empty your warehouse. The more items of your inventory you discard, the more you make room for other things."

"Like what?" I said, still annoyed. "Seeing shadows move and hearing voices?"

"Perhaps," she said vaguely. "Or you might even see the people the shadows and voices belong to."

I wanted to know what people she was referring to, but she refused to say any more about it.

Abruptly she stood up and announced that she wanted to get back to the house to turn on the generator before it got too dark.

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha**

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I **hadn't** seen **Clara** for three days. Some mysterious errand was keeping her away.

It was her habit now, without a word of warning, to leave me alone in the house for days at a time with only **Manfred** for company.

Although I had the whole house to myself, I never dared to venture beyond the living room, my bedroom, **Clara's** gymnasium, the kitchen and of course the outhouse.

There was something about **Clara's** house and grounds, especially when **Clara** was away, that filled me with an irrational fear.

The result was that when I was alone, I kept a strict routine, which I found comforting.

I used to wake up around nine, make my breakfast in the kitchen on a hot plate because I still **didn't** know how to light the wood-burning stove, pack a light lunch, then go to the cave to recapitulate, or take a long hike with **Manfred**.

I would return in the late afternoon to practice **kung fu** forms in **Clara's** martial arts gymnasium.

The gym was a big hall with a vaulted ceiling, a varnished wooden floor and a standing black-lacquer rack on which a variety of martial arts weapons were displayed.

Along the wall opposite the door was a raised platform covered with straw mats.

I had once asked **Clara** what the platform was for.

She had said it was where she did her meditation.

I had never seen **Clara** meditate because whenever she went into the building by herself, she always locked the door.

Every time I had asked her what kind of meditation she practiced, she had refused to elaborate on it.

The only thing I ever found but was that she called it 'dreaming.'

Clara had allowed me free access to her gymnasium whenever she **wasn't** using it herself.

When I was alone in the house, I gravitated to that room, finding there emotional solace for it was imbued with **Clara's** presence and power.

It was there that she taught me a most intriguing style of **kung fu**.

I had never been interested in Chinese martial arts because my Japanese karate teachers had always insisted that its movements were too elaborate and cumbersome to be of any practical value.

Systematically they ran down the Chinese styles and elevated their own, saying that although karate had its roots in the Chinese styles, its forms and applications were thoroughly altered and perfected in Japan.

Ignorant of martial arts, I believed my teachers and totally discounted all other styles.

Consequently, I **didn't** know what to make of **Clara's** **kung fu** style.

In spite of my ignorance, one thing was obvious: She was an indisputable master of it.

After working out for an hour or so in **Clara's** gymnasium, I would change clothes and go to the kitchen to eat.

Invariably, my food would be there, set on the table, but I was always so famished after exercising that I just wolfed down whatever had been prepared without speculating how it got there.

Clara had told me, when I questioned her about it, that when she was

gone the caretaker came to the house to cook my meals.

He must have also done the laundry **because** I would find my clothes neatly folded in a pile at the door of my bedroom: All I had to do was iron them.

One evening after a heavy workout which **Manfred** looked on growling critically from time to time; I had such a surplus of energy that I decided to break my routine and return to the cave in the darkness to continue recapitulating.

I was in such a hurry to get there that I forgot to bring my flashlight.

It was a cloudy night. Yet despite the total darkness, I **didn't** stumble on anything along the path.

I got to the cave and recapitulated; visualizing and breathing in memories of all my karate instructors and every demonstration and tournament I had participated in.

It took me most of the night, but when I had finished I felt thoroughly cleansed of the prejudices that I had inherited from my teachers as part of my training.

The following day **Clara** still **hadn't** returned, so I went to the cave a bit later than usual.

As I walked home in daylight, I tried a deliberate exercise. I walked on the same path I had walked every day, only this time I kept my eyes shut to simulate darkness.

Because it had only occurred to me later that it had been very unusual to have walked all the way to the cave the night before without tripping, I wanted to see if I could walk without stumbling.

But with my eyes shut, I fell several times over stumps and rocks, and badly bruised my shin.

I was on the living room floor putting bandages on my abrasions when **Clara** unexpectedly walked in the door. "What happened to you?" she asked with a look of surprise. "Were you and the dog fighting?"

At that very instant, **Manfred** ambled into the room. He barked gruffly, as if offended.

I was convinced that he had understood what **Clara** had said.

Clara stood in front of him, bowed slightly from the waist, the way an Oriental student bows to his master, and voiced a most convoluted bilingual apology.

She said, "I am extremely sorry, my dear **se** or, for having spoken so lightly about your irreproachable behavior and your exquisite manners; and above all, your superior consideration that makes you **un se** or **entre se** ores, **el m s ilustre entre todos ellos**- a lord among lords, the most illustrious of them all."

I was absolutely bewildered. I thought **Clara** had lost her mind during her three days' absence.

I had never heard her speaking like this before. I wanted to laugh, but her serious expression made my laugh stick in my throat.

She was about to begin another barrage of apologies when **Manfred** yawned, looked at her bored, turned around, and left the room.

Clara sat down on the couch, her body shaking with muffled laughter. "When he's offended, the only way to get rid of him is to bore him to death with apologies," she confided.

I hoped that **Clara** would tell me where she had been for the past three days.

I waited for a moment in case she would bring up the subject of her absence, but she **didn't**.

I told her that while she was gone, **Manfred** had come every day to visit me at the recapitulation cave; and that it was as if he went there from time to time to check if I was all right.

Again I wanted **Clara** to say something about the nature of her trip, but instead she said without surprise, "Yes, he's very solicitous, and extremely considerate of others.

"Therefore he expects the same treatment from them; and if he even suspects that he's not getting it, he becomes rabid.

"When he's in that mood, he's deadly dangerous.

"Remember that night he nearly snapped your head off when you called him a toad-dog?"

I wanted to change the subject.

I **didn't** like to think of **Manfred** as a mad dog. Over the past months, he had become more a friend than a beast.

He was such a friend that the unsettling certainty he was the only one who truly understood me had taken possession of me.

"You haven't said what happened to your legs," **Clara** reminded me.

I told her about my failed attempt at walking with my eyes shut. I explained that I had had no difficulty walking in the dark the night before.

She looked at the scratches and welts on my legs and patted my head as if I were **Manfred**.

"Last night, you **weren't** making a project out of walking," she said:

"You were determined to get to the cave, so your feet automatically took you there.

"This afternoon, you were consciously trying to replicate last night's walking, but you failed miserably because your mind got in the way."

She thought for a moment then added, "Or perhaps you **weren't** listening to the voice of the spirit that could have guided you safely."

She puckered up her lips in a childish gesture of impatience as I told her that I **hadn't** been aware of any voices; but that sometimes in the house, I thought I heard strange whisperings; although I was convinced that that was only the wind blowing through the empty hallway.

"We've agreed that you **weren't** going to take anything I say literally, unless I tell you beforehand to do so," **Clara** reminded me sternly:

"By emptying your warehouse, you are changing your inventory.

"Now there is room for something new, such as walking in darkness; so I thought that perhaps there might also be room for the voice of the spirit."

I was trying so hard to figure out what **Clara** was saying, that my forehead must have been furrowed.

Clara sat down in her favorite chair and patiently began to explain what she meant,

"Before you came to this house, your inventory had nothing on dogs being more than dogs.

"But then you met **Manfred** and meeting him forced you to modify that part of your inventory." She shook her hand like an Italian and said, "**Capisce?**"

"You mean **Manfred** is the voice of the spirit?" I asked, dumbfounded.

Clara laughed so hard that she could barely speak. "No, it's not quite what I mean. It's something more abstract," she mumbled.

She suggested I take out my mat from the closet. "Let's go to the patio and sit under the **zapote** tree," she said as she was getting some salve from a cabinet:

"The twilight is the best time to listen for the voice of the spirit."

I unrolled my mat under the huge tree covered with **peachlike** green fruits.

Clara massaged some salve into my bruised skin. It hurt fearsomely, but I tried not to wince.

When she had finished, I noticed that the biggest welt had almost disappeared.

She leaned back and propped her back against the thick tree trunk.

"Everything has a form," she began, "but besides the outer shape, there is an inner awareness that rules things.

"This silent awareness is the spirit.

"It is an all-encompassing force that manifests itself differently in different things.

"This energy communicates with us."

She told me to relax and to take deep breaths because she was going to show me how to exercise my inner hearing, "For it is with the inner ear," she said, "that one is able to discern the spirit's **biddings**.

"When you breathe, allow the energy to flow out of your ears," she continued.

"How do I do that?" I asked.

"When you exhale, fix your attention on the openings of your ears and use your intent and your concentration to direct the flow."

She monitored my attempts for a while, correcting me as I went along.

"Exhale through your nose with your mouth closed and the tip of your tongue touching your palate," she said. "Exhale noiselessly."

After a few attempts, I could feel my ears pop and my sinuses clear. Then she instructed me to rub the palms of my hands together until they were hot and to place them over my ears with my fingertips almost touching, at the back of my head.

I did as she instructed. **Clara** suggested I massage my ears using a gentle circular pressure.

Then, with my ears still covered and my index fingers crossed over the middle fingers, I was to repeatedly tap behind each ear by snapping my index fingers in unison.

As I flicked my fingers, I heard a sound like a muffled bell reverberating inside my head.

I repeated the tapping eighteen times as she had instructed.

When I removed my hands I noticed I could distinctly hear the faintest sounds in the surrounding vegetation, while before, everything had been undifferentiated and muffled.

"Now, with your ears clear, perhaps you'll be able to hear the voice of the spirit," **Clara** said:

"But don't expect a shout from the treetops.

"What we call the voice of the spirit is more of a feeling; or it can be an idea that suddenly pops into your head.

"Sometimes it can be like a longing to go somewhere vaguely familiar, or a longing to do something also vaguely familiar."

Perhaps it was the power of her suggestion that made me hear a soft

murmur around me.

As I began paying closer attention to it, the murmur turned into human voices speaking in the distance.

I could distinguish women's crystalline laughter, and a man's voice, a rich baritone, singing.

I heard the sounds as if the wind was carrying them to me in spurts.

I strained to make out what the voices were saying, and the more I listened to the wind, the more elated I became.

Some ebullient energy inside me made me jump up.

I was so happy that I wanted to play, to dance, and to run around like a child.

And without realizing what I was doing, I began to sing and leap and twirl around the patio like a ballerina until I had completely exhausted myself.

When I finally came to sit down next to **Clara**, I was perspiring, but it was not a healthy physical sweat.

It was more like the cold sweat of exhaustion.

Clara too was out of breath, from laughing at my antics.

I had succeeded in making an utter fool of myself, jumping and cavorting around the patio.

"I don't know what came over me," I said at a loss for an explanation.

"Describe what happened," **Clara** said in a serious tone.

When I refused out of embarrassment, she added, "Otherwise, I'll be forced to view you as being a bit... well, batty in the belfry, if you know what I mean."

I told her that I had heard the most haunting laughter and singing, and that it actually drove me to dance around.

"Do you think I'm going crazy?" I asked, concerned.

"If I were you, I **wouldn't** worry about it," she said. "Your cavorting was a natural reaction to hearing the voice of the spirit."

"It was not a voice; it was lots of voices," I corrected her.

"There you go again, the literal-minded Miss Perfect," she scoffed.

She explained that **literal**-mindedness is a major item of our inventory, and that we have to be aware of it to bypass it.

The voice of the spirit is an abstraction that has nothing to do with voices, and yet we may at times hear voices.

She said that in my case, since I was raised a devout Catholic, my own way of readapting my inventory would be to turn the spirit into a sort of guardian angel; a kind, protective male that watches over me.

"But the spirit is not anybody's guardian," she went on:

"It is an abstract force, neither good nor evil; A force that has no interest whatsoever in us, but that nevertheless responds to our power.

"Not to our prayers, mind you, but to our power.

"Remember that the next time you feel like praying for forgiveness!"

I asked, alarmed, "But **isn't** the spirit kind and forgiving?"

Clara said that sooner or later I was going to discard all my preconceptions about good and evil; God and religion, and think only in terms of a completely new inventory.

"Do you mean good and evil don't exist?" I asked, armed with the ready-made barrage of logical arguments about free will and the existence of evil I had learned throughout my years of Catholic schooling.

Before I could even begin to present my case, **Clara** said, "This is

where my companions and I differ from the established order.

"I've told you that for us freedom is to be free from humanness.

"That includes God, good and evil, the saints, the Virgin and the Holy Ghost.

"We believe that a nonhuman inventory is the only possible freedom for human beings.

"If our warehouses are going to remain filled to capacity with the desires, feelings, ideas and objects of our human inventory, where is our freedom then?"

"Do you see what I mean?"

I understood her, but not as clearly as I would have liked to; partly because I was still resisting the idea of relinquishing my humanness; and also because I **hadn't** yet recapitulated all the religious preconceptions handed down to me by the Catholic school system.

I was also accustomed to never thinking of anything that **didn't** pertain to me directly.

As I tried to find flaws with her reasoning, **Clara** jolted me out of my mental speculations with a tap on my ribs.

She said that she was going to show me another exercise for stopping thoughts and for feeling energy lines, otherwise I would be doing what I had always done: be enthralled with the idea of myself.

Clara told me to sit in a cross-legged position and lean sideways as I inhaled, first to the right, then to the left, and to feel how I was being pulled by a horizontal line extending out of the opening of my ears.

She said that, surprisingly, the line **didn't** sway with the motion of one's body but remained perfectly horizontal, and that this was one of the mysteries she and her cohorts had uncovered.

"Leaning in this manner," she explained, "moves our awareness- which normally is always directed to the front- to the side."

She ordered me to loosen my jaw muscles by chewing and swallowing saliva three times.

"What does this do?" I asked, swallowing with a gulp. "The chewing and swallowing brings some of the energy lodged in the head down to the stomach, lessening the load on the brain,"

She said with a chuckle. "In your case, you should do this maneuver often."

I wanted to get up and walk around because my legs were falling asleep, but **Clara** demanded that I remain seated for a while longer and practice this exercise.

I leaned to both sides, trying as hard as I could to feel that elusive horizontal line, but I **couldn't** feel it.

I did manage, however, to stop my thoughts from their usual avalanche.

Perhaps an hour passed with me sitting in total silence without any thoughts at all.

Around us, I could hear crickets chirping and leaves rustling, but no more voices were brought by the wind.

For a while I listened to **Manfred's** barking coming from his room at the side of the house.

Then, as if moved by an unvoiced command, thoughts rushed in my mind again.

I became aware of what had been their complete absence; and how

peaceful total silence had been.

My restless body movements must have cued **Clara**, for she began to speak again. "The voice of the spirit comes from nowhere," she continued:

"It comes from the depth of silence; from the realm of not-being.

"That voice can only be heard when we are absolutely quiet and balanced."

She explained that the two opposing forces that move us, male and female, positive and negative, light and dark, have to be kept in balance so that an opening is created in the energy that surrounds us; an opening through which our awareness can slip.

It is through this opening in the energy encompassing us that the spirit manifests itself.

"Balance is what we are after," she went on. "But balance **doesn't** only mean an equal portion of each force.

"It also means that as the portions are made equal, the new, balanced combination gains momentum and begins to move by itself."

Clara searched my face in the darkness, I felt, for signs of comprehension.

Finding none, she said almost cuttingly, "We are not that intelligent, are we?"

I felt my whole body tense at her remark.

I told her that in all my life nobody had ever accused me of not being intelligent.

My parents, my teachers had always praised me for being one of the brightest students in the class. When it came to report cards, I nearly made myself ill by studying to make sure I had better grades than my brothers.

Clara sighed and listened patiently to my lengthy reaffirmation of my intelligence.

Before I had exhausted my arguments to convince her that she was wrong, she conceded, "Yes, you are intelligent, but everything you **ve** said refers only to the world of everyday life.

"More than intelligent, you are studious, industrious and cunning.

Wouldn't you agree?"

I had to agree with her in spite of myself, because my own reason told me that if I had truly been as intelligent as I claimed, I **wouldn't** have had to nearly kill myself studying.

"In order to be intelligent in my world," **Clara** explained, "you must be able to concentrate; to fix your attention on any concrete thing as well as on any abstract manifestation."

"What kind of abstract manifestations are you talking about, **Clara**?" I asked.

"An opening in the energy field around us is an abstract manifestation," she said:

"But don't expect to feel it or see it in the same manner you feel and see the concrete world. Something else takes place."

Clara stressed that for us to fix our attention on any abstract manifestation, we have to merge the known with the unknown in a spontaneous amalgamation.

In this way, we can engage our reason, yet at the same time be indifferent to it.

Clara told me then to stand up and walk around. "Now that it's dark, try walking without looking at the ground," she said. "Not as a conscious exercise, but as a sorcery not-doing."

I wanted to ask her to explain what she meant by a sorcery not-doing, but I knew that if she did, I would be consciously thinking about her explanation and gauging my performance against this new concept, even if I **wasn't** sure what it meant.

I did recall, however, that she had used the term "not-doing" before; and in spite of my reluctance to ask questions, I still tried to remember what she had told me about it.

For me, knowledge, even if it was minimal and faulty, was better than none for it gave me a sense of control; whereas no knowledge left me feeling completely vulnerable.

"Not-doing is a term that comes to us from our own sorcery tradition," **Clara** went on, obviously aware of my need for explanations:

"It refers to everything that is not included in the inventory that was forced upon us.

"When we engage any item of our forced inventory, we are doing.

"Anything we do that is not part of that inventory is not-doing."

Any degree of relaxation I had achieved was **abruptly** disrupted by the statement she had just made.

"What did you mean, **Clara**, when you referred to your tradition as sorcery?" I demanded.

"You catch every detail when you want to, **Taisha**.

"No wonder your ears are So big," she said laughing; and **didn't** answer me right away.

I stared at her, waiting for her reply.

Finally she said, "I **wasn't** going to tell you about this yet, but since it slipped out, let me just say that the art of freedom is a product of sorcerers' intent."

"What sorcerers are you talking about?"

"There have been people here in Mexico, and there still are, who are concerned with final questions. My magical family and I call them sorcerers.

"From them we have inherited all the ideas I am acquainting you with.

"You already know about the recapitulation. Not-doing is another of those ideas."

"But who are these people, **Clara**?"

"You **ll** know all there is to know about them soon," she assured me. "For now, let's just practice one of their not-doings."

She said that not-doing at this particular moment would be, for example, to force myself to trust the spirit implicitly by letting go of my calculating mind.

"Don't just pretend to trust while secretly harboring doubts," **Clara** warned me:

"Only when your positive and negative forces are in perfect accord will you be capable of either feeling or seeing the opening in the energy around you; or walking with your eyes closed, and be assured of success."

I took a few deep breaths and began walking, not looking at the ground but with my hands outstretched in front of me in case I bumped into things.

For a while I kept stumbling, and on one occasion I tripped over a potted plant and would have fallen had **Clara** not grabbed my arm.

Gradually I began to stumble less and less, until I had no trouble walking smoothly.

It was as if my feet could see clearly everything on the patio and knew exactly where to step and where not to step.

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Version 2007.03.17

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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One afternoon while recapitulating in the cave, I fell asleep.

Upon awakening, I found a pair of beautifully polished crystals lying on the ground next to me.

For a while I deliberated whether or not to touch them because they looked quite ominous.

They were about five inches long and perfectly translucent. Their tips had been fashioned into a sharp point, and they seemed to shine with a light of their own.

When I saw **Clara** walking toward the cave, I carefully slid the crystals onto my palm and crawled out the cave to show them to her. "Yes, they are exquisite." She nodded as if she recognized them.

"Where did they come from?" I asked.

"They were left here for you by someone who's watching you very closely," she said, putting down a bundle she was carrying.

"I **didn't** see anyone leave them."

"That person came while you were dozing off."

"I warned you not to fall asleep during your recapitulation."

"Who came while I was dozing? One of your relatives?" I asked excitedly.

I laid the fragile crystals down on a pile of leaves and put on my shoes: **Clara** had advised me never to wear shoes while recapitulating because, by constricting the feet, they impede the circulation of energy.

"If I told you who left the crystals, it **wouldn't** make any sense to you or it might even frighten you," she said.

"Try me. After seeing your shadow move, I don't think anything can frighten me."

"All right, if you insist," she said, untying her bundle. "The person who's watching you is a master sorcerer, with very few equals on this earth."

"You mean a real sorcerer? One who does evil things?"

"I mean a real sorcerer, but not one who does evil things."

"He is a being who shapes and molds perception the way you might paint a picture with your brushes."

"But that **doesn't** mean that he is arbitrary. When he manipulates perception with his intent, his behavior is impeccable."

Clara compared him to the Chinese master painters who were said to have painted dragons so lifelike that when they put in the pupils as the finishing touch, the dragons flew right off the wall or the screen on which they had been painted.

In the low tone of a meaningful disclosure, **Clara** said that when a consummate sorcerer is ready to leave the world, all he has to do is manipulate perception, intend a door, step through it and disappear.

The deep passion, expressed in her voice, made me uneasy.

I sat down on a large flat rock, and holding the crystals, I tried to fathom who the master sorcerer might be.

Since the day I arrived, I **hadn't** talked to anyone but **Clara** and **Manfred**, simply because there was no one else around.

There **wasn't** any sign of the caretaker **Clara** had mentioned, either.

I was about to remind her that she and **Manfred** were the only beings I had seen since my arrival, when I recalled that there had been one other person I had seen; a man who seemed to have appeared out of nowhere one morning when I was sketching some trees near the cave.

He was squatting in a clearing about a hundred feet from where I was.

The cold was making me shiver and also made me focus my attention on his green windbreaker. He had on beige trousers and the typical wide-brimmed straw hat of northern Mexico.

I **couldn't** see his features because he wore his hat tilted over his face, but he seemed muscular and limber.

He was facing sideways. I could see him fold his arms across his chest.

Then he turned his back to me and, to my utter amazement, brought his hands all the way around his back where he touched his fingertips. Then he stood up and walked away, disappearing into the bushes.

I quickly sketched his squatting posture, then put down my drawing pad and tried to imitate what he had done; but no matter how I stretched my arms and contorted my shoulders, I **couldn't** touch my fingers behind my back.

I continued squatting with my arms wrapped around me. In a moment, I had stopped shivering and felt warm and comfortable in spite of the cold.

When I told **Clara** about the man, she remarked, "So you've already seen him."

"Is he the master sorcerer?"

Clara nodded, and reached into her bundle to hand me a tamale she had brought for my meal.

"He's very limber," she said. "It's nothing for him to dislodge his shoulder joints then ease them into place again."

"If you continue your recapitulation and store enough energy, he may teach you his art."

"The time you saw him, he just showed you how to fight the cold with a specific posture: squatting with the arms wrapped around the chest."

"Is that some form of yoga?"

Clara shrugged. "Perhaps your paths will cross again and he'll answer that question himself."

"In the meantime, I'm sure these crystals will help you to clarify things inside you."

"What exactly do you mean by that. **Clara**?"

Ignoring my question, she asked, "What aspect of your life were you recapitulating before you fell asleep?"

I told **Clara** that I had been remembering how I hated to do chores at home.

It seemed to take me forever to wash the dishes. What made it worse

was that all the while I could see my brothers playing ball outside the kitchen window.

I envied them for not having to do housework and loathed my mother for making me do it. I felt like smashing all her precious plates, but of course I **couldn't**.

"How do you feel now, recapitulating all this?"

"I feel like smacking all of them, my mother included. I can't bring myself to forgive her."

"Perhaps the crystals will help you **rechannel** your intent and your trapped energy," **Clara** said softly.

Driven by a strange urge, I slid the crystals between my index and middle fingers. The crystals fit comfortably, as if they were attached to my hands.

"I see you already know how to hold them," she remarked. "The master sorcerer instructed me that if I saw that you could hold them correctly by yourself, I was to show you one indispensable movement that you can do with these crystals."

"What kind of movement, **Clara**?"

"A movement of power," she said. "I'll explain more about its origin and purpose later."

"For now, let me just show you how it's done."

She told me to firmly press the crystals between my index and middle fingers.

Helping me from behind, she gently made me extend my arms in front of me at the height of my shoulders, and rotated them in a counterclockwise direction.

She had me begin making large circles that became increasingly smaller until the movement stopped and the crystals became two dots pointed into the distance; their extended imaginary lines converged at a spot on the horizon.

"When you make the circles, be sure to keep your palms facing each other," she corrected me, "and always begin by making large, smooth circles."

"This way you gather energy that you can then focus onto whatever you want to affect regardless of whether it is an object, a thought or a feeling."

"How will pointing the crystals affect them?" I asked.

"To move the crystals and point them the way I showed you takes the energy out of things," she explained. "The effect is like defusing a bomb."

"This is exactly what you want to do at this stage of your training, so never under any circumstance rotate your arms in a clockwise direction while holding the crystals."

I asked, "What would happen if I rotated them in that direction?"

"You would not only make a bomb, but you would light the fuse and cause a gigantic explosion."

"A clockwise movement is for charging things, for gathering energy for any enterprise."

"We'll save that movement for a later occasion; when you are stronger."

"But **isn't** that what I need now, **Clara**? To gather energy? I feel so depleted."

"Of course you need to gather energy," she agreed, "but right now you

must do it by demolishing your indulgence in absurdities.

"There is plenty of energy you can harness simply by not doing the things you are accustomed to, like complaining, or feeling sorry for yourself, or worrying about things that can't be changed."

"Defusing these concerns will give you a positive, nurturing energy that will help to balance and heal you."

"On the other hand, the energy you would gather by moving the crystals in a clockwise direction is a virulent kind of energy, a devastating blast that you won't be able to withstand at the moment."

"So promise me that you will not under any circumstances attempt to do it."

"I promise, **Clara**. But it sounds rather tempting."

"The master sorcerer that gave you these crystals is watching your progress," she warned, "so you must not misuse them."

There was a tinge of morbid curiosity in my question as I asked, "Why is this master sorcerer interested in watching me?"

I was uneasy, yet I felt flattered that a man would go to the trouble of observing me, even if it was from a distance.

"He has designs on you," **Clara** replied casually.

My alarm was instantaneous. I clenched my hand into a fist and jumped up indignantly.

Clara said, annoyed, "Don't be so stupid and leap to the wrong conclusion."

"I assure you, nobody is trying to get in your pants."

"You really do need to recapitulate your sexual encounters in depth, **Taisha**, so you can get rid of your absurd suspicions."

Her tone, devoid of all feeling, and her vulgar choice of words were somehow sobering.

I sat down again and mumbled an apology.

She put a finger to her lips. "We are not involved in ordinary pursuits," she assured me. The sooner you get that straight, the better."

"When I speak of designs, I mean sublime designs; maneuvers for a daring spirit."

"In spite of what you think, you are very daring."

"Look at where you are now. Every day you sit for hours alone in a cave recapitulating your life away. That takes courage."

I confessed that whenever I thought how I had followed her and was now living in her house as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I became totally alarmed.

"It has always baffled me," she said, "yet I've never asked you outright what made you accompany me so willingly? I would not have done it myself."

"My parents and brothers always told me that I'm crazy," I admitted. "I suppose that must be the reason."

"Some strange emotion is bottled up inside me, and because of it, I always end up doing weird things."

"Such as what, for instance?" Her sparkling eyes urged me to confide in her.

I hesitated. There were dozens of things I could think of, each a traumatic event that stood out as a milestone to mark a moment when my life turned - always for the worse.

I never talked about these catastrophes, although I was painfully

aware of them; and during the past months of intensive recapitulating, many of them had become even more poignant and vivid.

Not wanting to go into detail, I said, "Sometimes I do silly things."

"What do you mean by silly things?" **Clara** asked.

After further prompting on her part, I gave her an example.

I told her about an experience I had had not too long before, in Japan, where I had gone to participate in an international karate tournament.

There, in **Tokyo's Budokan**, I had disgraced myself in front of **tens** of thousands of people.

"**Tens** of thousands of people?" she echoed me. "**Aren't** you exaggerating a bit?"

"Definitely not!" I said. "The **Budokan** is the largest auditorium in the city and it was packed!"

Recalling the incident, I felt my hands clenching and my neck tensing.

I **didn't** want to continue. "**Isn't** it better just to let sleeping dogs lie?" I asked. "Besides, I've already recapitulated my karate experiences."

"It's important that you talk about your experience," **Clara** insisted:

"Perhaps you **didn't** visualize it clearly enough or breath it in thoroughly. It still seems to have a hold over you.

"Just look at you, you're breaking out in a nervous sweat."

To appease her, I described how my karate teacher had once let it slip that he thought women were lower than dogs.

To him, women had no place in the world of karate and especially not in tournaments.

That time, in the **Budokan**, he wanted only his male students to go on stage to perform.

I told him that I **hadn't** come all the way to Japan just to sit on the sidelines and watch the all male team competing.

He warned me to be more respectful, but instead I became so angry that I did something disastrous.

"What exactly did you do?" **Clara** inquired.

I told her that I became so enraged, I climbed onto the central platform, grabbed the gong from the master of ceremonies, struck it myself and formally announced my name and the name of the karate routine I was going to demonstrate.

"And did they give you a grand applause?" **Clara** asked, grinning.

"I flubbed it," I said, near tears:

"In the middle of the long sequence of movements, my mind went blank. I forgot what came next.

All I saw was a sea of faces staring at me in disapproval.

Somehow, I managed to get through the rest of the form and left the stage in a state of shock.

"To take matters into my own hands, and to disrupt the program the way I did was bad enough; but to forget my form in front of thousands of spectators was the ultimate insult to the Karate Federation.

"I brought shame to myself, my teachers and I suppose to women in general."

"What happened afterward?" **Clara** asked, trying to suppress a chuckle.

"I was expelled from the school, there was talk of revoking my black belt, and I never practiced karate again."

Clara burst out laughing.

I, on the other hand, was so moved by my shameful experience that I began to weep; and on top of that, I was doubly embarrassed for having revealed it to **Clara**.

Clara shook my shoulders to jolt me. "Do the sweeping breath," she said. "Breathe in now."

I moved my head from right to left, breathing in the energy that was still hopelessly caught in the exhibition hall.

As I brought my head back to the right again, I exhaled all the embarrassment and self-pity that had enveloped me.

I moved my head repeatedly, doing one sweeping breath after the other until all my emotional turmoil was released.

Then I moved my head from right to left and back again without breathing, thereby severing all ties with that particular moment of my past.

When I had finished, **Clara** scanned my body then nodded.

"You are vulnerable because you feel important," she declared, handing me an embroidered handkerchief to blow my nose:

"All that shame was caused by your misguided sense of personal worth.

"Then by bungling your performance, as you were bound to do, you added more insult to your already injured pride."

Clara was silent for a moment; giving me time to collect myself.

She finally asked, "Why did you quit practicing karate?"

"I just got tired of it and all the hypocrisy," I snapped.

She shook her head and said, "No.

"You quit because no one paid any attention to you after your misadventure; and you **didn't** get the recognition you thought you deserved."

In all honesty, I had to admit **Clara** was right.

I had believed I deserved recognition.

Every time I committed one of my wild, impulsive acts, it had been to boost my self-image or to compete with someone in order to prove that I was better.

A sense of sadness and dejection enveloped me. I knew that in spite of all my breathing and recapitulating, there was no hope for me.

"Your inventory is changing very naturally and harmoniously," **Clara** said, tapping my head lightly. "Don't worry so much.

"Just concentrate on recapitulating, and everything else will take care of itself."

"Perhaps I need to see a therapist," I said. "Although, **isn't** recapitulating a kind of psychotherapy?"

"Not at all," **Clara** disagreed. "The people who first devised the recapitulation lived hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago; so you certainly **shouldn't** think of this ancient renewing process in terms of modern psychoanalysis."

"Why not?" I said. "You have to admit that going back to your childhood memories and the emphasis on the sexual act sounds like what psychoanalysis are interested in, especially the ones with a Freudian twist."

Clara was adamant. She stressed that the recapitulation is a magical act in which intent and the breath play indispensable roles.

"Breathing gathers energy and makes it circulate," she explained. "It

is then guided by the **preestablished** intent of the recapitulation, which is to free ourselves from our biological and social ties.

"The intent of the recapitulation is a gift bestowed on us by those ancient seers who devised this method and passed it on to their descendants," **Clara** continued:

"Each person performing it has to add his or her own intent to it; but their intent is merely the desire or need to do the recapitulation.

"The intent of the recapitulation's end result, which is total freedom, was established by those seers of ancient times.

"Because it was set up independently of us, it is an invaluable gift."

Clara explained that the recapitulation reveals to us a crucial facet of our being: The fact that for an instant, just before we plunge into any act, we are capable of accurately assessing its outcome, our chances, and our motives and expectations.

Since this knowledge is never to our convenience or satisfaction, we immediately suppress it.

"What do you mean by that, **Clara**?"

"I mean that you, for example, knew for a split second that it would be a deadly mistake to jump onto the stage of the auditorium and disrupt the performance.

But, you immediately suppressed that certainty for various reasons.

You also knew, for a moment, that you had stopped practicing karate because you felt offended at not being praised or given recognition.

But, you instantly covered up that knowledge with another, more self-enhancing explanation; that of being fed up with the hypocrisy of others."

Clara said that this moment of direct knowing was called 'the seer' by the people who first formulated the recapitulation, because it allows us to directly see into things with unclouded eyes.

Yet in spite of the clarity and accuracy of the seer's assessments, we never pay attention to it, or give the seer a chance to make itself heard.

Through a continual suppression, we stifle its growth and prevent it from developing its full potential.

"In the end, the seer inside us is filled with bitterness and hatred,"

Clara went on:

"The ancient men of wisdom who invented the recapitulation believed that since we never stop subduing the seer, it finally destroys us.

"But they also assured us that by means of the recapitulation we can allow the seer to grow and unfold as it was meant to do."

"I never realized what the recapitulation was really about," I said.

"The purpose of the recapitulation is to grant the seer the freedom to see," **Clara** reminded me:

"By giving the seer range, we can deliberately turn the seer into a force that is both mysterious and effective; a force that will eventually guide us to freedom instead of killing us.

"This is the reason why I always insist that you tell me what you find out through your recapitulation," **Clara** said:

"You must bring the seer to the surface, and give it the chance to speak and tell what it sees."

I had no problem understanding or agreeing with her.

I knew perfectly well that there is something inside me that always knows what's what.

I also knew that I suppress its capacity to advise because what it tells me is usually contrary to what I expect or want to hear.

A momentary insight I had to share with **Clara** was that the only time I ever invoked the seer's guidance was when I looked at the southern horizon, and deliberately sought its help; and I had never been able to explain why I did that.

"Someday all that will be explained to you," she promised, but from the way she was grinning, I deduced that she **didn't** want to say any more about it.

Clara suggested I return to the cave for a few more hours, then come to the house and take a nap before dinner.

"I'll send **Manfred** to fetch you," she offered.

I declined.

I **couldn't** have possibly gone back into the cave that day. I was too exhausted.

Revealing to **Clara** my embarrassing moments, and having to fend off her personal attacks, had left me emotionally drained.

For an instant, my attention was caught by light being reflected on one of the crystals.

Focusing my attention on the crystals calmed me.

I asked **Clara** if she knew the reason why the master sorcerer had given me the crystals.

She replied that he **hadn't** actually given them to me, but that he had, rather, recovered them on my behalf.

"He found them in a cave in the mountains. Someone must have left them there ages ago," she said gruffly.

Her impatient tone made me think that she **didn't** want to talk about the master sorcerer either, so I asked her instead, "What else do you know about these crystals?"

I held one up to the sunlight to see its translucence.

"The use of crystals was the domain of sorcerers of ancient Mexico,"

Clara explained:

"They are weapons, used to destroy an enemy."

Hearing that gave me such a jolt I nearly dropped one of the crystals.

I tried to give them to **Clara** to hold, wanting nothing more to do with them, but **Clara** refused to take them.

"Once you hold crystals like these in your hands, you can't pass them on," she reprimanded me:

"It's not right: In fact, it's dangerous.

"These crystals must be treated with infinite care. They are a gift of power."

"I'm sorry," I said, "I **didn't** mean any disrespect, I just became frightened when you said they were used as weapons."

"Formerly, they were, but not today," she clarified. "We've lost the knowledge of how to turn them into weapons."

"Was there such a knowledge in ancient Mexico?"

"There certainly was! It's part of our tradition," she declared:

"Just as in China where there were ancient beliefs so farfetched that they have turned into legends, here in Mexico we also have our share of beliefs and legends."

"But how is it that nobody knows very much about what went on in ancient Mexico, while everybody is aware of the beliefs and practices of

ancient China?"

"Here in Mexico, there were two cultures that collided head on: the Spaniards and the Indians," **Clara** explained:

"We know everything about ancient Spain, but not ancient Mexico simply because the Spaniards were the victors and tried to obliterate Indian traditions.

"But in spite of their systematic and relentless efforts, they **didn't** succeed completely."

"What were the practices associated with the crystals?" I asked.

"It is believed that sorcerers of ancient times used to hold the mental image of their enemy while in a state of intense and pinpointed concentration; a unique state that is nearly impossible to attain and certainly impossible to describe.

"In such condition of mental and physical awareness, they would manipulate that image until they found its center of energy."

"What did those sorcerers do with their enemy's image?" I asked, driven by morbid curiosity.

"They used to look for an opening usually localized in the area of the heart; like a tiny vortex around which energy circulates.

As soon as they found it, they would point at it with their **dartlike** crystals."

At the mention of pointing with the crystals at the image of an enemy, I began to shiver.

In spite of my discomfort, I felt compelled to ask **Clara** what happened to the person whose image was being manipulated by the sorcerers.

"Perhaps his body withered," she offered. "Or maybe the person met with an accident.

"It is believed that those sorcerers themselves never knew exactly what would happen.

"However, if their intent and power were strong enough, they would be assured of success in destroying their enemy."

More than ever I wanted to put the crystals down, but in the light of what **Clara** had said, I **didn't** dare profane them.

I wondered why on earth anyone would want to give them to me.

"Magical weapons were terribly important at one time," **Clara** continued:

"Weapons such as crystals became an extension of the sorcerer's own body. The crystals were filled with energy that could be channeled and projected outward across time and space."

Clara said that the ultimate weapon, however, is not a crystal dart, a sword or even a gun.

It is the human body.

The human body can be turned into an instrument capable of gathering, storing and directing energy.

"We can regard the body either as a biological organism or as a source of power," **Clara** explained:

"It all depends on the state of the inventory in our warehouse. The body can be hard and rigid, or soft and pliant.

"If our warehouse is empty, the body itself is empty, and energy from infinity can flow through it."

Clara reiterated that in order to empty ourselves, we have to sink

into a state of profound recapitulation and let energy flow through us unimpeded.

Only in quiescence, [* quiescence- a state of quiet (but possibly temporary) inaction] she stressed, can we give the seer in us full reign; or can the impersonal energy of the universe turn into the very personal force of intent.

"When we have emptied ourselves sufficiently of our obsolete and encumbering inventory," she went on, "energy comes to us and gathers itself naturally.

When enough of it coalesces, it turns into power.

Anything can announce intent's presence: a loud noise, a soft voice, a thought that **isn't** yours, an unexpected surge of vigor or well-being."

Clara emphasized that in the final analysis, it made no difference whether power descends on us in a state of wakefulness or in dreams.

It is equally valid in both cases; dreaming being, however, more elusive and potent.

"What we experience in wakefulness in terms of power should be put into practice in dreams," she continued.

"And whatever power we experience in dreams should be used while we are awake.

"What really counts is being aware regardless of whether we are awake or asleep."

She peered at me and repeated, "What counts is being aware."

Clara was silent for a moment.

Then she told me something I considered to be completely irrational. She said, "Being aware of time, for example, can make a man's life span several hundred years."

"That's absurd," I said. "How can a man live that long?"

"Being aware of time is a special state of awareness that prevents us from aging quickly and dying in a few decades," **Clara** explained:

"There is a belief handed down from the ancient sorcerers, that if we would be able to use our bodies as weapons- or, put in modern terms, if we would empty our warehouses- we would be able to slip out of the world to roam elsewhere."

"Where would we go?" I asked.

Clara looked at me in surprise, as if I ought to know the answer. "To the realm of not-being; to the shadows' world," she replied:

"It is believed that once our warehouse is empty, we would become so light that we could soar through the void and nothing would hinder our flight.

"Then we could return to this world youthful and renewed."

I shifted on the uncomfortable rock numbing my **tailbone**. "But this is just a belief, **isn't** it, **Clara**?" I asked. "A legend handed down from ancient time."

"At this moment, it is just a belief," she acknowledged:

"But moments, like all things, are known to change.

"Nowadays, more than ever, man needs to renew himself and experience emptiness and freedom."

For a moment I wondered what it would be like to be as vaporous as a cloud and float up into the air, with nothing to bar my coming and going.

Then I mentally returned to earth again and felt obliged to say, "All

this talk about being aware of time, and passing into the shadows' world, **Clara** is impossible for me to accept or to understand.

"It **isn't** part of my tradition, or, as you put it, it **isn't** part of the inventory in my warehouse."

"No, it **isn't**," **Clara** agreed. "This is sorcery!"

"Do you mean to say that sorcery still exists and is practiced today?" I asked.

Clara suddenly got up and grabbed her bundle.

"Don't ask me any more about it," she said flatly:

"Later on, you'll find out whatever you want to know, but from someone who is more capable of explaining these things than I."

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Taisha Abelar - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 10

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha**

Abelar

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Chapter 10

Clara sat on the rattan armchair at the edge of the patio, brushing her shiny black hair.

Then she arranged it with her fingers until everything was in place.

When she had finished grooming herself, she brought her left palm to her forehead and stroked it in a circular fashion.

Then she moved her hand over the top of her head and down the back of her neck, after which she flicked her wrists and fingers in the air.

She repeated this stroking and flicking sequence several more times.

I was fascinated watching her movements.

There was nothing careless or haphazard about them. She performed them with intense concentration, as if she were engaged in a most important task.

"What are you doing?" I asked, breaking the silence. "Are you giving yourself some sort of a facial massage?"

Clara glanced over at me, sitting on the matching armchair, imitating her movements.

She said, "This circular stroking prevents wrinkles from forming on the forehead.

"It may appear like a facial massage to you, but it **isn't**."

"These are sorcery passes; movements of the hand that are designed to gather energy for a specific purpose."

"What specific purpose is that?" I asked, flicking my wrists the way she had done.

"The purpose of these sorcery passes is to keep one looking youthful by preventing wrinkles from forming," she said:

"The purpose has been decided beforehand, not by me or by you, but by power itself."

I had to admit that whatever **Clara** was doing certainly worked.

She had lovely skin that set off her green eyes and dark hair. I had always believed that her youthful appearance was the consequence of her Indian genes. I never suspected that she deliberately cultivated it by means of specific movements.

"Whenever energy gathers, as in the case of these sorcery passes, we call it power," **Clara** continued:

"Remember this, **Taisha**, power is when energy gathers, either by itself or under someone's command.

"You're going to hear much more about power, not just from me but from the others, too.

"They're expected back any time now."

Although **Clara** constantly referred to her relatives, I had by now given up all hope of ever meeting them.

Her reference to power was an additional matter. I had never understood what she meant by power.

"I'm going to show you some sorcery passes that you must perform every day of your life from now on," she announced.

I let out a sigh of complaint.

There were so many things that she told me to do every day of my life: the breathing, the recapitulation, the **kung fu** exercises, the long walks.

If I lined up back to back everything she told me to do, there **wouldn't** be enough hours in the day for even half of them.

"For heaven's sake, don't take me so literally," **Clara** said, seeing my pained expression:

"I'm cramming all I can into your peewee brain because I want you to know about all these things.

"Knowledge assists in gathering energy; therefore knowledge is power.

"To make sorcery work, we must know what we're doing when we intend the result- not the purpose, mind you, but the result of the sorcery act.

"If we intended the purpose of our sorcery actions, we would be creating sorcery; and you and I don't have that much power."

"I don't think I'm following you, **Clara**," I said, moving my chair closer. "For what don't we have enough power?"

"I mean that even between the two of us, we can't gather the overwhelming energy it would take to create a new purpose.

"But, individually we can certainly gather enough energy to intend the result of these sorcery passes: no wrinkles for us.

"This is all we can do since the passes' purpose- to keep us young and youthful looking- is already set."

"Is it like the recapitulation whose end result had been intended beforehand by the ancient sorcerers?" I asked.

"Exactly," **Clara** said. "The intent of all sorcery acts has already been set.

"All we have to do is hook our awareness to it."

She moved her chair across from me so that our knees were barely touching.

Then she vigorously rubbed each thumb on the palm of the opposite hand and placed them on the bridge of her nose.

She moved them outward with light, even strokes over her eyebrows to the temples.

"This pass will keep furrows from developing between your eyebrows," she explained.

After quickly rubbing together her index fingers, like two sticks starting a fire, she brought them vertically to each side of her nose and gently moved them sideways over her cheeks several times.

"That's to clear the sinus cavities," she said, deliberately constricting her nasal passages. "Instead of picking your nose, do this movement."

I **didn't** appreciate her reference to my picking my nose, but I tried the movement, and it did clear my sinuses as she had said.

"The next pass is to keep the cheeks from sagging," she said.

She briskly rubbed her palms together, and with long, firm strokes, she slid them up each cheek to her temples.

She repeated this movement six or seven times, always using slow, even, upward strokes.

I noticed her face was flushed, but she **didn't** stop yet.

She placed the inner edge of her hand with her thumb folded over her palm above her upper lip, and rubbed back and forth with a vigorous sawlike motion.

She explained that the spot where the nose and upper lip join, when briskly rubbed, stimulates energy to flow in mild, even bursts.

But if greater bursts of energy were needed, they could be obtained by pricking the point at the center of the upper gum underneath the upper lip and below the nose septum.

"If you get drowsy in the cave while recapitulating, rub this point briskly, and it will temporarily revive you," she said.

I rubbed my upper lip and felt my nose and ears clear.

I also experienced a slight numbing sensation on the roof of my palate.

It lasted for a few seconds but took my breath away.

It left me with the sensation that I was just about to uncover something that was veiled.

Next, **Clara** moved her index fingers sideways under her chin, again using a quick back-and-forth sawlike motion.

She explained that stimulating the point under the chin produces a calm alertness.

She added that we can also activate this point by resting the chin on a low table while sitting on the floor.

Following her suggestion, I moved my cushion to the floor and sat on it, and rested my chin on a wooden crate that was just level with my face.

By leaning forward, I put a slight pressure on that chin point **Clara** had indicated.

After a few moments, I felt my body settle down: A prickling sensation rose up my back, entered my head, and my breathing became deeper and more rhythmic.

"Another way to awake the center under the chin," **Clara** continued, "is by lying on the stomach with the hands in fists, one on top of the other, under the chin."

She recommended that when doing the exercise with the fists, we should tense them to create pressure under the chin and then relax them to release the pressure.

Tensing and relaxing the fists, she said, produces a pulsating movement that sends small bursts of energy to a vital center directly connected with the base of the tongue.

She stressed that this exercise should be done cautiously, otherwise one might develop a sore throat.

I went to sit in the rattan chair again.

"This group of sorcery passes I've shown you," **Clara** continued,

"must be practiced daily until they cease to be massage-like movements and become what they really are: sorcery passes.

"Watch me!" she ordered.

I saw her repeat the movements she had shown me, except that this time she was making her fingers and hands dance.

Her hands seemed at times to penetrate deeply into the skin of her face.

At other times, her hands passed over it lightly; as if gliding on the skin's surface; and moving so rapidly that they seemed to disappear.

Watching her exquisite movements kept me mesmerized.

"This way of stroking was never in your inventory," she laughed when she had finished:

"This is sorcery. It requires an intent different from the intent of the daily world.

"With all the tension that rises to the face, we certainly need a different intent if we are going to relax the muscles and tone the centers located there."

Clara said that all our emotions leave traces on our face more than on any other part of our body.

Therefore we have to release accumulated stress using the sorcery passes and their accompanying intent.

She stared at me for a moment and remarked, "I see from the tension in your face that you've been pondering over your recapitulation.

"Be sure to do your passes before going to bed tonight to remove those creases in your forehead."

I admitted that I had been worrying about my recapitulation.

"The problem is that you are spending too much time in the cave," **Clara** said with a wink. "I don't want you turning into a bat-girl.

"By now I think you've gathered enough energy to start learning other things."

She jumped out of the chair as if released by a spring.

It was so incongruous to see such a powerful woman jumping up so agilely that I had to laugh.

I myself got up more slowly, as if I were twice her size.

She looked at me and shook her head. "You're too stiff," she noted. "You need to do some special physical exercise to open your vital centers."

We went to the rack where the coats and boots were kept outside the back door of the house.

She handed me a wide-rimmed straw hat and led me to a clearing a short distance from the kitchen annex.

The sun shone brightly and it was an unusually warm day.

Clara told me to put on the hat.

She pointed to an area surrounded by a wire fence where the ground had been dug in furrows and lined with small plants in neat parallel rows.

"Who cleared the ground and put in all the plants?" I asked, surprised because I **hadn't** noticed **Clara** working there. "It looks like a huge project. Did you do it yourself?"

"No. Someone else came and did it for me."

"But when? I've been here every day and **didn't** see anyone."

"That's no mystery," **Clara** said. "The person who worked on this vegetable garden came when you were at the cave."

Her explanation **didn't** satisfy me.

The garden was so well organized that it looked like it had taken more than one person to lay it out.

Before I could probe her further, **Clara** announced, "From now on you'll take care of this garden. Consider it your new task."

I tried not to show my disappointment at being given yet another task that required daily attention.

I had thought that by physical exercise **Clara** had meant that we were going to practice a new martial art form; preferably one using a classical Chinese weapon like the broadsword or long pole.

Seeing my downcast look, **Clara** assured me that cultivating a garden would be good for me.

It would give me the physical activity and exposure to the sun that I needed for health and well-being.

She also pointed out that for more than six months I had been doing nothing but focusing on incidents of my life. Caring for something outside of myself would prevent me from becoming more self-centered.

It shocked me to realize that half a year had passed. To me, it seemed like only yesterday that I had come to **Clara's** house and my life had changed so drastically that nothing remained the same.

"Most people only know how to care for themselves," **Clara** said, jolting me out of my train of thought. "Although not very well at that.

"Because of this overwhelming emphasis, the self becomes distorted; full of outrageous demands."

We walked to a wooden gate; the entrance to the garden.

"Working in this garden will give you a special kind of energy that you can't get from recapitulating or breathing or practicing **kung fu**," **Clara** said.

"What kind of energy is that?"

"The energy of the earth," she replied.

Her eyes were as green as the new plants.

She added, "The energy of the earth complements the energy of the sun. Perhaps you'll feel it entering through your hands as you work the soil.

"Or it may start to flow into your legs as you squat on the ground."

I had never worked in a garden before and **wasn't** sure what to do.

I asked her to outline my duties.

She peered at me for a moment as if wondering if she had picked the right person for the task.

"The ground is still moist from yesterday's rain," she said, stooping down to touch the soil. "But when it's dry, you'll have to carry buckets of water from the stream; or if you're very clever, you can devise an irrigation system."

"I might just do that," I said confidently. "I'll construct an electric water pump like one I saw in a house in the country; and connect it to the dynamo.

"Then I **wouldn't** have to **lug** the buckets of water up the hill."

"It **doesn't** matter how you do it as long as the plants get watered.

"Also, you'll have to feed the plants every two weeks from that pile of compost at the end of the garden. And make sure that all the weeds are pulled. Around here they spread like wildfire. And keep the gate closed so no rabbits can get in."

"No problem," I assured her half-heartedly.

"Good. You can begin now."

She pointed to a bucket and told me to fill it with compost and mix it into the soil around each plant. When I returned with the bucket full of what I hoped **wasn't** night soil, [* night soil- human excreta used as fertilizer] she gave me a digging tool with which to loosen the earth.

For a while she watched as I worked, cautioning me not to dig too closely to the tender plants.

As I concentrated on the task, I felt a sense of well-being, and a strange peace surround me.

The dirt was cool and soft in my fingers.

For the first time since I had been in **Clara's** house, I felt truly at ease, safe and protected,

"The energy of the earth is nurturing," she remarked, as if noticing my change of mood:

"You're empty enough from your recapitulation that some of it is already creeping into your body.

"You feel at ease because you know that the earth is the mother of all things."

She swept her hands over the rows of plants. "Everything comes from the earth.

"The earth sustains and nourishes us; and when we die, our bodies return to it."

She paused for a moment then added, "Unless of course, we succeed in the great crossing."

"You mean there's a chance that we won't die?" I asked. "Really, **Clara, aren't** you exaggerating?"

"We all have a chance for freedom," she said softly, "but it's up to each one of us to seize it and turn it into an actuality."

She explained that by storing energy, we can dissolve our preconceptions about the world and the body; thus making room in our warehouse for other possibilities.

A chance not to die was one of these possibilities.

She said that the best explanation of this extravagant alternative was offered by the sages of ancient China.

They claimed that it is feasible for one's personal awareness, or **te**, to link up knowingly with the all-encompassing awareness or **Tao**.

Then when death comes, one's individual awareness is not dispersed as in ordinary dying, but expands and unites with the greater whole.

She added that the recapitulation in the setting of a cocoon-like cave had enabled me to gather and store energy.

Now I needed to use that energy to strengthen my bond with the abstract force called the spirit.

"That's why you have to cultivate the garden and absorb its energy, and also the energy of the sun," she said:

"The sun bestows its energy on the earth and causes things to grow. If you allow the sun's light to enter your body, your energy, too, will flourish."

Clara told me to wash my hands in a bucket of water, and to sit on a log by a clearing outside the fenced garden because she was going to show me how to begin to direct my attention to the sun.

She said that I should always wear a wide-rimmed hat in order to

shield my head and face.

She also warned me never to do any of the breathing passes she was about to show me for more than a few minutes at a time.

"Why are they called breathing passes?" I asked.

"Because the preset intent of these passes is to pass energy from the breath to the area where we place our attention.

It could be an organ in our body or an energy channel; or even a thought, or a memory as in the case of the recapitulation.

"What is important is that energy is transmitted, thus fulfilling the intent established beforehand.

"The result is sheer magic because it appears as if it had sprung out of nowhere.

"That's why we call these movements and breaths sorcery passes."

Clara instructed me to face the sun with my eyes closed, and then take a deep breath through my mouth, and pull the sun's warmth and light into my stomach.

I was to hold it there for as long as I could, then swallow, and finally, exhale any air that was left.

"Pretend you're a sunflower," she teased. "Always keep your face toward the sun when you breathe.

"The light of the sun charges the breath with power, so be sure to take big gulps of air, and completely fill your lungs. Do this three times."

She explained that in this exercise, the energy of the sun automatically spreads throughout the entire body.

Yet, we could deliberately send the sun's healing rays to any area by touching the spot where we want the energy to go; or by simply using the mind to direct energy to it.

"Actually, when you have practiced this breath long enough, you don't need to use your hands anymore," she went on. "You can just visualize the sun's rays oozing directly into a specific part of your body."

She suggested that I do the same three breaths, but this time breathing through my nose and visualizing the light flowing down into my back; thus energizing the channels along my spine.

That way, the sun's rays would flood my entire body.

"If you want to bypass breathing through the nose or mouth altogether," **Clara** said, "you can breathe directly with your stomach or your chest or your back.

"You can even bring the energy up the body through the soles of your feet."

She told me to concentrate on my lower abdomen on the spot just below my navel, and breathe in a relaxed fashion until I could feel a bond forming between my body and the sun.

As I inhaled under her guidance, I could feel the inside of my stomach becoming warmer and filled with light.

After a while, **Clara** told me to practice breathing with other areas.

She touched the spot on my forehead between my eyes. When I concentrated my attention there, my head became flushed with a yellow glow.

Clara recommended that I absorb as much of the sun's vitality as I could by holding my breath; then rolling my eyes in a clockwise direction before exhaling.

I did as she instructed and the yellow glow intensified.

"Now stand up and try breathing with your back," she said, and helped me to take off my jacket.

I turned my back to the sun and tried to place my attention on the various centers she pointed out with a touch.

One was between my shoulder blades, another was at the nape of my neck.

As I breathed, visualizing the sun on my back, I felt a warmth move up and down my spine, then rush to my head.

I became so dizzy that I nearly lost my balance.

"That's enough for today," **Clara** said, handing me my jacket.

I sat down feeling giddy, as if I were happily drunk.

Clara said, "The light of the sun is pure power. After all, it's the most intensely gathered energy there is."

She said that an invisible line of energy flows out directly from the top of the head, upward to the realm of not-being; or it can flow from the realm of not-being down into us via an opening at the very center of the top of the head.

"If you like, you can call it the life line that links us to a greater awareness," she said. "The sun, if used properly, charges this line and causes it to spring into action.

"That's why the crown of the head must always be protected."

Clara said that before we returned to the house, she was going to show me another powerful sorcery pass; one involving a series of body movements.

She said that it had to be executed in one single motion, with strength, precision and grace; but without straining.

"I can't urge you enough to practice all the passes I've shown you," she said. "They are the indispensable companions of the recapitulation.

"This one did wonders for me. Watch me closely. See if you can see my double."

"Your what?" I said, panicking.

I was afraid I would miss something crucial, or not know what to make of it even if I saw it.

"Watch my double," she repeated, enunciating the words carefully. "It's like a double exposure.

"You have enough energy to intend with me the result of this sorcery pass."

"But tell me again, **Clara**, what is the result?"

"The double: The ethereal body: The counterpart of the physical body, which by now you must know, or at least suspect, is not merely a projection of the mind."

She moved to an area of level ground, and stood with her feet together and her arms at her sides.

"**Clara**, wait. I'm sure I don't have enough energy to see what you're referring to, because I can't even understand it conceptually."

"It **doesn't** matter if you understand it conceptually.

"Just watch closely. Maybe I have enough power for both of us to intend my double."

In the most agile movement I had yet seen her perform, she brought her arms over her head, with her palms touching in a gesture of prayer.

Then she arched backward, forming an elegant bow with her arms stretched out behind her, almost to the ground.

She flipped her body laterally to the left so that instantly she ended up bending forward almost touching the ground; and before I could even open my mouth in surprise, she had flipped back and her body was gracefully arched backward.

She flipped back and forth two more times, as if to give me a chance to see her inconceivably fast and graceful movements; or perhaps a chance to see her double.

At one point in her movement, I saw her as a hazy shape, just as if she were a life-size photograph that had been double exposed.

For a fraction of an instant, there were two **Claras** moving, one a millisecond behind the other.

I was completely perplexed by what I saw, which when I thought about it, I could explain as being an optical illusion created by her speed.

But at a bodily level, I knew that my eyes had seen something inconceivable.

I had had enough energy to suspend my common sense expectations, and allow another possibility to enter in.

Clara stopped her exquisite acrobatics and came and stood beside me, not even out of breath.

She explained that this sorcery pass enables the body to unite with its double in the realm of not-being; a realm whose entrance hovers above the head and slightly behind it.

"By bending backward with the arms outstretched, we create a bridge," **Clara** said. "And since the body and the double are like two ends of a rainbow, we can intend them to join."

"Is there any specific time when I should practice this pass?" I asked.

"This is a sorcery pass of the twilight," she said. "But you have to have lots of energy, and be extremely calm in order to do it.

"The twilight helps you to become calm and gives you an added boost of energy. That's why the end of the day is the best time to practice it."

"Should I try it now?" I asked.

When she looked at me doubtfully, I assured her that I had studied gymnastics as a child and was eager to try it.

"The question is not whether, you have studied gymnastics as a child, but how calm you are now," **Clara** replied.

I said that I was as calm as I could be.

Clara laughed in disbelief, but told me to go ahead and try it.

She said she would watch over me to make sure I **didn't** break anything by twisting too forcefully.

I planted my feet on the ground, bent my knees and began slowly executing my best **backbend**.

But, when I got past a certain point, gravity took over and I fell clumsily to the ground.

"You're the farthest thing from being calm," **Clara** concluded amiably as she helped me up. "What's bothering you, **Taisha**?"

Rather than revealing to **Clara** what was on my mind, I asked if I could try the movement again.

But, the second time I had more trouble than before.

I was sure my mental and emotional concerns had made me lose my balance.

I knew that the demands of the self, as **Clara** had said, were really outrageous. They took all my attention.

I saw no solution except to confess to **Clara** what was on my mind. I told her what bothered me the most was that I seemed to have reached a standstill in my recapitulation.

"What is causing it?" **Clara** asked.

I admitted that it had to do with my family. "I know now without a doubt that they dislike me," I said sadly:

"Not that I **didn't** suspect it all along, because I did; and I used to get into rages about it.

"But, now that I have reviewed my past, I can't get angry the way I used to, so, I don't know what to do."

Clara eyed me critically, moving her head backward to size me up.

"What is there to do?" she asked. "You've done the work and found out that they disliked you.

"That's good! I don't see the problem."

Her cavalier tone annoyed me.

I expected if not sympathy, at least understanding and an intelligent comment.

"The problem," I said emphatically, on the verge of tears, "is that I'm stuck.

"I know that I need to go deeper than I have, but I can't.

"All I can think is that they disliked me, whereas I loved them."

"**Walt**, wait. **Didn't** you tell me that you hated them? I distinctly remember..."

"Yes, I did say that, but at the time I said it I **didn't** know what I was saying.

"I really loved them; my brothers too. Later I learned to despise them, but that was much later. Not as a child. As a child I wanted them to pay attention to me and play with me."

"I think I see what you mean," **Clara** said, nodding. "Let's sit down and discuss this."

We sat down again on the log.

"As I see it, your problem stems from a promise you made as a child.

"You did make a promise as a child, **didn't** you, **Taisha**?" she asked, looking at me squarely in the eye.

"I don't recall making any promises," I said sincerely.

In a friendly tone, **Clara** suggested that perhaps I **didn't** recall because I had been very young when I made it, or because it was more of a feeling than a promise actually stated in so many words.

Clara explained that as children, we often make vows and then become bound by those vows even though we can no longer remember making them.

"Such impulsive pledges can cost us our freedom," **Clara** said:

"Sometimes we are bound by preposterous childish devotion, or pledges of undying, eternal love."

She said that there are moments in everyone's life, especially in early childhood, when we have wanted something so badly that we automatically fixed our total intent on it, which, once fixed, remains in place until we fulfill our desire.

She elaborated by saying that vows, oaths and promises bind our intent; so that from then on, our actions, feelings and thoughts are consistently directed toward fulfilling or maintaining those commitments regardless of whether or not we remember having made them.

She advised me to review, during the recapitulation, all the promises I had ever made in my lifetime, especially the ones made in haste or ignorance or faulty judgement.

Unless I deliberately retrieved my intent from those promises, she advised, intent would never rise freely to be expressed in the present. ^

I tried to think about what she was saying, but my mind was a mass of confusion.

Suddenly I remembered a scene from my very early childhood.

I must have been six.

I wanted to be cuddled by my mother but she pushed me away, saying that I was too old for cuddling, and told me to go clean up my room.

Yet the youngest of my brothers, who was four years older than I and was my mother's favorite, was always cuddled by her.

I swore then that I would never love or get close to any of them ever again.

From that day on, I seemed to have kept my promise by always remaining estranged from them.

"If it's true that they didn't love you," Clara said, "it was your fate not to be loved by your family.

"Accept it! Besides, what possible difference could it make now whether they loved you or not?"

It still made a difference, but I didn't tell Clara that.

Clara went on, "I too had a problem very much like yours.

"I had always been aware of being a friendless, fat, miserable girl.

"But through recapitulating I found out that my mother had deliberately fattened me up since the day I was born.

She reasoned that a fat, homely girl would never leave home; and she wanted me there as her servant for life."

I was horrified. This was the first time Clara had revealed anything about her past to me.

"I went to my teacher, who was definitely the greatest teacher one can ever have, for advice about this problem," she went on:

"He said to me, 'Clara, I feel for you, but you are wasting your time because then was then: now is now.

"Now there is only time for freedom.

"You see, I sincerely felt that my mother had ruined me for life: I was fat and couldn't stop eating.

"It took me a long time to get the meaning of 'Then was then: now is now.'

"And now there is only time for freedom."

Clara was silent for a moment as if to let the impact of her words settle on me.

"You have only time to fight for freedom, Taisha," she said, giving me a nudge. "Now is now."

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 11

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Chapter 11

HTML EDITOR

"You ought to know by now that the outward form of anything we do is really an expression of our inner state."

...

"It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you gather energy with your actions and transform it into power."

END **HTML EDITOR**

It was growing dark and I was becoming more and more apprehensive about finishing my task.

Clara had asked me to rake the leaves in the clearing behind the house; and also to carry some rocks from the stream and make a border on each side of the path leading from the vegetable garden to the back of the patio.

I had raked the leaves, and was hurriedly lining up the river rocks along the path when Clara came out of the house to check on my progress.

"You're setting the rocks any which way," she said glancing at the path. "And you haven't raked up the leaves yet. What have you been doing all afternoon, daydreaming again?"

To my dismay, an untimely gust of wind had scattered the neat piles I had made before I had had a chance to put the leaves in a basket.

"The path looks pretty good to me," I said, on the defensive:

"As for the leaves, well, can I help it if the wind made a mess of them?"

"When aiming for the perfect form, 'pretty good' isn't good enough,"

Clara interrupted:

"You ought to know by now that the outward form of anything we do is really an expression of our inner state."

I told her that I didn't see how arranging heavy rocks could be anything but hard work.

"That's because you do everything just to get by," she retorted.

She walked over to the row of rocks I had lined up and shook her head. "These rocks look as if you've dropped them without considering their proper placement."

"It's getting dark and I was running out of time," I explained.

I was in no mood for a lengthy discussion on aesthetics or composition.

Besides, I felt I already knew more than Clara about the subject of composition from my art classes.

Clara said, "Placing rocks is just like practicing kung fu."

"It's how we do things that matters, not how fast or how much we get done."

I shook my wrists to relax my cramped fingers. "Do you mean that carrying rocks is a part of martial arts training?" I asked, surprised.

"What do you think kung fu is?" she countered.

I suspected she was asking me a trick question, so I deliberated for a moment to find the right answer.

I said confidently, "It's a set of martial arts fighting techniques."

Clara shook her head. "Leave it to Taisha to come up with a pragmatic reply," she said with a laugh.

She sat down on one of the wicker chairs at the edge of the patio from where we had a good view of the path.

I slumped into the chair next to her.

I settled comfortably, propping my feet on the rim of a huge ceramic pot.

Clara then began to explain that the term "**kung fu**" is derived from the juxtaposition of two Chinese characters; one meaning 'work done over a period of time,' and the other word signifying 'man.'

When these two characters are combined, the term refers to man's endeavor to perfect himself through constant effort.

She contended that whether we practice formal exercises, or arrange rocks, or rake leaves we always express our inner state through our actions.

"Therefore, to perfect our acts is to perfect ourselves," **Clara** said. "This is the true meaning of **kung fu**."

"But still, I don't see the connection between garden work and practicing **kung fu**," I said.

"Then let me spell it out for you," **Clara** replied with a tone of exaggerated patience:

"I asked you to carry the rocks from the stream so that walking up the hilly trail with the added weight would develop your internal strength.

"We are not just interested in building muscles, but rather in cultivating internal energy.

"Also, all the breathing passes I have taught you thus far, and that you should be practicing daily, are designed to increase your internal strength."

I felt guilty: From the way she had looked at me when she said I should be practicing the breathing exercises daily, I knew that she was aware I **wasn't** doing them religiously.

"What you have been learning here with me might be referred to in China as internal **kung fu**, or **nei kung**," **Clara** continued:

"Internal **kung fu** uses controlled breathing and the circulation of energy to strengthen the body and augment one's health.

"External martial arts, like the karate forms you learned from your Japanese teachers and some of the forms I showed you, focus on building muscles and quick body responses in which energy is released and is directed away from us."

Clara said that internal **kung fu** was practiced by monks in China long before they developed the external or hard styles of fighting that are popularly known as **kung fu** today.

"But understand this," **Clara** continued. "Regardless of whether you are learning martial arts or the discipline I have been teaching you, the goal of your training is to perfect your inner being so that it can transcend its outer form in order to accomplish the abstract flight."

A feeling of dejection swept over me like a somber cloud.

I felt my old mood of failure taking hold of me.

Even if I did do the breathing passes as **Clara** recommended, I felt I would never be able to succeed in whatever it was that she wanted.

I **didn't** even know what the great crossing meant, let alone conceive of it as a pragmatic possibility.

"You've been very patient all these months," **Clara** said, patting me on the back as if sensing my need for encouragement:

"You've never really pressed me about my constant insinuations that I am teaching you sorcery as a formal discipline."

I saw the perfect opportunity to ask something that had been on my mind from the first time she used the word.

"Why do you call this formal discipline sorcery?" I asked.

Clara peered at me. The expression on her face was seriousness itself.

"It's hard to say," she replied. "My reluctance to discuss it is because I don't want to misname it and scare you away.

"I think now is the time to talk about it, though.

"But first let me tell you something more about the people of ancient Mexico."

Clara leaned toward me and in a low voice said that the people of **pre-Hispanic Mexico** were very similar in many respects to the ancient Chinese.

Perhaps because they both may have had the same origins, they shared a similar world view.

The ancient Indians of Mexico, however, had a slight advantage, she said, because the world in which they lived was in transition.

This made them extremely eclectic and curious about every facet of existence.

They wanted to understand the universe, life, death and the range of human possibilities in terms of awareness and perception.

Their great drive to know led them to develop practices that enabled them to arrive at unimaginable levels of awareness.

They made detailed descriptions of their practices and mapped the realms that those practices unveiled.

This tradition they handed down from generation to generation, always shrouding it in secrecy.

Nearly out of breath with excitement or perhaps wonderment, **Clara** ended her discussion of those ancient Indians by saying that they were indeed sorcerers.

She stared at me wide-eyed. In the twilight, her pupils were enormous.

She confided that her foremost teacher, a Mexican Indian, possessed a complete knowledge of those ancient practices, and he had taught them to her.

"Are you teaching me those practices, **Clara**?" I asked, matching her excitement. "You said the crystals were used as weapons by the ancient sorcerers, and the sorcery passes were empowered with their intent, and the recapitulation also was devised in ancient times. Does that mean that I am learning sorcery?"

"That is partially true," **Clara** said. "But for the time being, it's better not to focus on the fact that these practices are sorcery."

"Why not?"

"Because we are interested in something beyond the aberrant, esoteric rituals and incantations of those sorcerers of ancient times.

"You see, we believe that their bizarre practices and obsessive search for power resulted only in a greater enhancement of the self.

"This is a dead-end road because it never leads to total freedom, and total freedom is what we ourselves are after.

"The danger is that one can easily become swayed by the mood of those sorcerers."

"I **wouldn't** become swayed," I assured her.

"I really can't tell you any more at the moment," she said,

exasperated, "but you'll find out more as you go along."

I felt betrayed and protested vehemently.

I accused her of deliberately toying with my mind and feelings by keeping me dangling with bits of information that piqued my curiosity; and with promises that all was going to be clarified at some unspecified future date.

Clara completely ignored my protests. It was as if I **hadn't** said a word.

She stood up, walked over to the pile of rocks and picked one up as if it were made of Styrofoam.

After deliberating for a moment as to which side to turn up, she set the rock down on the edge of the path.

She then arranged two more rocks the size of footballs on either side of it. When she was satisfied with their placement, she stepped back to study the effect.

I had to admit that the garden path, the smooth gray rocks she had set, and the jagged green leaves of the plants made a most harmonious composition.

"It is the grace with which you manipulate things that matters," **Clara** reminded me as she picked up another rock:

"Your inner state is reflected in the way you move, talk, eat or place rocks.

"It **doesn't** matter what you do, as long as you gather energy with your actions and transform it into power."

For a while, **Clara** gazed at the path as if considering where to place the next rock she held in her hands.

When she found a suitable spot, she gently set it down and gave it an affectionate pat.

"As an artist you should know that the rocks have to be put where they are in balance," she said, "not where it is the easiest for you to drop them.

"Of course, if you were imbued with power, you could drop them any which way and the result would be beauty itself.

"To understand this is the real purpose of the exercise of placing rocks." From the tone of her voice, and the ugly, erratic arrangement of my rocks, I realized I had failed again at my task.

I felt acutely dejected.

"**Clara**, I'm not an artist," I confessed. "I'm merely a student. In fact, I'm an **ex**-student. I dropped out of art school a year ago. I like to make believe that I'm an artist, but that's about all. I'm really nothing."

"We are all nothing," **Clara** reminded me.

"I know, but you are a mysterious, powerful nothing, while I'm a meager, stupid, petty nothing. I can't even set down a bunch of dumb rocks. There's no..."

Clara clamped her hand over my mouth. "Don't say another word," she warned. "I'm telling you again.

"Be careful of what you say out loud in this house, especially in the twilight!"

It was almost dark then and everything was absolutely still to the point of being eerie.

The birds were silent. Everything had quieted down. Even the wind, which had been so annoying earlier while I was trying to rake the leaves,

had settled.

"It's the time of no shadows," **Clara** whispered. "Let's sit under this tree in the dark and find out if you can summon the shadows' world."

"Wait a moment, **Clara**," I said in a loud whisper that bordered on a screech. "What are you going to do to me?"

Waves of nervousness were cramping my stomach, and in spite of the cold, my forehead was perspiring.

Clara asked me then outright if I had been practicing the breaths and the sorcery passes she had taught me.

I wanted more than anything to tell her that I had, yet that would have been a lie.

In truth, I had practiced them minimally, just so I **wouldn't** forget them; because recapitulating took all of my available energy and left me no time for anything else. At night I was too tired to do anything, so I just went to bed.

"You haven't been doing them regularly or you **wouldn't** be in this sorry state now," **Clara** said, leaning closer. "You're trembling like a leaf.

"There's one secret to the breathing and the passes I've taught you that makes them invaluable."

"What is that?" I stammered.

Clara tapped me on the head. "They have to be practiced every day or else they're worthless.

"You **wouldn't** think of going without eating or drinking water, would you? The exercises I've taught you are even more important than food and water."

She had made her point. I silently vowed that every night before going to bed I would do them, and again upon awakening in the morning before going to the cave.

"The human body has an extra energy system that comes into play when we are under stress," **Clara** explained. "And stress happens any time we do anything to excess; like being overly concerned with yourself and your performance, as you are now.

"That's why one of the fundamental precepts of the art of freedom is to avoid excesses."

She said that the movements she was teaching me, whether she called them breaths or sorcery passes, were important because they operate directly on the reserve system; and that the reason they can be called indispensable passes is because they allow added energy to pass into and through our reserve pathways.

Then when we are summoned to action, instead of becoming depleted from stress, we become stronger, and have surplus energy for extraordinary tasks.

"Now, before we summon the shadows' world, I'll show you two more indispensable sorcery passes which combine breathing and movements," she went on:

"Do them every day and you not only won't get tired or sick, but you'll have plenty of surplus energy for your intending."

"For my what?"

"Your intending," **Clara** repeated. "For intending the result of anything you do. Remember?"

She held my shoulders and twisted me around so that I was facing north.

"This movement is particularly important for you, **Taisha**, because your lungs are weakened from excessive weeping," she said:

"A lifetime of feeling sorry for yourself certainly has taken its toll on your lungs."

Her statement jolted me to attention.

I watched her bend her knees and ankles and assume a martial art posture called the 'straight horse,' because it simulates the sitting position of a rider mounted on a horse, with his legs a shoulders' width apart and slightly bowed.

The index finger of her left hand was pointed down, while her other fingers were curled at the second joint.

As she began to inhale, she gently but forcefully turned her head to the right as far as she could, and rotated her left arm at the shoulder joint over her head in a full circle all the way to the back, ending up with the heel of her left palm resting on her **tailbone**.

Simultaneously she brought her right arm around her waist to her back and placed her right fist over the back of her left hand, wedging it against her bent left wrist.

Using her right fist, she pushed up her left arm along her spinal column, her left elbow bent akimbo, and finished her inhalation.

She held her breath for a count of seven, then released the tension on her left arm, lowered it to her **tailbone** again and rotated it at the shoulder joint straight overhead to the front, ending up with the heel of her left palm resting on her pubis.

Simultaneously she brought her right arm around her waist to the front and placed that fist on the back of her left hand, and pushed the left arm up her abdomen as she finished exhaling.

"Do this movement once with your left arm, and again with your right one," she said. "That way you will balance your two sides."

To demonstrate, she repeated the same movements, alternating arms, and this time turning her head to the left.

"Now you try it, **Taisha**," she said, stepping aside to give me room to circle my arm backward.

I replicated her movements.

As I swung my left arm back, I felt a painful tension along the underside of my extended arm, running all the way from my finger to my armpit.

"Relax and let the breath's energy flow through your arm and out of the tip of your index finger," she said. "Keep it extended and the other fingers curved. That way you'll release any blockage of energy along the pathways in your arm."

The pain grew even more acute as I pushed my bent arm upward along my back.

Clara noticed my pinched expression. "Don't push too hard," she warned, "or you'll strain your tendons. And round your shoulders a bit more as you push."

After performing the movement with my right arm, I felt a burning in my thigh muscles from standing with my knees and ankles bent.

Even though I stood in the same position every day while practicing **kung fu**, my legs seemed to vibrate as if an electric current were running through them.

Clara suggested I stand up and shake my legs a few times to release

the tension.

Clara emphasized that in this sorcery pass, rotating and pushing the arms up in conjunction with breathing moves energy to the organs in the chest and vitalizes them.

It massages deep, underlying centers that rarely are activated.

Turning the head massages the glands in the neck and also opens energy passageways to the back of the head.

She explained that if awakened and nourished by the energy from breathing, these centers could unravel mysteries beyond anything we can imagine.

"For the next sorcery pass," **Clara** said, "stand with your feet together and look straight ahead as if you were facing a door that you are going to open."

Clara told me to raise my hands to eye level and to curl my fingers as if I were placing them inside the recessed handles of sliding doors that open in the middle.

"What you are going to open is a crack in the energy lines of the world," she explained:

"Imagine those lines as rigid vertical cords that make a screen in front of you.

"Now grab a bunch of the fibers and pull them apart with all your might.

"Pull them apart until the opening is big enough for you to step through."

She told me that once I had made that hole, I should step forward with my left leg and then quickly, using my left foot as a pivot, rotate one hundred and eighty degrees counterclockwise to face the direction from which I had come.

By my turning in this manner, the energy lines I had pushed apart would wrap around me.

To return, she said, I had to open the lines again by pulling them apart the same way I had done before, then step out with the right foot and quickly turn one hundred and eighty degrees clockwise as soon as I had taken the step. In this fashion, I would have unwrapped myself and would again be facing the direction in which I had begun the sorcery pass.

"This is one of the most powerful and mysterious of all the sorcery passes," **Clara** cautioned. "With it we can open doors to different worlds, provided of course that we have stored a surplus of internal energy and are able to realize the intent of the pass."

Her serious tone and expression made me ill at ease.

I **didn't** know what to expect if I succeeded in opening that invisible door.

In a brusque tone, she then gave me some final instructions.

"When you step in," she said, "your body has to feel rooted, heavy, full of tension.

"But once you are inside and have turned around, you should feel light and airy, as if you were floating upward.

"Exhale sharply as you first lunge forward through the opening, then inhale slowly and deeply, filling your lungs completely with the energy from behind that screen."

I practiced the pass several times as **Clara** looked on, but it was as if I

were only going through the outward motions.

I **couldn't** feel the energy fibers forming the screen that **Clara** was talking about.

"You're not pulling the door open hard enough," **Clara** corrected me. "Use your internal energy, not just your arm muscles. Expel the stale air and pull in your stomach as you lunge forward. Once inside, breathe as many times as you can, but be on the alert. Don't stay longer than you need to."

I mustered up all my strength and grabbed the air. **Clara** stood behind me, held my forearms and gave them a tremendous pull sideways.

Instantly I felt as if some sliding doors had opened.

Exhaling sharply, I lunged through it, or rather **Clara** had given me a shove from behind, pushing me forward.

I remembered to turn around and breathe deeply, but for a moment I worried that I **wouldn't** know when to come out. **Clara** sensed this and told me when to stop breathing and when to step out.

"As you practice this sorcery pass by yourself," **Clara** said, "you'll learn to do it perfectly, but be careful.

"All sorts of things can happen once you go through that opening.

"Remember, you have to be cautious and at the same time bold."

"How will I know which is which?" I asked.

Clara shrugged. "For a while, you won't. Unfortunately, prudence comes to us only after we've gotten blasted."

She added that cautiousness without cowardice is hinged on our ability to control our internal energy; and to divert it into the reserve channels so that it is available to us when we need it for extraordinary actions.

"With enough internal energy, anything can be accomplished," **Clara** said, "but we need to store and refine it.

"So let's both practice some of the sorcery passes you've learned and see if you can be cautious without being cowardly and summon up the shadows' world."

I experienced a surge of energy that began as small circles in my stomach.

At first I thought it was fear, but my body **didn't** feel frightened.

It was as if an impersonal force, void of desires or sentiment, was stirring inside me; moving from the inside out. As it ascended, my upper back jerked involuntarily.

Clara moved to the center of the patio, and I followed her.

She began doing some of the sorcery passes, slowing herself down to allow me to follow her.

"Close your eyes," she whispered. "When your eyes are closed, it's easier to use energy lines that are already there to keep your balance."

I shut my eyes and started to move in unison with **Clara**.

I had no trouble following her **cues** for changing positions, yet I had difficulty in keeping my balance.

I knew it was because I was trying too hard to do the movements correctly. It was like the time I had tried walking with my eyes shut, and kept stumbling because I desperately wanted to succeed.

But gradually my desire to excel diminished and my body became more limber and subtle.

As we kept on moving, I became so relaxed that I felt I had no bones

or joints.

If I raised my arms overhead, it seemed I could stretch them all the way to the tops of the trees.

If I bent my knees and lowered my weight, a surge of energy rushed downward through my feet.

I felt I had grown roots. Lines were extending from the soles of my feet deep into the earth, giving me an unprecedented stability.

Gradually the boundary between my body and its surroundings dissolved.

With every pass I did, my body seemed to melt and merge with the darkness until it began to move and breathe all by itself.

I could hear **Clara** breathing beside me, performing the same passes.

With my eyes closed, I sensed her shape and postures.

At one point, the strangest thing yet happened.

I felt a light turning on inside my forehead.

But as I looked up, I became aware that the light **wasn't** really inside me at all. It came from the top of the trees, as if a huge panel of electric lights had been turned on at night, illuminating an outdoor stadium.

I had no trouble seeing **Clara** and everything on the patio, and what was around it.

The light had the strangest hue, and I **couldn't** decide if it was rose-tinted, pinkish or peach, or like pale terra-cotta.

In places, it seemed to change its glare depending on where I looked.

Clara, peering at me curiously, said, "Don't move your head, and continue keeping your eyes closed. Just concentrate on your breathing."

I **didn't** know why she had said to continue keeping my eyes closed since she saw that my eyes were wide open: I was trying to determine the coloration of the light, for it seemed to change with every movement of my head, and its intensity fluctuated depending on how hard I stared at it.

I became so involved with the glow around me that I lost the rhythm of the breaths.

Then as suddenly as the light had turned on, it switched off again and I was left in total darkness.

"Let's go into the kitchen and heat up some stew," **Clara** said, nudging me.

I hesitated. I felt disoriented; out of place. My body was so heavy I thought I must be sitting down.

"You can open your eyes now," **Clara** said.

I never remembered having had such a difficult time opening my eyes as I did at that moment.

It seemed to take me forever to do it, for just as I got them open, they would droop shut again.

This opening and closing seemed to go on for a long time, until I felt **Clara** shaking my shoulders.

"**Taisha**, open your eyes!" she commanded. "Don't you dare pass out on me. Do you hear?"

I shook my head to clear it and my eyes popped open.

They had been closed all the time.

It was pitch black, but there was enough moonlight coming through the foliage to see **Clara's** silhouette. We were sitting under the tree on the two rattan armchairs in the patio.

"How did I get here?" I asked dazed.

"You walked over here and sat down," **Clara** said matter-of-factly.

"But what happened? A moment ago it was light. I could see everything clearly."

"What happened is that you entered into the shadows' world," **Clara** said with a congratulatory tone:

"I could tell by the rhythm of your breathing that you had gone there, but I **didn't** want to frighten you then by asking you to look at your shadow.

"If you had looked, you would have known that..."

I instantly understood what **Clara** was intimating.

I gasped, "There were no shadows. There was light but nothing had a shadow."

Clara nodded. "Tonight you've found out something of real value, **Taisha**. In the worlds outside this one, there are no shadows!"

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 12

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Chapter 12

After more than eight months of faithfully practicing the recapitulation, I was able to do it all day long without fretting or becoming distracted.

One day, while I was visualizing the buildings where I attended the last year of high school, the classrooms, and the teachers I had, I became so involved in going down the aisles and seeing where my classmates sat, that I ended up talking to myself.

"If you talk to yourself, you can't breathe correctly," I heard a man's voice say.

I was so startled that I bumped my head against the cave wall.

I opened my eyes, and the image of the classroom faded as I turned to look at the cave's entrance.

Outlined against the opening, I saw a man squatting.

I immediately knew that he was the master sorcerer; the man I had once seen in the hills.

He wore the same green windbreaker and trousers, but this time I could see his profile. He had a prominent nose and a mildly sloping forehead.

"Don't stare," I heard the master sorcerer say. His voice was low, and rumbled like a stream over gravel:

"If you want to learn more about breathing, remain very quiet and regain your equilibrium."

I continued taking deep breaths until his presence no longer frightened me, and I became, instead, relieved that I was finally making his acquaintance.

He sat down cross-legged at the cave entrance, and leaned in the way **Clara** always did.

"Your movements are too jerky," he said in a low murmur. "Breathe like this."

He inhaled deeply as he gently turned his head to the left.

Then he exhaled thoroughly as he smoothly turned his head to the right.

Finally, he moved his head from his right shoulder to the left and back to the right again without breathing, and then back to the center.

I copied his movements inhaling and exhaling as completely as I could.

"That's more like it," he said. "When exhaling, throw out all the thoughts and feelings you are reviewing.

"Don't just turn your head with your neck muscles. Guide it with the invisible energy lines from your midsection.

"Enticing those lines to come out is one of the accomplishments of the recapitulation."

He explained that just below the navel was a key center of power, and that all body movements, including one's breathing, had to engage this point of energy.

He suggested I synchronize the rhythm of my breathing with the turning of my head, so that together they would entice the invisible energy lines from my abdomen to extend outward into infinity.

"Are those lines a part of my body or am I to imagine them?" I asked.

He shifted his position on the ground before answering.

He said, "Those invisible lines are a part of your soft body; your double.

"The more energy you entice out by manipulating those lines, the stronger your double will become."

"What I wanted to know was, are they real or just imaginary?"

"When perception expands, nothing is real and nothing is imaginary," he said. "There is only perception.

"Close your eyes and find out for yourself."

I **didn't** want to shut my eyes. I wanted to see what he was doing in case he made any sudden moves.

But, my body grew limp and heavy, and my eyes began to droop shut in spite of my efforts to keep them open.

"What is the double?" I managed to ask before I drifted off into a drowsy stupor.

"That's a good question," he said:

"It means that a part of you is still alert and listening."

I sensed him take a deep breath and inflate his chest.

After slowly exhaling, he said, "The physical body is a covering; a container, if you will. By concentrating on your breathing, you can make the solid body dissolve so that only the soft, ethereal part is left."

He corrected himself, saying that it is not that the physical body dissolves, but that by changing the fixation of our awareness we begin to realize that it was never solid in the first place.

This realization, he said, is the exact reversal of what took place as we matured.

As infants, we were totally aware of our double. As we grew up, we learned to put increasingly more emphasis on the physical side and less on our ethereal being.

As adults we are completely unaware that our soft side exists.

He explained, "The soft body is a mass of energy. Usually we are aware only of its hard, outer casing.

"We become aware of our ethereal side by allowing our intent to shift

back to it."

He stressed that our physical body is inseparably linked with its ethereal counterpart, but that link has been clouded over by our thoughts and feelings which are focused exclusively on our physical body.

In order to shift our awareness from our hard appearance to its fluid counterpart, we must first dissolve the barrier that separates the two aspects of our being.

I wanted to ask him how that could be done, but I found it impossible to voice my thoughts.

"The recapitulation helps to dissolve our preconceptions," he said, answering me, "but it takes skill and concentration to reach the double.

"Right now you are using your ethereal part to some extent. You are half asleep, but some part of you is awake and alert. It can hear me and sense my presence."

He warned me that there is considerable danger involved in releasing the energy that is locked within us, because the double is vulnerable and can easily become injured in the process of shifting our awareness to it.

He cautioned me, "You can inadvertently create an opening in the ethereal net and lose vast amounts of energy; precious energy that is necessary to maintain a certain level of clarity and control in your life."

"What is that ethereal net?" I mumbled, as if talking in my sleep.

"The ethereal net is the luminosity that surrounds the physical body," he explained:

"This web of energy gets torn to shreds during daily living. Huge portions of it become lost or entwined in other people's bands of energy.

"If a person loses too much vital force, he becomes ill or dies."

His voice had lulled me so thoroughly that I was breathing from my stomach as if in a deep sleep.

I had slumped against the side of the cave, but I didn't feel its hard walls.

"Breathing works on both the physical and ethereal levels," he explained, "it repairs any damage in the ethereal net and keeps it strong and pliant."

I wanted to ask something about my recapitulation, but I couldn't formulate the words; they seemed so far away.

Without my asking, he again supplied the answer.

"This is what you've been doing for the past months with your recapitulation.

"You are retrieving filaments of your energy from your ethereal net that have become lost or entangled as a result of your daily living.

"By focusing on that interaction, you are pulling back all that you dispersed over twenty years and in thousands of places."

I wanted to ask him whether the double had a specific shape or, color. I was thinking of auras.

He didn't reply.

After a long silence, I forced my eyes open and saw that I was alone in the cave.

I strained to peer through the dark to the light at the opening where I had first seen him outlined against the entrance.

I suspected that he had slipped away and was waiting nearby for me to crawl out.

As I looked, a bright patch of light appeared, hovering about two feet

from me.

The illusion startled me, yet at the same time it enthralled me so that I couldn't turn my eyes away.

I had the irrational certainty that the light was alive, conscious and aware that my attention was focused on it.

Suddenly the glowing sphere expanded to twice its size and became encircled by an intense purple ring.

Frightened, I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping that the light would disappear so I could leave the cave without passing through it.

My heart pounded loudly in my chest and I was perspiring. My throat was dry and constricted.

With great effort, I slowed down my breathing.

When I opened my eyes, the light had vanished.

I was tempted to explain away the entire event as a dream, for I often dozed off during my recapitulation, but the memory of the master sorcerer and what he had said was so vivid that I was almost certain it all had been real.

Cautiously I crawled out of the cave, put on my shoes and took the shortcut to the house.

Clara was standing by the living room door as if she were expecting me.

Panting, I blurted out that I had either just spoken with the master sorcerer or I had had a most vivid dream about him.

She smiled and pointed with a subtle movement of her chin to the armchair.

My mouth fell open: There he was; the same man who had been with me in the cave only minutes before, except that he was wearing different clothes. Now he had on a gray cardigan sweater, a sports shirt and tailored trousers.

He was much older than I thought, but also much more vital.

It was impossible for me to tell his age; he may have been forty or seventy. He appeared to be extremely strong, and neither lean nor corpulent. He was dark, and looked Indian. He had a prominent nose, a strong mouth, a square chin and sparkling black eyes, which had the same intense look I had seen in the cave. All of these features were accentuated by a thick, lustrous crop of white hair.

The remarkable effect of his hair was that it didn't turn him into an old man, as white hair ordinarily does. I remembered how old my father looked when his hair turned silver and how he covered it with dyes and hats; all to no avail because old age was in his face, in his hands, in his whole body.

"Taisha, let me introduce you. This is Mr. John Michael Abelar," Clara said to me.

The man politely stood up and extended his hand. "Very glad to meet you, Taisha," he said in perfect English as he gave my hand a strong shake.

I wanted to ask him what he was doing here, and how he had changed his clothes so fast; and whether or not he had really been in the cave.

A dozen other questions ran through my mind, but I was too shocked and intimidated to ask any of them.

I pretended to be calm and not nearly as unsettled as I was.

I commented on how well he spoke English, and how clearly he had

expressed himself when he talked to me in the cave.

"It's nice of you to say so," he said, with a disarming smile. "But I ought to speak English well. I'm a Yaqui Indian. I was **born** in Arizona."

"Do you live in Mexico, Mr. Abelar?" I asked awkwardly.

"Yes. I live in this house," he replied. "I live here with Clara."

He looked at her in a way I could only describe as sheer affection.

I **didn't** know what to say. I felt self-conscious, embarrassed for some unknown reason.

"We are not man and wife," Clara said, as if to put me at ease, and at that both of them broke out laughing.

Rather than lightening things up, their laughter made me feel even more self-conscious.

Then to my dismay, I recognized the emotion I was feeling: It was pure jealousy.

In an inexplicable possessive impulse, I felt that he belonged to me. I tried to conceal my embarrassment by quickly asking some trivial questions. "Have you lived in Mexico for a long time?"

"Yes, I have," he said.

"Are you planning to return to the United States?"

He fixed me with his fierce eyes, then smiled and said in a charming way, "Those details are unimportant, Taisha."

"Why don't you ask me about the topic we discussed in the cave? Was anything unclear?"

At Clara's suggestion, we sat down; Clara and I on the sofa, and Mr. Abelar on the winged chair.

I asked him if he would tell me more about the double. The concept interested me enormously.

"Some persons are masters of the double," he began. "They can not only focus their awareness on it but also spur it into action."

"The majority of us, however, are scarcely aware that our ethereal side exists."

"What does the double do?" I asked.

"Anything we want it to do. It can jump over trees, or fly through the air, or become large or small, or take the shape of an animal; or it can become aware of people's thoughts, or become a thought and hurl itself in an instant over vast distances."

"It can even act like the self," Clara interjected, looking straight at me:

"If you know how to use it, you can appear in front of someone and talk to him as if you were really there."

Mr. Abelar nodded. "In the cave, you were able to perceive my presence with your double."

"It was only when your reason woke up that you doubted that your experience had been real."

"I'm still doubting," I said. "Were you really there?"

"Of course," he replied with a wink, "as much as I'm really here."

For a moment I wondered if I was dreaming now, but my reason assured me I **couldn't** possibly be.

Just to make certain, I touched the table. It felt solid.

"How did you do it?" I asked, leaning back on the sofa.

Mr. Abelar was silent for a moment as if choosing his words. "I let go of my physical body and allowed my double to take over," he said:

"If our awareness is tied to the double, we are not affected by the

laws of the physical world; rather, we are governed by ethereal forces.

"But as long as awareness is tied to the physical body, our movements are limited by gravity and other constraints."

I still **didn't** understand if that meant that he could be in two places at once. He seemed to sense my confusion.

"Clara tells me you are interested in martial arts," Mr. Abelar said.

"The difference between the average person and an expert in kung fu is that the latter has learned to control his soft body."

"My karate teachers used to tell me the same," I said. "They insisted that martial arts trained the soft side of the body, but I could never understand what they meant."

"What they probably meant was that when an expert practitioner attacks, he strikes the vulnerable points of his enemy's soft body," he said:

"It's not the power of the physical body that is destructive, but the opening he makes in his enemy's ethereal body."

"He can hurl into that opening a force that rips through the ethereal net to cause major damage."

"A person may receive what seems at the time only a gentle hit, but hours or perhaps days later, the person may die from that blow."

"That's right," Clara agreed. "Don't be fooled by the outward movements or by what you see. It's what you don't see that counts."

From my karate teachers, I had often heard similar tales.

When I had asked them how those feats were performed, they **couldn't** give me a coherent explanation.

I had thought at the time that it was because my teachers were Japanese and **couldn't** express such intricacies of thought in English.

Now Mr. Abelar was explaining something similar, and although his command of English was perfect, I still **couldn't** understand what he meant by the soft body or the double, and how to tap its mysterious powers.

I wondered if Mr. Abelar was a martial artist, but before I could ask him, he continued. "True martial artists, as Clara has described them to me from her training in China, are interested in mastering the control of their soft body," he said:

"The double is controlled not by our intellect but by our intent."

"There is no way to think about it or to understand it rationally."

"It has to be felt, for it is linked to some luminous lines of energy crisscrossing the universe."

He touched his head and pointed upward. "For instance, a line of energy that extends up from the top of the head gives the double its purpose and direction."

"That line suspends and pulls the double whichever way it wants to go."

"If it wants to go up, all it has to do is to intend up. If it wants to sink into the ground, it just intends down. It's that simple."

At that point Clara asked me whether I remembered what she had told me in the garden the day we were doing the sun breathing exercises: how the crown of the head always needed to be protected.

I told her I remembered very clearly- ever since then, I was afraid to leave the house without a hat.

She then asked me if I was able to follow what Mr. Abelar was saying.

I assured her that I was having no trouble understanding him even though I **didn't** comprehend the concepts; and paradoxically, I found what he was saying incomprehensible, yet also familiar and believable.

Clara nodded and said that was so because he was directly addressing a part of me that was not quite rational and had the ability to grasp things directly, especially if a sorcerer spoke to it directly.

What **Clara** said was true.

There was something about **Mr. Abelar** that put me even more at ease than **Clara** did.

It **wasn't** his polite and soft-spoken manner, but something in the intensity of his eyes that forced me to listen and follow his explanations, despite the fact that rationally they seemed nonsensical.

I heard myself asking questions as if I knew what I was talking about.

"Would I be able to reach my soft body some day?" I asked **Mr.**

Abelar.

"The question is, **Taisha**, do you want to reach it?"

For a moment I hesitated.

From my recapitulation, I had found out that I'm complacent and cowardly, and that my first reaction is to avoid anything that is too troublesome or frightening.

But I also had an intense curiosity to experience things out of the ordinary, and as **Clara** had once told me, I possessed a certain reckless daring.

"I'm very curious about the double," I said, "so I definitely do want to get to it."

"At any price?"

"Anything short of selling my body," I said lamely.

At that they both burst out laughing so hard I thought they were going to convulse right there on the floor.

I **hadn't** meant to be facetious either, for in truth, I **wasn't** certain what secret plans they had for me.

As if sensing my train of thought, **Mr. Abelar** said that it was time to acquaint me with certain premises of their world. He straightened up and assumed a serious demeanor.

"The involvements of men and women are no longer our concern," he said. "That means we are not interested in man's morality, immorality or even amorality. All our energy is poured into exploring new paths."

"Can you give me an example of a new path, **Mr. Abelar**?" I asked.

"Certainly. How about the task you are engaged in; the recapitulation?"

The reason I'm talking to you now is because by means of the recapitulation you have stored enough energy to break certain physical boundaries.

You have perceived, if only for an instant, inconceivable things that are not part of your normal inventory, to use **Clara's** terminology."

I warned him, "My normal inventory is pretty weird."

"I'm beginning to see from recapitulating the past that I was crazy. In fact, I still am crazy."

"The proof of it is that I'm here and I can't tell if I'm awake or dreaming."

At that they both burst out laughing again as if they were watching a comedy program and the comedian had just dropped his **punchline**.

"I know very well how crazy you are," **Mr. Abelar** said with a note of

finality, "but not because you're here with us."

"More than crazy, you're indulgent. Nevertheless, since the day you came here, contrary to what you might think, you haven't indulged as much as you had in the past."

"So in all fairness, I'd say that some of the things **Clara** tells me you did, like entering what we call the shadows' world **wasn't** indulging or being crazy."

"It was a new path; something unnamed and unimaginable from the point of view of the normal world."

A long silence followed that made me fidget uneasily.

I wanted to say something to break the spell, but I **couldn't** think of anything.

What made it worse was that **Mr. Abelar** kept giving me sideward glances.

Then he whispered something to **Clara** and they both laughed softly; irritating me no end because there was no doubt in my mind they were laughing at me.

"Maybe I'd better go to my room," I said, getting up.

"Sit down, we're not through yet," **Clara** said.

"You have no idea how much we appreciate your being here with us," **Mr. Abelar** said all of a sudden. "We find you humorous because you are so eccentric."

"Soon you will meet another member of our party; someone who is as eccentric as you are, but much older."

"Seeing you reminds us of her when she was young; that's why we laugh. Please forgive us."

I hated being laughed at, but his apology was so genuine that I accepted it.

Mr. Abelar resumed talking about the double as if nothing else had been said.

"As we let go of our ideas of the physical body, little by little or all at once," he said, "awareness begins to shift to our soft side."

"In order to facilitate this shift, our physical side must remain absolutely still, suspended as if it were in deep sleep."

"The difficulty lies in convincing our physical body to cooperate, for it rarely wants to give up its control."

"How do I let go of my physical body, then?" I asked.

"You fool it," he said. "You let your body feel as if it were sound asleep. You deliberately quiet it by removing your awareness from it."

"When your body and mind are at rest, your double wakes up and takes over."

"I don't think I follow you," I said.

Clara snapped, "Don't play the devil's advocate with us, **Taisha**."

"You must have done this in the cave. In order for you to have perceived the **nagual**, you must have used your double. You were asleep and yet aware at the same time."

What caught my attention in **Clara's** statement was the way she had spoken of **Mr. Abelar**: She had called him 'the **nagual**.'

I asked her what that word meant.

"John **Michael Abelar** is the **nagual**," she said proudly. "He is my guide; the source of my life and well-being."

"He is not my man by any stretch of the imagination and yet he is the

love of my life.

"When he is all that for you, he'll then be the nagual for you also.

"In the meantime, he's Mr. Abelar, or even John Michael."

Mr. Abelar laughed, as if Clara had said those things only in jest, but Clara held my gaze long enough to let me know that she had meant every word of it.

The silence that followed was finally broken by Mr. Abelar.

"In order to activate the soft body, you have to first open certain body centers that function like gates," he continued:

"When all the gates are open, your double can emerge from its protective covering.

"Otherwise, it will forever remain encased within its outer shell."

He asked Clara to get a mat out of the closet.

He spread it on the floor and told me to lie face up with my arms at my sides.

"What are you going to do to me?" I asked suspiciously.

"Not what you think," he snapped.

Clara giggled. "Taisha is really wary of men," she explained to Mr. Abelar.

"It hasn't done her any good," he replied, making me feel utterly self-conscious.

Then, facing me, he explained he was going to show me a simple method for shifting awareness from my physical body to the ethereal net that surrounds it.

"Lie down and close your eyes, but don't fall asleep," he ordered.

Embarrassed, I did as he asked, feeling strangely vulnerable lying down in front of them.

He knelt down beside me and spoke in a soft voice. "Imagine lines extending out from the sides of your body, beginning at your feet," he said.

"What if I can't imagine them?"

"If you want to, you certainly can," he said. "Use all your strength to intend the lines into existence."

He elaborated that it was not really imagining those lines that was involved, but rather a mysterious act of pulling them out from the side of the body, beginning at the toes and continuing all the way up to the top of the head.

He said that I should also feel lines emanating from the soles of my feet going downward and wrapping around the length of my body to the back of my head; and also other lines that radiated from my forehead upward and downward, along the front of my body to my feet, thus forming a net or a cocoon of luminous energy.

"Practice this until you can let go of your physical body and can place your attention at will on your luminous net," he said. "Eventually, you'll be able to cast and sustain that net with a single thought."

I tried to relax. I found his voice soothing. It had a mesmerizing quality. At times it seemed to come from very close, and at other times from far away.

He cautioned me that if there was a place in my body where the net felt tight or where it was difficult to stretch the lines out or where the lines recoiled, that was the place where my body was weak or injured.

"You can heal those parts by allowing the double to spread out the

ethereal net," he said.

"How do I do that?"

he replied, "By intending it, but not with your thoughts. Intend it with your intent, which is the layer beneath your thoughts.

"Listen carefully: Look for it beneath the thoughts; away from them.

"Intent is so far away from thoughts that we can't talk about it: We can't even feel it, but we can certainly use it."

I couldn't even conceive how to intend with my intent.

Mr. Abelar said that I shouldn't have too much difficulty casting my net because for the past few months, unknowingly, I had been projecting just such ethereal lines during my recapitulation.

He suggested that I begin by concentrating on my breathing.

After what seemed to be hours, during which time I must have dozed off once or twice, I could eventually feel an intense tingling heat in my feet and head.

The heat expanded to form a ring encircling my body lengthwise.

In a soft voice, Mr. Abelar reminded me that I should focus my attention on the heat outside my body and try to stretch it out, pushing it out from within and allowing it to expand.

I focused on my breathing until all the tension in me vanished.

As I relaxed even more, I let the tingling heat find its own course.

It didn't move outward or expand; it contracted instead, until I felt I was lying on a gigantic balloon, floating in space.

I experienced a moment of panic. My breathing stopped and for an instant I was suffocating.

Then something outside of myself took over and began to breathe for me.

Waves of lulling energy surrounded me, expanding and contracting until everything went black and I could no longer focus my awareness on anything.

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Chapter 13

I awoke hearing Clara tell me to sit up.

It took me a long time to respond; first, because I was totally disoriented; and second, because my legs were numb.

Seeing my difficulty, Clara held me under the arms and pulled me forward, then propped some pillows behind my back so I could sit without her help.

I was in my bed and I had my nightgown on. From the light, I could tell it was late afternoon.

"What happened?" I muttered. "Did I sleep all night?"

"You did," Clara replied. "I was concerned about you. You went off the deep end into a perceptual limbo. No one could get through to you. So we decided to let you sleep it off."

I leaned over and rubbed my legs until the prickling sensation stopped. I still felt groggy and strangely enervated. [* enervated- lacking strength or vigour]

"You've got to talk to me until you're yourself again," Clara said in her most authoritative tone. "This is one of those occasions when talking is good for you."

"I don't feel like talking," I said, plopping back onto the pillows. I had broken out in a cold sweat and my limbs felt limp and rubbery. "Did Mr. Abelar do something to me?"

"Not while I was looking," Clara replied, and laughed jovially at her own joke.

She took my hands in hers and rubbed the backs of them, attempting to revive me.

I wasn't in the mood for levity. "What really happened, Clara?" I demanded. "I don't remember a thing."

She made herself comfortable on the edge of the bed.

"Your first encounter with the nagual was too much for you," Clara said. "You're too weak: That's what happened."

"But I don't want you to focus on that because you become discouraged so easily."

"Also, I don't want you to read between the lines, as you're apt to do, and come up with the wrong conclusions."

"Since I don't know what's going on, how I am going to read between the lines?" I said, my teeth chattering.

"I'm sure you'd find a way," Clara sighed. "You're exceptionally adept at jumping to conclusions; unfortunately, the wrong ones."

"And it doesn't matter that you don't know what's going on. You always assume that you do."

I had to admit I hated ambiguous situations, because they always put me at a disadvantage. I wanted to know what was going on so I could deal with the contingencies.

"Your mother taught you to be a perfect woman," Clara said. "By observing the surroundings, perfect women infer everything they need to know, especially when a male is involved."

"They can anticipate their man's subtlest wishes. Perfect women are always aware of changes in his moods because they believe that these changes are caused by something they themselves said or did."

"Consequently, they feel it's up to them to appease their man."

Having seen myself, by means of my recapitulation, acting in such a fashion again and again, I had to admit, to my chagrin, that Clara was correct.

I was well trained. I only needed a look or a sigh or tone of voice from my father and I would know exactly what he was thinking or feeling.

The same was true of my brothers. They had me jumping at the most subtle cues.

What's worse, I only had to imagine that a man didn't like me and I would bend over backward to please him.

Clara nudged my side gently as if to get my attention. "If you and I had been alone last night, you wouldn't have passed out so dramatically," she said, with a most annoying smile.

I replied, "What are you insinuating, Clara? That I find Mr. Abelar appealing?"

"Precisely. When a man is around, you undergo an instant transformation. You become the woman that will do anything for a man's attention, including passing out."

"I beg to differ with you," I said. "I really wasn't trying to play up to Mr. Abelar."

"Think about it! Don't just defend yourself," Clara said:

"I'm not attacking you. I'm merely pointing out to you what I used to feel and do myself."

Deep down I knew what Clara was talking about. Mr. Abelar had such a charismatic charm that, in spite of his age, I found him utterly attractive. Yet I chose not to acknowledge this, either to myself or to Clara. To my relief, Clara didn't pursue the subject of my feelings for Mr. Abelar.

She continued, "I understand you perfectly because I too had my John Michael Abelar."

"He was the nagual Julian Grau, the most handsome and debonair being that ever lived."

"He was charming, impish and funny. He was truly unforgettable."

"Everyone adored him, including John Michael and the rest of my family."

"We all kissed the ground he walked on."

It occurred to me, listening to Clara rave about her teacher, that she had spent too much time in the Orient.

I had always been disturbed by the obscene adoration that students in the karate world felt for their teacher, or sensei.

They too literally kissed the ground their teacher walked on, bringing their heads to the floor in obeisance whenever the master entered the room.

I didn't say this to Clara, but I felt that she was lowering herself by revering her teacher so much.

"The nagual Julian taught us everything we know," she went on, oblivious to my judgements. "He dedicated his life to leading us to freedom."

"He gave special instruction to the nagual John Michael Abelar; instruction that made him qualified to become the new nagual."

"Do you mean, Clara, that naguals are like kings?" I asked, wanting her to see the danger and fallacy of too much veneration.

"No. Not at all. Naguals have no self-importance whatsoever," she said. "And it is precisely for this reason that we can adore them."

"What I meant, Clara, was, do they inherit their post?" I corrected myself quickly.

"Oh, yes! They certainly inherit their post, but not like kings. Kings are sons of kings."

"A nagual, on the other hand, has to be singled out by the spirit because unless the spirit chooses him, he cannot set himself up as a leader."

A nagual to begin with is a person with extraordinary energy, but it is not until he is taught the rule of the naguals that he actually becomes a nagual himself."

I followed Clara's explanation, but I felt inexplicably ill at ease with it. Upon deliberation, I realized that the part that bothered me was that the spirit has to make the selection.

"How does the spirit decide whom to pick?" I asked.

Clara shook her head. "That, my dear Taisha, is a mystery beyond mysteries," she said softly. "All a nagual can do is fulfill the spirit's

biddings, or fail miserably."

I thought of **Mr. Abelar** and wondered what bidding the spirit had in mind for him. I remembered also that **Clara** had said that he might one day be a **nagual** to me.

"By the way, where is **Mr. Abelar**?" I asked trying to sound casual.

"He left last night when he realized that you were out for the count."

"Will he be back?"

"Certainly. He lives here."

"Where, **Clara**? In the left side of the house?"

"Yes. At the moment, he is there. Not at this precise moment," she corrected herself, "but nowadays.

"At other times, he lives with me on the right side of the house. I take care of him."

I felt a pang of jealousy so potent that it charged me with a surge of energy. "You said he **wasn't** your husband, **didn't** you, **Clara**?" I asked, with a most disturbing twitch in the side of my mouth.

Clara laughed so hard that she rolled backward onto the bed out of breath.

"The **nagual** John **Michael Abelar** has transcended all aspects of being a male," she assured me, sitting up again.

"What do you mean, **Clara**?"

"I mean, he's not a human being any longer, but I can't explain all this to you because I lack the finesse and you lack the facility to understand me.

"The way I see it, my inability to explain things to you is the reason why the **nagual** gave you those crystals."

"What inability, **Clara**? You speak perfectly well."

"Then it's you who **doesn't** understand perfectly well."

"That's idiotic, **Clara**."

"Then how come I can't convey to you what we are and what we have in mind for you?"

I took several deep breaths to settle my nervous stomach.

"What do you have in mind for me, **Clara**?" I asked, falling prey once more to panic.

"It's very hard for me to explain," she began:

"You and I definitely belong to the same tradition. You are an integral part of what we are. Therefore, we are compelled to teach you."

"Whom do you mean when you say 'we'? Do you mean you and **Mr. Abelar**?"

Clara took a moment as if giving herself time to answer correctly.

"As I've told you already, we are more than two," she said. "In fact, I'm not really your teacher, and neither is the **nagual** John **Michael**. Someone else is."

"Wait, wait, **Clara**. You're confusing me again. Who is this other person you're referring to?"

"Another woman like yourself, but older and infinitely more powerful.

"I'm merely your usher. I'm in charge of preparing you; of getting you to store enough energy through your recapitulation so you can meet this other person.

"And believe me, her presence is much more devastating than the **nagual**'s."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say, **Clara**. Do you mean she's dangerous and will harm me?"

"That's the problem when I try to answer your questions," **Clara** said. "You get confused because you and I have only a superficial connection.

"You ask me a question, expecting a clear-cut answer that would satisfy you, and I give you an answer that satisfies me and throws you into confusion.

I recommend that you either don't ask questions or take my answers without getting into a dither." [* dither- an excited state of agitation]

I wanted to know more about **Mr. Abelar** and this other woman's plans for me; so with the hope of getting **Clara** to tell all, I promised that from then on, I would weigh all her answers with due consideration, but with no panic or agitation on my part.

"All right. Let's see how you take this," **Clara** said tentatively:

"I'm going to tell you what the **nagual** told you last night before you passed out on him.

"But, since I'm not a male, you no doubt are going to react differently to me than you did when the **nagual** talked to you. You might even listen to me."

"But I don't remember him telling me anything after I fell asleep on the mat," I protested.

She paused and searched my face, I suppose for some spark of recognition.

She shook her head to denote she found none, although I was **trying** to appear as calm and attentive as possible, and even smiled to reassure her.

"He told you about all the beings that live in this house," **Clara** began. "He told you that they are all sorcerers, including **Manfred**."

At the mention of **Manfred**'s name, something inside me clicked.

"I knew it," I blurted out without thinking.

I found the idea that **Manfred** was a sorcerer perfectly believable, yet I **hadn't** the vaguest notion of why it should be so.

I told **Clara** that at one point I must have already entertained that thought, although I still **didn't** know exactly what a sorcerer is.

"Of course you do," **Clara** assured me with a broad smile.

"But I tell you, I don't."

Clara looked at me bewildered. "You're sure you don't remember the **nagual** explaining this to you?"

"No. I really don't."

"A sorcerer, to us, is someone who, through discipline and perseverance, can break the limits of natural perception," **Clara** said with an air of formality.

"Well, that **doesn't** make things any clearer," I said. "How can **Manfred** do all that?"

She seemed to appreciate my confusion.

"I think we're having a misunderstanding again, **Taisha**."

"I'm not just talking about **Manfred**. It **hasn't** sunk in yet that all of us in this house are sorcerers; not just the **nagual**, **Manfred** and myself, but the fourteen others you haven't yet met.

"We are all sorcerers; all abstract beings.

"If you want to think of sorcery as something concrete involving rituals and magic potions, all I can tell you is that there are sorcerers who

are as concrete as that, but you won't find them in this house."

Obviously we were on different trains of thought.

I was talking about **Manfred** and she was talking about people I **hadn't** even laid eyes on.

It was only then, after she had told me so directly, that it finally struck me that **Clara**, **Mr. Abelar** and the elusive others to whom they kept alluding were all sorcerers.

Rather than ask any more questions, I remembered her advice and thought it best to remain silent.

She went on to elaborate that abstract sorcerers seek freedom through enhancing their capacity to perceive; while concrete sorcerers, like the traditional ones who lived in ancient Mexico, seek personal power and gratification through increasing their self-importance.

"What's wrong with seeking personal gratification?" I asked, taking a sip of water from a glass on the bedside table.

"Leave it to **Taisha** to side up with the concrete sorcerers," she said with a look of concern. "No wonder the **nagual** gave you those crystal darts."

In spite of my promise to stay calm, at the mention of the crystals, waves of nervousness ran through me.

My stomach began to cramp with such intensity that I was certain I was coming down with an intestinal **flu**.

"It's nearly impossible for me to explain to you what we do, and even harder to convey why we do it," **Clara** said. "You must ask those questions of your teacher."

"My teacher?"

"You're not listening to me, **Taisha**."

"I've already told you that you have a teacher. You haven't met her yet because you don't have the necessary energy."

Meeting her requires ten times more energy than meeting the **nagual**, and you still haven't recovered from that encounter. You look green and pasty."

"I think I have a case of the **flu**," I said, feeling dizzy again. **Clara** shook her head:

"You have a bad case of indulging," she interjected before continuing. "The **nagual** can also explain anything you ask him."

The only problem is that you think he's a male, and if he talks to you for more than a few minutes, rest assured, you're going to fall into your female mold. That's why your teacher has to be a woman."

"**Aren't** you making too much of this male-female thing?" I said, trying to get out of bed.

I felt weak and my legs were trembling. The room began to spin and I nearly fainted.

Clara caught me by the arm in the nick of time.

She said, "We'll soon find out if I'm making too much of it. She said."

"Let's go outside and sit in the shade of a tree. Maybe the fresh air will help revive you."

She helped me put on a long jacket and some pants, and led me like an invalid out of the room to the back patio.

We sat on some straw mats under the enormous **zapote** tree that shaded nearly the entire patio.

Once before, I had asked **Clara** if I could eat the fruit.

She had hushed me and said, "Just eat, but don't talk about it."

I did what she told me, but I felt guilty ever since; as if I had insulted the tree.

We sat in silence listening to the wind rustling the leaves.

It was cool and peaceful there and I felt relaxed and at ease again.

After a while, **Manfred** sauntered over from around the side of the house where he had a room with a large swinging panel cut into the door so he could come and go as he pleased.

He came up to me and began licking my hand.

I looked into his soulful eyes and I knew we were the best of friends.

As if by an unstated invitation, he eased himself across my lap, making himself comfortable. I stroked his soft silky coat and felt the most profound affection for him.

Gripped by an inexplicable compassion, I leaned forward and embraced him. The next thing I knew I was weeping, for I felt so sorry for him.

"Where are your crystals?" **Clara** demanded. Her harsh tone brought me back to reality.

"In my room," I said, letting go of **Manfred** to wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my jacket.

He took one look at **Clara's** disapproving stare, jumped off my lap, and moved across the walk to sit under a nearby tree.

"You should have them with you at all times," she snapped:

"As you already know, weapons like those crystals have nothing to do with war or peace."

"You can be as peace-loving as you wish and yet still need weapons. In fact, you need them at this moment to fight your enemies."

"I don't have any enemies, **Clara**," I sniffled. "No one even knows I'm alive."

Clara leaned toward me. "The **nagual** gave you those crystals to help you to destroy your enemies," she said softly:

"If you had them with you at this moment, you could make your sorcery passes with them and that would help dissipate your nagging self-pity."

"I wasn't feeling sorry for myself, **Clara**," I said, on the defensive. "I was feeling sorry for poor **Manfred**."

Clara laughed and shook her head. "There's no way to feel sorry for poor **Manfred**."

"No matter what form he is in, he's a warrior."

"Self-pity, on the other hand, is inside you, and expresses itself in different ways."

"Right now you're calling it 'feeling sorry for **Manfred**.'"

My eyes began to tear once more because, together with my insecurity, I did have a bottomless pool of pity, centered totally on myself.

I had done enough recapitulating to realize that I had learned this reaction from my mother, who felt sorry for herself every day of her life, or at least every day of my life with her.

Since I never knew any other personal expression in her, that was what I had learned to feel myself.

"You should hold the crystal weapons in your fingers and make your sorcery passes at the heart of your elusive enemies, such as self-importance, that come to you disguised as self-pity, moral indignation or

righteous sadness," **Clara** went on.

I could only stare at her in dismay.

She went on to accuse me of being weak; of falling apart the moment a little pressure is put on me.

But what hurt me the most was when she told me that my months of recapitulating were meaningless: They were nothing but shallow reveries, for all I had done was to reminisce nostalgically about my marvelous self or wallow in pity remembering my not-so-marvelous moments.

I **couldn't** understand why she was attacking me so viciously.

My ears were buzzing as I experienced a surge of fury.

I began to weep uncontrollably, hating myself for having allowed **Clara** the opportunity to devastate me emotionally.

I heard her words as if they were coming from far away.

She was saying, "...self-importance, lack of purpose, unchecked ambition, unexamined sensuality, cowardice: The list of enemies that try to stop your flight to freedom is endless, and you must be relentless in your fight against them."

She told me to calm down.

She said she had just been trying to illustrate to me that our attitudes and feelings were our real enemies and that they were just as damaging and dangerous as any bandit armed to the teeth that we might encounter on the road.

"The **nagual** gave you those crystals to round up your energy," she said:

"The crystals are extraordinary for gathering our attention and fixing it. That is a quality of quartz crystals in general, and the specific intent of these crystals in particular.

"To accomplish this, all you have to do is perform your sorcery passes with them."

I wished I had the crystals with me then.

Instead I looked at **Manfred**'s sympathetic, shiny eyes. The thought occurred to me that they were reflecting light just as the quartz crystals had done.

For a moment, his eyes held my gaze; and as I stared at them an irrational certainty popped into my mind.

I knew **Manfred** was a sorcerer of the ancient tradition, a sorcerer's spirit that had somehow gotten trapped in a dog's body.

The moment I thought that, **Manfred** let out a sharp yelp as if in affirmation.

I wondered, too, if it **wasn't Manfred** who had found the crystals for me in a cave, or rather had led the **nagual** to them, the same way he had led me to my favorite lookout point in the hills overlooking the house and grounds.

"You asked me once how it was possible that I knew so much about crystals," **Clara** said, interrupting my speculations:

"I **couldn't** tell you then because you **hadn't** yet met the **nagual**."

"But now that you've been introduced to him, I can tell you that..."

She took a deep breath and leaned toward me, "We are sorcerers from the same tradition as those of ancient times.

"We have inherited all their esoteric rituals and incantations, but although we know how to use them, we **aren't** interested in making them

work."

"**Manfred** is an ancient sorcerer!" I exclaimed in sincere amazement, but forgetting that I **hadn't** mentioned to her my mental speculations.

Clara looked at me as if questioning my sanity and then laughed so hard that conversation stopped.

I heard **Manfred** barking as if he too were laughing, and the eerie part was that I could have sworn that either **Clara**'s laughter had an echo or that someone hiding behind the corner of the house was also laughing.

I felt like a complete imbecile. **Clara didn't** want to hear the details about **hight** being reflected in **Manfred**'s eyes.

"I've told you that you are slow and not that intelligent, but you **didn't** believe me," she chided. "But don't worry, none of us is that intelligent either. We are all arrogant, dumb, thick-headed apes."

She gave me a rap on my head to bring the point home.

I **didn't** like being called a thick-headed ape, but I was still so excited about my discovery that I let the remark pass.

"The **nagual** has many other reasons for giving you those crystals," **Clara** continued, "but he will have to explain them to you himself. The one thing I know for certain is that you will have to make a pouch for them."

"What kind of pouch?"

"A sheath made with whatever material you feel is right. You can use suede, felt or quilt, or even wood if that is what you want to use."

"What kind of pouch did you make for yours, **Clara**?"

"I **didn't** get any crystals myself," she said, "but I handled them at one time in my youth."

"You speak of yourself as if you were old. The more I see you, the younger you look."

"That's because I do plenty of sorcery passes to create that illusion," she replied, laughing with childlike abandon. "Sorcerers create illusions. Just look at **Manfred**."

At the mention of his name, **Manfred** stuck his head out from behind the tree and stared at us. I had the uncanny sensation that he knew we were talking about him and he **didn't** want to miss a single word.

"What about **Manfred**?" I asked, automatically lowering my voice.

"One would swear that he's a dog," **Clara** said in a whisper. "But that's his power to create an illusion." She nudged me and gave me a conspiratorial wink. "You see, you are absolutely right, **Taisha. Manfred** is not a dog at all."

I **couldn't** tell whether she was coaxing me to agree with her for **Manfred**'s sake because now he was sitting up and definitely listening to every word we were saying; or whether she really meant what she said; that **Manfred** was not a dog.

Before I could find out which, a shrill noise from inside the house made both **Clara** and **Manfred** jump up and rush in that direction.

I began to follow, but **Clara** turned to me and said gruffly, "You stay where you are. I'll be back in a moment."

She ran into the house with **Manfred** close on her heels.

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 14

Version 2007.03.18

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha](#)

Abelar

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Chapter 14

[HTML](#) EDITOR

"I don't feel at ease with the word 'sorcerer,'" [Mr. Abelar](#) said, "because it connotes beliefs and actions that are not part of what we do."

...

"Seriously, though, storing sexual energy is the first step in the journey toward the ethereal body; the journey into awareness and total freedom."

END [HTML](#) EDITOR

Weeks went by, then months.

I [didn't](#) really pay attention to dates and time.

[Clara](#), [Manfred](#) and I lived in perfect harmony.

[Clara](#) had ceased to insult me, or perhaps it was that I had ceased to feel insulted.

I spent all my time recapitulating and practicing [kung fu](#) with [Clara](#) and with [Manfred](#), who, at one hundred pounds of bone and muscle, was a mighty dangerous opponent.

I was certain that to be rammed with his head was equivalent to being punched by a prize fighter.

The one thing that worried me was a contradiction I found difficult to resolve.

While [Clara](#) maintained that my energy was unmistakably on the rise because I could now have conversations with [Manfred](#), I believed the opposite was true; that I was slowly going over the deep end.

Whenever [Manfred](#) and I were alone, a bond of indescribable affection would possess me.

I actually adored him, and it was this blind feeling of love that created a bridge between us so he could, at times, transmit his thoughts and moods to me.

I knew [Manfred](#)'s feelings were simple and direct like a child's.

He experienced happiness, discomfort, pride in any accomplishment, and fear of everything; which was instantly turned to wrath.

But the traits that I found most admirable in him were his courage and his capacity for compassion.

I sensed that he actually felt sorry for [Clara](#) for looking like a toad.

With respect to courage, [Manfred](#) was unique. His was the courage of an evolved consciousness aware of his imprisonment.

To me, [Manfred](#) was alone beyond comprehension, and no one can face that imposed solitude the way he did without possessing peerless courage.

One afternoon, upon returning from the cave, I sat down to rest under the shade of the [zapote](#) tree.

[Manfred](#) came to me and lay across my legs and fell instantly asleep.

Listening to his snoring and feeling his warm weight in my lap made me drowsy.

I must have fallen asleep, because I suddenly woke up from a dream in which I was arguing with my mother over the advantages of not putting the silverware away after washing them.

[Mr. Abelar](#) was staring at me with fierce, cold eyes.

His gaze, the posture of his body, his extremely defined features, and

his concentration gave me the total impression that he was an eagle. He imbued me with awe and fear.

The temperature and the light had changed. It was almost dark: Twilight shadows had fallen over the patio.

"What happened?" I asked.

"What happened is that [Manfred](#)'s got hold of you and is using your energy like a fiend," he said with a broad smile. "He did the same with me.

"There seems to be a genuine rapport between you two. Try calling him [sapito](#) and let's see if he gets angry."

"No. I can't do that," I said, running my fingers on [Manfred](#)'s head. "He's beautiful and solitary and in no way does he resemble a [t-o-a-d](#)."

I found it absurd that I had actually spelled the word, but something in me [didn't](#) want to risk offending [Manfred](#).

"Toads are also beautiful and solitary," [Mr. Abelar](#) said with a glint.

Spurred by a sudden curiosity, I leaned over to [Manfred](#) and whispered in his ear, "[Sapito](#)," having only the best of feelings. [Manfred](#) yawned, as if bored with my empathy.

[Mr. Abelar](#) laughed. "Let's go into the house," he said, "before [Manfred saps](#) all your energy. Besides, it's warmer there."

I pushed [Manfred](#) off my lap and followed [Mr. Abelar](#) inside the house.

I sat down very formally in the living room, acutely self-conscious at being alone with a man in a dark, empty house.

[Mr. Abelar](#) lit the gasoline lantern, then sat on the sofa a respectable distance away and said, "I understand you wanted to ask me some questions. Now is a good time, so go ahead and ask them."

For an instant my mind went blank. Being confronted so directly with his intense stare made me lose my composure.

Finally, I asked, "What happened to me the night I met you, [Mr. Abelar](#)? [Clara](#) felt she [couldn't](#) explain it to me adequately, and I don't remember much about it."

"Your double took over," he said matter-of-factly, "and you lost control of your everyday self."

"What do you mean, I lost control?" I asked, worried. "Did I do anything I [shouldn't](#) have?"

"Nothing that you [couldn't](#) tell your mother about," he chuckled.

His eyes sparkled, full of mischief. "Seriously, [Taisha](#), all you did was to cast your luminous net as far as you were able to. You learned how to rest on that invisible hammock that is actually a part of you. Someday, as you become more adept, you may begin to use its lines to move and alter things."

"Is the double inside or outside the physical body?" I asked. "That night, it seemed to me that, for a moment, something clearly outside of myself had taken over."

"It's both," [Mr. Abelar](#) said. "It is inside and outside the physical body at the same time.

"How can I put it? In order to command it, the part of it that is outside floating freely has to be linked to the energy that is housed inside the physical body.

"The external force is beckoned and held by an unwavering concentration, while the internal energy is released by opening some

mysterious gates in and around the body.

"When the two sides merge, the force that is produced allows one to perform inconceivable feats."

"Where are those mysterious gates you're talking about?" I asked, incapable of meeting his gaze directly.

"Some are close to the skin, others are deep inside the body," **Mr. Abelar** replied. "There are seven main gates. When they are closed, our inner energy remains locked within the physical body.

"The presence of the double inside us is so subtle that we can go through our entire lives without ever knowing that it is there.

"However, if one is going to release it, the gates must be opened and this is done through the recapitulation and the breathing exercises **Clara** showed you."

Mr. Abelar promised that he himself would guide me to deliberately open the first gate after I had successfully accomplished the abstract flight.

He emphasized that in order to open the gates, a complete change of attitude is necessary because our preconceived notion that we are solid is what keeps the double imprisoned rather than any physical structure of the body itself.

"**Couldn't** you describe to me where the gates are so I can open them myself?"

He looked at me and shook his head. "To tamper haphazardly with the power behind the gates is foolish and dangerous," he warned:

"The double must be released gradually; harmoniously.

"A prerequisite, however, is that one remains celibate."

"Why is celibacy important?" I asked.

"**Didn't Clara** tell you about the luminous worms a man leaves inside a woman's body?"

"Yes," I said, ill at ease and embarrassed. "But I must confess I **didn't** really believe her."

"That was a mistake," he said, annoyed. "For without a thorough recapitulation first, you would literally be opening a can of worms. And to have sex would only be adding more fuel to the fire."

He laughed heartily making me feel ridiculous.

"Seriously, though, storing sexual energy is the first step in the journey toward the ethereal body; the journey into awareness and total freedom."

Just then, **Clara** entered the living room wearing a white flowing kaftan that made her look like a huge toad.

I began to snicker for thinking such a disrespectful thought, and immediately glanced over at **Mr. Abelar**, who I could have sworn was thinking the same thing.

Clara sat down on the armchair and smiled at both of us sitting awkwardly on the couch.

"Have you gotten to the subject of the gates yet?" she asked **Mr. Abelar** curiously. "Is that why **Taisha** is pressing her legs together so tightly?"

Mr. Abelar nodded in utter seriousness. "I was just about to tell her that an enormous gate is in the sexual organs. But I don't think she will understand what I'm talking about. She still has quite a few misconceptions in that department."

Simultaneously, they both broke out in such peals of laughter that I felt utterly disconnected.

I resented being laughed at and talked about as if I **weren't** in the room.

I was about to tell them that they **didn't** understand me at all, when **Clara** spoke again, this time addressing me.

"Do you understand why we are recommending that you remain celibate?" she asked.

"To journey to freedom," I said, repeating **Mr. Abelar**.

I boldly asked **Clara** if she and **Mr. Abelar** were celibate, or if they were just recommending behavior they were not prepared to practice themselves.

"I told you we are not man and wife," **Clara** replied, not the least bit perturbed. "We are sorcerers interested in power; in gathering energy, not losing it."

I turned to **Mr. Abelar** and asked him if he really was a sorcerer and what that entailed.

He **didn't** answer me, but looked at **Clara** as if he were asking her permission to divulge something.

Clara nodded her almost imperceptible assent.

"I don't feel at ease with the word 'sorcerer,'" **Mr. Abelar** said, "because it connotes beliefs and actions that are not part of what we do."

"What exactly do you do?," I asked. "**Clara** said only you could tell me."

Mr. Abelar straightened his back and gave me a frightening look that jolted me to attention.

He began formally, "We are a group consisting of sixteen people, myself included, and one being: **Manfred**. Ten of the people are women.

"All of us do the same thing: We have dedicated our lives to developing our double.

"We use our ethereal bodies and defy many of the natural laws of the physical world.

"Now, if that's being a sorcerer, then all of us are sorcerers. If not, then we're not. Does that make things any clearer?"

"Since you are teaching me about the double, am I going to be a sorceress too?" I asked.

"I don't know," he replied, scanning me curiously:

"It'll all depend on you. It is always up to us individually to fulfill or to **nub** our fate."

"But **Clara** said everyone in this house has a purpose for being here. Why was I selected?" I asked. "Why me in particular?"

"That's a very difficult question to answer," **Mr. Abelar** said, smiling. "Let's say that we are compelled to include you.

"Do you remember that night, about five years ago, when you were caught in a compromising situation with a young man?"

I immediately began to sneeze, my usual reaction when I felt threatened.

During my recapitulating I had remembered time and again being in compromising situations.

Since I was fourteen, I had been obsessed with boys and had aggressively run after them, as I had run after my brothers as a child.

I wanted desperately to be loved by anyone because I knew my family

didn't like me.

But I always ended up scaring off my would-be suitors before they could get too close.

My aggressiveness made everyone think I was a loose woman; capable of anything.

Consequently, I had the worst reputation imaginable in spite of the fact that I **hadn't** done even half of the things my friends and family attributed to me.

"You were caught on the food counter where you worked in the concession stand of a drive-in theater in California. Remember?" I heard **Mr. Abelar** say.

How could I possibly not remember? That was by far one of the worst experiences of my life.

And because it was so sensitive, I had put off recapitulating it deeply; always skirting its fringes.

I had at that time a high school summer job selling hot dogs and soft drinks in a drive-in theater.

Near the end of the summer, **Kenny**, the young man who managed the concession stand, told me that he loved me.

Up to that moment, I had been indifferent to him because I had my eye on the boss, who was handsome and rich.

Unfortunately, the boss was interested in **Rita**, my red-headed nemesis, who was nineteen and gorgeous.

Every night soon after the movie began, she would slip into the boss's office and lock the door.

When she emerged just before intermission, her pink and white checkered uniform was wrinkled and her hair was limp and tangled.

I acutely envied **Rita** for all the attention she was getting.

What made it even worse was her promotion to running the cash register, while I had to continue passing out popcorn and serving soft drinks at the counter.

When **Kenny** told me that I was beautiful and desirable, I began to think of him in a different light.

I overlooked the fact that he had severe acne, drank beer by the gallon, listened to country music, wore boots, and spoke with a heavy Texan drawl.

All of a sudden I found him manly and affectionate, and all I cared to know about him was that his parents were Catholic and **didn't** know that he smoked marijuana.

I was beginning to fall in love with him, and **didn't** want personal details to stand in the way.

Kenny became incensed when I told him that I had to quit working at the end of the week because my family was leaving for a holiday in Germany, and I had to go with them.

He said my parents were deliberately trying to separate us.

He took my hand and swore that he **couldn't** live without me. He proposed marriage; but I was not quite sixteen so I told him that we would have to wait.

He embraced me passionately and said that the least we could do was to have sex.

I **didn't** know if he meant sometime before I left for Germany or right then; but I thoroughly agreed with him, and I opted for right then.

We had about twenty minutes until the show broke, so I moved the rest of the **buns** from the worktable and began taking off my clothes.

He was frightened. He shook like a little boy, although he was twenty-two.

We hugged and kissed, but before anything else could happen, we were interrupted by an old man who burst into the room.

Upon seeing us in such a compromising situation, he grabbed a broom, hit me on the back with the straw side.

The old man chased me half-naked into the foyer; in full view of the people who had lined up at the snack shop. They laughed and jeered at me.

The worst part was that I recognized two of my teachers from school. They were as shocked to see me as I was to see them.

One of my teachers reported the incident to the principal, who in turn informed my parents.

By the time everyone finished gossiping, I was the laughingstock of the school.

For years afterward, I hated that horrid old man who took it upon himself to be my moral judge.

I thought he had actually ruined my life, for I was never allowed to see **Kenny** again.

"I was that man," **Mr. Abelar** said, as if he had been following my thoughts.

At that moment, the full impact of remembering my public humiliation struck me.

To have the person responsible for it in front of me was more than I could bear.

I began to weep out of sheer frustration.

The worst part was, that **Mr. Abelar didn't** seem at all sorry for what he had done.

"I've been looking for you ever since that night," **Mr. Abelar** said, grinning slyly.

I read all kinds of kinky sexual nuances into his look and words. My heart was about to explode out of wrath and fear. I knew then that **Clara** had brought me to Mexico for sinister reasons, centering on some secret scheme the two of them had been hatching from the start that included plenty of aberrant sex. I **didn't** believe their claim of celibacy, not for an instant.

"What do you intend to do to me?" I asked, my voice cracking with fear.

Clara looked at me puzzled then began to laugh as if she had understood all that had been going through my mind.

Mr. Abelar imitated my cracked voice as he asked **Clara** the same question, "What do you intend to do to me?"

Then his booming laughter joined **Clara's** to reverberate throughout the house.

I heard **Manfred's** howls from his room: It sounded like he too was laughing.

I was more than miserable. I was devastated.

I got up to leave, but **Mr. Abelar** pushed me back onto the couch.

"Shame and self-importance make terrible companions," he said seriously:

"You haven't recapitulated that incident or you **wouldn't** be in such a state now."

Then softening his fierce stare to an almost kind look.

He added, "There's nothing **Clara** and I want to do to you. You've done more than enough yourself."

"That night, I was looking for the rest room and opened a door for employees only."

Since a **nagual** never makes such a careless mistake because he is always aware of what he does, I had to assume that I was fated to find you, and that you had a special significance for me.

Seeing you there half naked, about to give yourself to a weak man who might have destroyed your life, I acted in a very specific manner and hit you with the broom."

"What you did was to make me the laughingstock of my family and friends," I yelled.

"Perhaps. But, I also grabbed your ethereal body and tied an energy line around it," he said:

"From that day on, I've always known where you were."

"Yet it has taken me five years to get you in a position where you would listen to what I have to say,"

For the first time, what he was saying registered.

I stared at him incredulously.

"You mean you've known where I was all the time?" I asked.

"I've been tracking your every move," he said definitely.

"You mean you've been spying on me." The implications of what he was saying were slowly rising to the surface.

"Yes, in a manner of speaking," he admitted.

"Did **Clara** also know I lived in **Arizona**?"

"Naturally. We all knew where you were."

"Then, it was not by accident that **Clara** found me in the desert that day," I gasped.

I turned to **Clara**, furious. "You knew I would be there, **didn't** you?"

Clara nodded. "I admit it. You went there so regularly it **wasn't** hard to follow you."

"But you told me that you just happened to be there," I shouted. "You lied to me; you tricked me into coming to Mexico with you. And you've been lying to me ever since; laughing behind my back for God only knows what reason."

All my doubts and suspicions that had not had expression for months finally surfaced and exploded.

"This has been nothing but a joke to you," I yelled, "to see how stupid and gullible I am."

Mr. Abelar gave me a ferocious look, but that **didn't** stop me from staring right back at him.

He tapped me on the top of my head to quiet me.

"You're deadly wrong, young lady," he said sternly. "All this has not been a joke to us."

"It's true we laugh a great deal at your idiocies, but none of our actions are lies or tricks."

"They are utterly serious: In fact, they are a matter of life or death to us."

He was so earnest and looked so commanding that the bulk of my

anger dissipated, leaving in its place a hopeless bewilderment.

"What did **Clara** want with me?" I asked, looking at **Mr. Abelar**.

"I entrusted **Clara** with a most delicate mission; that of bringing you home," he explained. "And she succeeded."

"You followed her, obeying your own inner drive."

"It was extremely difficult to get you to accept an invitation from anyone; but from a total stranger, it's nearly impossible."

"But she did it. Hers was a masterful stroke! I have only praise and admiration for a job well done."

Clara jumped up to her feet and took a graceful bow.

Assuming a solemn expression as she sat down again, she said, "Leaving all joking aside, the **nagual** is right. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life."

"For a while there, I thought you were going to let your suspicious nature get the better of you and tell me to get lost. I even had to lie and tell you that I have a secret Buddhist name."

"You don't have one?"

"No, I don't. My desire for freedom has burned every secret in me."

"But I'm still not clear as to how **Clara** knew where to find me," I said, looking at **Mr. Abelar**. "How did she know I was in **Arizona** at that particular time?"

"By means of your double," **Mr. Abelar** replied, as if it were the most obvious thing.

The instant he said that, my mind cleared and I understood exactly what he meant. In fact, I knew it was the only possible way they could have kept track of me.

"I tied an energy line to your ethereal body the night I burst in on you," he explained:

"Since the double is composed of pure energy, it **isn't** that difficult to mark it."

"I had felt that, given the circumstances of our meeting, it was the least I could do for you as a form of protection."

Mr. Abelar looked at me, waiting for me to ask a question.

But my mind was too busy trying to remember more details of what had happened that night when he had run into the room.

"**Aren't** you going to ask me how I marked you?" he said, gazing at me intently.

My ears popped. The room became energized and everything fell into place.

I **didn't** have to ask **Mr. Abelar** how he had done it, I already knew it.

I exclaimed, "You marked me when you hit me with the broom!"

It was perfectly clear, but when I thought about it, it made no sense whatsoever, for it **didn't** explain anything.

Mr. Abelar nodded, pleased that I had arrived at that realization myself.

"That's right. I marked you when I struck your upper back with the broom as I chased you out the door."

"I left a particular energy inside you."

"And this energy has been lodged in you ever since that night."

Clara came over and scrutinized me. "Haven't you noticed, **Taisha**, that your left shoulder is higher than the right?"

I had been aware that one of my shoulder blades protruded more

than the other, causing my neck and shoulders to be tense.

"I thought I was born that way," I said.

"Nobody is born with the nagual's mark," Clara laughed. "The nagual's energy is lodged behind your left shoulder blade.

"Think about it. Your shoulders got out of alignment after the nagual struck you with the broom."

I had to admit that it had been around the time I had had my summer job in the drive-in theater that my mother first noticed that there was something wrong with my upper back.

She was fitting a sundress she was sewing for me and saw that it didn't fit properly.

She was shocked to find that the flaw was not in the dress but in my shoulder blades: One was definitely higher than the other.

The next day she had the family doctor examine my back.

He concluded that my spine was slightly curved to one side.

He diagnosed my condition as congenital scoliosis, but assured my mother that the curvature was so slight that we shouldn't concern ourselves with it.

"It's a good thing the nagual didn't leave too much energy in you," Clara teased, "otherwise you'd be a hunchback."

I turned to face Mr. Abelar.

I felt the muscles in my back tense, the way they usually did when I was nervous. "Now that you have me reeled in, what are your intentions?" I asked.

Mr. Abelar took a step closer. He fixed me with his cold stare.

"All I ve wanted, since the day I found you, was to do the same thing I did for you that night," he replied solemnly, "to open the door and chase you out.

"This time, I want to open the door of the daily world and chase you out to freedom."

His words and mood unleashed a wealth of feelings.

For as long as I can remember, I had been always searching; looking out of windows and peering down streets as if something or someone was around the corner waiting for me.

I ve always had premonitions; dreams of escaping, although I didn't know from what.

It was this feeling that had compelled me to follow Clara to an unknown destination.

And this feeling was also what prevented me from leaving in spite of the impossibility of my tasks.

As I held Mr. Abelar's gaze, an indescribable wave of well-being enveloped me.

I knew that I had at last found what I had been looking for.

Following an impulse of the purest affection, I leaned over and kissed his hand.

Out of the unsuspected depth of me, I muttered something that had no rational but only an emotional significance.

"You are the nagual to me, too," I said.

His eyes were shining; happy we had finally come to an understanding.

He ruffled my hair in an affectionate way, and all my pent-up fears and frustrations exploded in a deluge of anguished tears.

Clara got up and handed me a handkerchief.

She said, "The way to get you out of this sad mood is to make you angry or to make you think.

"I m going to do both by telling you this.

"Not only did I know where to find you in the desert, but do you remember that hot, stuffy little apartment you asked me to move your things out of?

"Well, the building is owned by my cousin."

I looked at Clara shocked, unable to utter a single word, Clara's and Mr. Abelar's laughter was like a giant explosion reverberating inside my head.

I couldn't have been more surprised at anything they might have said or sprung on me.

As my initial numbness subsided, instead of becoming angry for being manipulated, I was filled with awe at the incredible precision of their maneuvering and at the immensity of their control which, I finally realized, was not control over me but over themselves.

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha](#)

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One day several months after I had met Mr. Abelar, Clara, instead of sending me to the cave to recapitulate, asked me to keep her company while she worked in the yard.

Near the vegetable garden beyond the back patio of her house, I watched Clara meticulously rake leaves into a pile.

On top of the heap, she carefully arranged some crisp brown leaves into an elliptical pattern.

"What are you doing?" I asked, moving closer to take a better look.

I was feeling tense and somber for I had spent the entire morning in the cave recapitulating memories of my father.

I had always thought he was a bombastic and arrogant ogre.

To realize he was actually a sad, defeated man broken by the war and his thwarted ambitions left me emotionally drained.

"I m making a nest for you to sit on," Clara replied. "You are to brood like a hen hatching eggs.

"I want you to be rested because we may have a visitor this afternoon."

"And who might that be?" I asked casually.

For months Clara had promised to introduce me to the other members of the nagual's group- her mysterious relatives that had finally returned from India- but she never had.

Every time I had expressed my desire to meet them, she always said I needed to cleanse myself first with a more thorough recapitulation because in my present state I wasn't fit to meet anyone.

I believed her. The more I examined memories of my past, the more I felt in need of cleansing.

"You haven't answered my question, Clara," I said testily. "Who's coming?"

"Never mind who," she said, handing me a bunch of dry, copper-colored leaves:

"Put these over your navel and tie them with your recapitulation sash."

"I left my sash in the cave," I said.

"I hope you're using it properly," she commented. "The sash supports us while we recapitulate. You're to wrap your stomach with it and tie one end of it to the stake I planted in the ground inside the cave. That way, you won't fall over and bang your head if you doze off or in case your double decides to wake up."

"Should I go and get it?"

She clicked her tongue, exasperated. "No, we don't have time.

"Our visitor might be here any minute and I want you to be relaxed and at your best. You can use my sash."

Clara hurried inside the house and momentarily returned with a strip of saffron cloth.

It was truly beautiful. It had an almost imperceptible pattern woven in it. In the sunlight the strip of silk shimmered, changing its hue from a dark gold to a mellow amber.

"If any part of your body is injured or in pain, wrap this sash around it," **Clara** explained. "It will help you recover.

"It has a bit of power, for I've done years of recapitulating wearing it.

"Someday you'll be able to say the same about your sash."

"Why can't you tell me who's coming to visit?" I pressed. "You know I hate surprises. Is it the **nagual**?"

"No, it's someone else," she said, "but equally powerful, if not more so.

"When you meet her, you have to be quiet and empty of thoughts, or you won't benefit from her presence."

With exaggerated solemnity, **Clara** said that today, as a matter of principle, I had to use all the sorcery passes she had taught me, not because anyone was going to test me to make sure I knew them, but because I had come to a crossroad and I had to begin moving in a new direction.

"Wait, **Clara**, don't frighten me with talk of changing," I pleaded. "I'm terrified of new directions."

"To frighten you is the farthest thing from my mind," she assured me. "It's just that I'm a bit worried myself.

"Do you have your crystals with you?"

I unbuttoned my vest and showed her the leather double-shoulder holster I had fashioned, with her help, to hold the two quartz crystals.

The crystals were secured, one under each arm, like two knives in their own sheathes; complete with an overlapping flap, and fastened with a snap.

She said, "Take them out and have them ready; and use them to rally your energy.

"Don't wait for her to tell you to do so.

"Do it at your own discretion whenever you feel you need an extra boost of energy."

From **Clara**'s statements, it was easy to deduce two things: that this was going to be a serious encounter, and that our mystery guest would be a woman.

"Is she one of your relatives?" I asked.

"Yes, she is," **Clara** replied with a cold smile:

"This person is my relative; a member of our party.

"Now relax and don't ask any more questions."

I wanted to know where her relatives were staying.

It was impossible that they were staying in the house because I would have run across them or at least seen signs of their presence.

The fact that I **hadn't** seen anybody had turned my curiosity into an obsession.

I imagined that **Clara**'s relatives were deliberately hiding from me and even spying on me.

This made me angry and at the same time even more determined to catch a glimpse of them.

The origin of my turmoil was the unmistakable feeling that I was constantly being watched.

I deliberately tried to entrap whoever it was by leaving one of my drawing pencils lying around to see if anyone picked it up, or by placing a magazine open at a certain page and checking it later to see if that page had been changed.

In the kitchen, I carefully examined the dishes for signs of use.

I even went as far as smoothing out the packed dirt on the path by the back door, then coming back later and searching the ground for footprints or unfamiliar tracks.

In spite of all my efforts at sleuthing, the only prints I ever saw were those of **Clara**, **Manfred** and myself.

If a person was hiding from me, I was convinced I would have noticed it, but as it was, there seemed to be no one else in the house in spite of my being certain that other people were present.

"Forgive me, **Clara**, but I have to ask you," I finally blurted out, "because it's driving me nuts. Where are your relatives staying?"

Clara looked at me surprised. "This is their house. They are staying here, of course."

"But where exactly?" I demanded.

I was on the verge of confessing how I had laid traps to no avail, but decided against it.

"**Oh!** I see what you mean," she said. "You haven't found any signs of them in spite of your efforts at playing detective; but that's no mystery. You never see them because they're staying in the left side of the house."

"Don't they ever come out?"

"They do, but they avoid the right side because you're staying here and they don't want to disturb you.

"They know how much you value your privacy."

"But not to show themselves ever? **Isn't** that carrying the idea of privacy a bit too far?"

"Not at all," **Clara** said. "You need absolute solitude to concentrate on your recapitulation.

"When I said that you're going to have a visitor today, I meant that one of my relatives is going to come from the left side of the house to where we are and meet you.

"She's been looking forward to talking to you, but had to wait until you had cleansed yourself minimally.

I told you that to meet her is even more taxing than to meet the

nagual.

You need to have stored enough power or else you'll go off the deep end as you did with him."

Clara helped me put the leaves on my stomach, and tie them with the cloth.

"These leaves and this sash will buffer you from the woman's onslaughts," **Clara** said, then looking at me added softly, "and from other blows too. So whatever you do, don't take it off."

"What's going to happen to me?" I asked, nervously packing in more leaves.

Clara shrugged. "That'll depend on your power," she said and gave the knot in the cloth a firm tug. "But, from the looks of you, God only knows."

With trembling fingers I **rebuttoned** my shirt and tucked it into my baggy pants.

I looked bloated with the wide saffron band around my middle. The leaves were like a brittle, scratchy pillow covering my abdomen.

But gradually my jittery stomach stopped shivering and became warm, and my entire body felt relaxed.

I must have given her a surprised look because she asked me, "What do you think hens do when they brood?"

"I really **couldn't** say, **Clara**."

"A hen remains still and listens to her eggs underneath her, directing all her attention to them.

"A hen listens and never lets her concentration waver.

"In this unbending manner she intends the chicks to hatch.

"It's a quiet listening that animals do naturally; but which human beings have forgotten, and therefore must cultivate."

Clara sat down on a large, pale gray rock and faced me. The rock had a natural depression in it and looked like an armchair.

"Now, doze like a hen does and listen with your inner ear while I talk.

"Concentrate on the warmth in your womb and don't let your attention wander.

"Be aware of the sounds around you, but don't allow your mind to follow them."

"Do I really have to sit here like this, **Clara**? I mean, **wouldn't** it be better if I just took a refreshing nap?"

"I'm afraid not.

As **I've** said, our visitor's presence is terribly taxing. If you fail to gather energy, you'll sink pitifully.

"Believe me, she's not soft like me. She's more like the **nagual**, pitiless and hard."

"Why is she so taxing?"

"She can't help it.

"She's so far removed from human beings and their concerns that her energy might completely disrupt you.

"By now, there's no difference between her physical body and her ethereal double.

"What I mean to say is that she is a master sorceress."

Clara gave me a searching look and commented on the dark circles under my eyes. "You've been reading at night by the light of the lantern, haven't you?" she scolded. "Why do you think we don't have electricity in

the bedrooms?"

I told her I **hadn't** read a single page since the day I arrived at her house because the recapitulation and all the other things she had asked me to do gave me no time for anything else.

I admitted, "I'm not particularly fond of reading though, but I do browse from time to time through your bookshelves in the halls."

I **didn't** tell her that what I really meant to say was that I went there snooping to see if any of the books had been removed by her relatives.

She laughed and said, "Some of the members of my family are avid readers. I'm not one of them."

"But don't you read for pleasure, **Clara**?"

"Not me. I read for information. But some of the others do read for pleasure."

"So how come I never see any of the books missing?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

Clara giggled. "They have their own library on the left side of the house," she said.

Then she asked me, "You don't read for pleasure, **Taisha**?"

"Unfortunately, I also only read for information," I said.

I told **Clara** that for me the joy of reading was nipped in the bud when I was in grade School.

One of my father's friends, who owned a book distribution firm, had the habit of giving him boxes of books that were out of print.

My father used to screen them and give me the literary books, which he said I had to read in addition to my regular homework.

I always took it for granted that he meant I had to read every word. What's more, I thought I had to finish one book before beginning the next one.

It came as a complete surprise to me when I found out later that some people start several books simultaneously and switch back and forth, reading according to their mood.

Clara looked at me and shook her head as if I were a lost cause. "Children do strange things under pressure," she said. "Now I know why you've turned out to be so compulsive.

"I bet if you try to remember those stories now, you'll be shocked at what you find.

"As children, we can never question what's presented to us, just as you **didn't** question that you had to read a book from cover to cover.

"All the members of my family have serious contentions about what's done to children."

"I've become obsessed with meeting your family, **Clara**."

"That's only natural. I've talked about them so often."

"It's not just that, **Clara**," I said. "It's more of a physical sensation.

"I don't know why, but I can't stop thinking about them. I even dream about them."

The minute I voiced that, something arranged itself in my mind, and I bluntly confronted **Clara** with a query.

Since she knew who I was, and her cousin being my landlord knew me, it suddenly occurred to me to ask whether I knew her other relatives too.

"Naturally all of them know you," **Clara** said, as if it were the most obvious thing; but she **didn't** answer my question.

I **couldn't** possibly imagine who they might be. I insisted, "Now let me bluntly ask you this, **Clara**. Do I know them?"

"These are all impossible questions, **Taisha**. I think it's best that you don't ask them."

I became sulky. I got up from my seat of leaves but **Clara** gently pushed me down again.

"All right, all right. Little Miss Snoop," she said. "If it will make you stay put, I'll tell you."

"You know them all, but you certainly don't remember having met them."

"Even if any one of my relatives were standing right in front of you, my guess is that you still **wouldn't** have even the slightest twitch of recognition."

"But, at the same time, something in you will get extremely agitated. Now are you satisfied?"

Her reply **didn't** satisfy me in the least. In fact, it convinced me that she was deliberately mystifying me, leading me on, playing with words.

"You must enjoy tormenting me, **Clara**," I said, disgusted.

Clara laughed out loud. "I'm not playing with you," she assured me:

"To explain what we are and what we do is the most trying thing in the world."

"I wish I could make it clearer, but I can't."

"So it's pointless to keep on insisting on explanations when there are none."

I shifted uncomfortably on the ground: My legs had fallen asleep.

Clara suggested that I lie on my stomach and rest my head on my right arm, bending it at the elbow.

I did that and found the position comfortable. The ground and the leaves seemed to keep me rooted while my mind was still but alert.

Clara leaned over and caressed my head affectionately.

Then she fixed me with her gaze in such an odd way that I grabbed her hand for a moment and held it.

Clara, loosening my grip, said softly, "I've got to go now, **Taisha**, but rest assured I'll see you again."

Her green eyes had specks of light amber in them, and their glow was the last thing I saw.

I woke up when someone was poking my back with a stick.

A strange woman was standing over me.

She was tall, slender and incredibly striking. Her features were exquisitely chiseled; small mouth, even teeth, perfectly defined nose; oval face; delicate, almost transparent white Nordic complexion; lustrous, curly gray hair.

When she smiled, I thought she was an adolescent girl, full of daring and sensuality.

When she looked serene, she seemed to be a continental European woman, fashionable and mature.

There was elegance in her stylish dress, especially in her sensible shoes, something I had never seen in the United States, where well-dressed women wearing comfortable shoes always appeared matronly.

The woman was at once older and younger than **Clara**. The woman was definitely older in age, but years younger in appearance, and she possessed something I could only call inner vitality.

By contrast, **Clara** seemed to be still in a formative stage, while this being was the finished product.

I knew that someone incredibly different, perhaps as different as a member of another species, was examining me with genuine curiosity.

I sat up and quickly introduced myself.

She reciprocated warmly.

"I am **Nelida Abelar**," she said in English. "I live here with the rest of my companions."

"You already know two of them, **Clara** and the **nagual**, John **Michael**. You will meet the rest of us soon."

She spoke with a slight inflection. Her voice was appealing and so utterly familiar that I **couldn't** help staring at her.

She laughed, I think at the fact that due to my surprise, my face muscles were locked in a frozen smile.

The sound of her raspy laughter was also remotely familiar: I had the sensation that I had heard that laughter before.

The thought crossed my mind that I had seen this woman on another occasion, although I could not fathom where.

The more I stared at her, the more convinced I became that I knew her at one time but had forgotten when.

"What's the matter, dear?" she asked in a solicitous tone. "Do you have the feeling we've met before?"

"Yes, yes," I said excitedly, for I felt that I was about to remember where I had seen her.

"You'll remember sooner or later," she said in a soothing tone that led me to understand that there was no hurry:

"The cleansing breath you do while recapitulating will eventually allow you to remember everything you have ever done, including your dreams."

"Then you'll know where and when we've met."

I felt embarrassed for staring at her and for being caught so completely off guard. I stood up and faced her, not challengingly, but with awe.

"Who are you?" I asked, in a daze.

"I already told you who I am," she said, smiling. "Now, if you want to know if I am a sort of personage, you'll be disappointed."

"I'm not anyone important. I'm only one of a group of people who seek freedom."

"Since you've met the **nagual**, the next step for you was to meet me. That is because I am responsible for you."

Upon hearing that she was responsible for me, I experienced a pang of fear.

All my life I had fought to gain my independence, and I had struggled for it as fiercely as I was capable of.

"I don't want anyone to be responsible for me," I said. "I've fought too hard to be independent to fall under anyone's thumb now."

I thought she would take offense, but she laughed and patted me on the shoulder.

"I never meant it like that," she said. "No one wants to keep you down."

"The **nagual** has an explanation about your unruly personality."

"He really believes that you have a fighting spirit. In fact, he thinks

you're undeniably crazy, but in a positive sense."

She said that the **nagual**'s explanation of my craziness was that I was conceived under unusual and desperate conditions.

Nelida then related to me facts about my parents' history that no one except my parents knew.

She disclosed that before I was conceived, while my parents lived and worked in South Africa, my father was incarcerated for reasons he never revealed.

I had always fantasized that he was not really in a prison but in a political detention camp.

Nelida said that my father saved a guard's life, and later that guard helped my father to escape by turning his back at a crucial moment.

"With his pursuers on his trail," **Nelida** continued, "he went to see his wife; to be with her for the last time on earth.

"He was certain he would be caught and killed.

"During that passionate life-death embrace, your mother became pregnant with you.

"The intense fear and passion for life that your father was feeling then was transmitted to you.

"Consequently, you were born restless and unruly and with a passion for freedom."

I could barely hear her words.

I was so stunned by what she was revealing to me that my ears were buzzing and my knees went weak.

I had to lean against a tree trunk to keep from falling down.

Before I could speak, she continued.

"The reason your mother was so unhappy and secretly despised your father was because he used up all of her family inheritance to pay for his mistakes, whatever they might have been.

"The money ran out and they had to leave South Africa before you were born."

"How can you know things about my parents that not even I am clear about?" I asked.

Nelida smiled. "I know those things because I am responsible for you," she replied.

Again I felt a jolt of fear run through me, making me shiver: I was afraid that if she knew my parents' secrets, she must also know things about me.

I had always felt safe, hidden in my impregnable subjective fortress.

I was lulled into a false security; certain that what I felt and thought and did **didn't** matter as long as I kept it hidden; as long as no one else knew about it.

But now it was obvious that this woman had access to my inner self. I desperately needed to reaffirm my position.

I said defiantly, "If I'm anything, I'm my own person. No one is responsible for me, and no one is going to dominate me."

Nelida laughed at my outburst.

She tousled my hair the way the **nagual** had done; a gesture both soothing and utterly familiar.

"Nobody is trying to dominate you, **Taishika**," she said in a friendly tone.

Her gentleness served to dissipate my anger.

Nelida continued, "I've said all those things to you because I need to prepare you for a very specific maneuver."

I listened to her intently because I sensed from her tone that she was about to reveal something awesome to me.

"**Clara** has brought you to your present level in a most artistic and effective way.

"You will forever be indebted to her.

"Now that she's finished her task, she has gone, and the sad part is that you **didn't** even thank her for her care and her kindness."

Some horrible, unnamed feeling loomed over me. "Wait a minute," I muttered. "Did **Clara** leave?"

"Yes, she did."

"But she'll be coming back, won't she?" I asked.

Nelida shook her head. "No. As I told you, her job is done."

At that moment, I had the only true feeling I had ever had in my entire life.

Compared to that feeling, nothing of what I had felt before was real; not my anger, not my fits of rage, not my outbursts of affection, not even my self-pity was true when compared with the searing pain I felt at that moment.

The feeling was so intense, it numbed me.

I wanted to weep, but I **couldn't**. I knew then that real pain brings no tears.

"And **Manfred**? Is he gone too?" I asked.

"Yes. His job of guarding you is finished too."

"And what about the **nagual**? Will I see him again?"

"In the sorcerers' world anything is possible," **Nelida** said, touching my hand:

"But one thing is for certain: It is not a world to be taken for granted.

"In it, we must voice our thanks now, because there is no tomorrow." I stared at her blankly, totally stunned.

She gazed back at me and whispered, "The future **doesn't** exist.

"It's time you realized this.

"When you have finished recapitulating and have completely erased the past, all that will be left is the present.

"And then you will know that the present is but an instant, nothing more."

Nelida gently rubbed my back, and told me to breathe.

I was so grief-stricken that my breathing had stopped.

I asked pleadingly, "Will I ever be different? Is there a chance for me?"

Without answering, **Nelida** turned around and walked toward the house.

When she reached the back door, she signaled me with a beckoning crook of the index finger to follow her inside.

I wanted to run after her, but I **couldn't** move.

I began to whimper, then the oddest whine came out of me; a sound that was not quite human.

I knew then why **Clara** had tied her protective sash around my stomach: It was to shield me from this blow.

I lay face down on the pile of leaves and released into them the animal cry that was choking me. It **didn't** relieve my anguish.

I took out my crystals, placed them in my fingers and turned my arms

in counterclockwise circles that became smaller and smaller.

I pointed the crystals at my indolence, at my cowardice, and at my useless self-pity.

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 16

Version 2007.03.18

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha Abelar](#)

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Chapter 16

[Nelida](#) was patiently waiting for me at the back door.

It had taken me hours to calm down. It was late afternoon.

I followed her inside the house.

In the hall just outside the living room, she stopped so abruptly that I nearly collided with her.

[Nelida](#) turned to face me, and said, "As [Clara](#) told you, I live in the left side of the house.

"I'm going to take you there, but first let's go in the living room, and sit down for a while so you can catch your breath."

I was panting and my heart was beating disturbingly fast.

"I'm in good physical condition," I assured her. "I practiced [kung fu](#) with [Clara](#) every day. But right now I'm not feeling very well."

"Don't worry about being out of breath," [Nelida](#) said reassuringly:

"The energy of my body is pressing on you.

"That extra pressure is what's making your heart beat faster.

"When you get used to my energy, it will no longer bother you."

She took my hand, and guided me to sit on a cushion on the floor with my back propped against the front of the sofa.

"When you are agitated as you are now, prop your lower back against a piece of furniture.

"Or, bend your arms backward; pressing your hands against the top of your kidneys."

To sit on the floor with my back propped in that fashion had a definite relaxing effect on me.

In a few moments I was breathing normally and my stomach was no longer tied in knots.

I watched [Nelida](#) pace back and forth in front of me.

"Now, let's understand something once and for all," she said as she continued her relaxed, easy stride:

"When I say that I'm responsible for you, I mean that I am in charge of your ultimate freedom.

"So don't give me any more nonsense about your struggle for independence.

"I'm not interested in your capricious fight against your family.

"Even though you've been at odds with them all your life, your fight has had no purpose or direction.

"It's time to give your natural strength and compulsive drive a worthy cause."

Her pacing, I noticed, was not nervous at all.

It seemed to be, rather, a way of trapping my attention, for it had put me completely at ease yet kept me attentive.

I asked her once more if I would ever see [Clara](#) and [Manfred](#).

[Nelida](#) looked at me with a pitiless gaze that sent chills through me.

"No, you won't see them," she said. "At least not in this world.

"Both of them have done their impeccable best to prepare you for the great flight.

"Only if you are successful in awakening the double and crossing over into the abstract will you meet again.

"If not, they will become memories that you will talk about with others for a while, or keep to yourself, then gradually forget."

I swore to her that I would never forget [Clara](#) or [Manfred](#); that they would be a part of me always, even if I never saw them again.

And although something in me knew that that would be so, I couldn't bear such a final separation. I wanted to weep as I had done so easily all my life.

But, somehow my sorcery pass with the crystals had worked: Weeping had fallen off me.

Now when I really needed to cry, I couldn't.

I was hollow inside. I was what I've always been: cold. Except that now I had no more pretenses.

I remember what [Clara](#) had told me; that coldness is not cruelty or heartlessness, but an unbending detachment.

At last I knew what it meant to be without pity.

"Don't focus on your loss," [Nelida](#) said, sensing my mood. "At least not for the time being.

"Let's deal, rather, with helpful ways to gather energy to attempt the inevitable: the abstract flight.

"You know now that you belong to us; to me in particular. You must try today to come to my side of the house."

[Nelida](#) took off her shoes, and sat down in an armchair across from me.

In one graceful movement, she raised her knees to her chest and planted her feet on the seat.

Her full skirt was pulled over her calves so that only her ankles and feet showed.

"Now, try not to be bashful, [judgy](#) or kinky," she said.

Then before I could respond, she lifted her skirt and spread her legs apart.

"Look at my vagina," she ordered:

"The hole between the legs of a woman is the energetic opening of the womb; an organ that is at the same time powerful and resourceful."

To my horror, [Nelida](#) had no underwear on.

I could see right into her crotch.

I wanted to look away but I was mesmerized. I could only stare with my mouth half open.

She was hairless, and her abdomen and legs were hard and smooth with absolutely no wrinkles or fat.

"Since I'm not in the world as a female, my womb has acquired a different mood than the mood of an average, undisciplined woman," [Nelida](#) said, without a hint of embarrassment. "So you simply shouldn't see me in a derogatory light."

She was indeed beautiful and I felt a jolt of sheer envy.

I was at least one third her age and I couldn't possibly have looked that good in a similar position.

In fact, I **wouldn't** dream of letting anyone see me naked. I always wore long bathrobes, as if I had something to hide.

Remembering my own shyness, I politely looked away, but not before I got an eyeful of what I can only call sheer energy- the area around her vagina seemed to radiate a force that if I stared at it made me dizzy.

I shut my eyes and **didn't** care what she thought of me.

Nelida's laughter was like an endless cascade of water, soft and bubbly.

"You are perfectly relaxed now," she said:

"Look at me again, and take a few deep breaths to charge yourself."

"Wait just a moment, **Nelida**," I said, struck by sudden fear; not fear of looking at her vagina, but of what I had just realized.

Showing me her nakedness had done something inconceivable to me: It had soothed my anguish, and made me abandon all my prudishness.

In one instant, I had become extraordinarily familiar with **Nelida**.

Stammering pitifully, I told her what I had just realized.

"That's exactly what the energy from the womb is supposed to do,"

Nelida said cheerfully:

"Now really, you must look at me and breathe deeply. After that, you can analyze things to your heart's content."

I did as she said, and felt no shyness at all.

Breathing in her energy made me feel strangely invigorated as if a bond had formed between us that needed no words.

"You can accomplish wonders by controlling and circulating the energy from the womb," **Nelida** said, pulling her skirt over her calves again.

Nelida explained that the womb's primary function is reproduction in order to perpetuate our species.

But, she said, unbeknownst to women, the womb also has subtle and sophisticated secondary functions; and it was these that she and I were interested in developing.

I was so pleased when **Nelida** had included me in her statement that I actually experienced a tickling sensation inside my stomach.

I listened attentively as she explained that the most important secondary function of the womb is to serve as a guiding unit for the double.

Whereas males have to rely on a mixture of reason and intent to guide their doubles, females have at their disposal their womb; a powerful source of energy with an abundance of mysterious attributes and functions all designed to protect and nurture the double.

"All this is possible, of course, if you have rid yourself of all the encumbering energy men have left inside you," she said:

"A thorough recapitulation of all your sexual activity will take care of that."

She emphasized that using the womb is an extremely powerful and direct method of reaching the double.

She reminded me of the sorcery pass I had learned in which one breathes directly with the opening of the vagina.

"The womb is the way female animals sense things and regulate their bodies," she said:

"Through the womb, women can generate and store power in their doubles to build or destroy; or to become one with everything around

them."

Again I felt a tingle in my abdomen; a mild vibration that spread this time to my genitals and inner thighs.

"Another way of reaching the double, also called the other, besides using the energy of the womb, is through movement," **Nelida** continued:

"This is the reason why **Clara** taught you the sorcery passes.

"There are two passes that you must use today to prepare yourself adequately for what is to come."

She walked to the closet, pulled out a straw mat, unrolled it on the floor and told me to lie on it.

When I was flat on my back, she asked me to bend my knees a bit, fold my arms across my chest, and roll once to my right side and then once to my left.

She made me repeat this movement seven times. As I rolled, I was to slowly curl my spine at the shoulders.

She told me then to sit cross-legged once more on the floor leaning my back against the couch, while she took her seat on the armchair.

Slowly and softly, she inhaled through her nose.

Then she gracefully wiggled her left arm and hand out and upward as if she were boring a hole in the air with her hand. Then she reached in, grasped something and pulled her arm back, giving me the total impression of a long rope being retrieved from a hole in the air.

She then did the same movements with her right arm and hand.

As she performed her sorcery pass, I recognized it to be a movement of the same nature as the ones **Clara** had shown me, but it was different too; lighter, smoother, more energetically charged.

Clara's sorcery passes were like martial art movements: They were graceful and filled with internal strength.

Nelida's passes were ominous, threatening, and yet, at the same time a pleasure to watch: They radiated a nervous energy but they were not agitated.

While she executed her pass, **Nelida's** face was like a beautiful mask. Her features were symmetrical, perfect.

Watching her exquisite movements done with utter aloofness and detachment, I remembered what **Clara** had said about **Nelida** having no pity.

"This pass is for gathering energy from the vastness that lies just behind all that we see," she said:

"Try making a hole. Reach behind the facade of visible forms, and grasp the energy that sustains us. Do it now."

I tried to replicate her swift, graceful movements, but felt stiff and clumsy in comparison.

I **couldn't** feel I was reaching through a hole and grasping energy, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Nevertheless, after I had finished the pass, I felt strong and bursting with energy.

"It **doesn't** really take much to communicate or reach the ethereal body," **Nelida** went on:

"Sound is a powerful way of attracting the **etheral** body's attention in addition to using the womb and movement."

She explained that by systematically directing words to our source of awareness- the double- one can receive a manifestation of that source.

"Provided, of course, that we have enough energy," she added:

"If we do, it may take only a few selected words or a sustained sound to open something unthinkable in front of us."

"How exactly can we direct those words to the double?" I asked.

Nelida extended her arms in a sweeping gesture.

"The double is nearly infinite," she said:

"For just as the physical body is in communication with other physical bodies, the double is in communication with the universal life force."

Abruptly **Nelida** stood up. "We've done our sorcery passes and also plenty of talking," she said. "Now let's see if we can act."

"I want you to stand in front of the door leading to the left side of the house."

"I want you to remain very quiet, but acutely aware of everything around you."

I followed her down the hall to the door that had always been closed.

Clara had explained to me that it was kept closed even when all of the family members were present in the house.

Since **Clara** had made me promise that I would never under any circumstances try to open it, no matter how curious I became, I never paid much attention to the door.

As I looked at it now, I could see nothing unusual: It was just a common wooden door much like all the others in the house.

Nelida carefully opened it.

There was a hallway, just like the right-side hallway that led to the other side of the house.

"I want you to repeat one word," **Nelida** said, standing close behind me:

"The word is 'intent.' I want you to say 'intent' three or four times or even more, but bring it out from the depths of you."

"From the depths of me?"

"Allow the word to burst out from your midsection loud and clear."

"In fact, you should shout the word 'intent' with all your strength." I hesitated.

I hated to shout and I disliked it when people raised their voices at me. As a child, I learned it was impolite to shout and I dreaded to hear my parents arguing in loud voices.

"Don't be bashful," **Nelida** said. "Shout as loud and as many times as it's needed."

"How will I know when to stop?"

"You stop when something happens, or when I tell you to stop because nothing has happened. Do it! Now!"

I said the word 'intent'. My voice sounded hesitant, feeble, unsure. Even to my ear, it lacked conviction.

But, I kept on repeating it; each time with more vigor.

My voice became not deep but shrill and loud, until I shocked myself into a near faint with a hair-raising scream that wasn't my own; and yet I had heard it before.

It was the same shrill noise I had heard the day **Clara** and **Manfred** had dashed into the house; leaving me under the tree.

I began to shiver, and became so dizzy that I slumped down on the spot and leaned against the door frame.

"Don't move!" **Nelida** ordered; but it was too late: I was already limp on the floor.

"Too bad you moved when you should have stayed put," **Nelida** said sternly, but added a smile when she saw I was about to pass out.

She squatted next to me, and rubbed my hands and neck to revive me.

"What did you make me shout for?" I muttered, straightening up against the wall.

"We were trying to catch the attention of your double," **Nelida** said:

"Seemingly, there are two levels to the universal awareness: the level of the visible, of order, and of everything that can be thought or named; and the unmanifested level of energy that creates and sustains all things."

"Because we rely on language and reason," **Nelida** continued, "it is the level of the visible that we regard as reality."

"It appears to have an order, and is stable and predictable."

"Yet in actuality, it is elusive, temporary and ever changing. What we judge as permanent reality is only the surface appearance of an unfathomable force."

I felt so drowsy, I could barely follow her words. I yawned several times to take in more air.

Nelida laughed when I opened my eyes wide in an exaggerated manner to give her the impression I was paying full attention.

"What you and I want to do with all this shouting," she went on, "is to catch the attention, not of the visible reality, but rather the attention of the unseen; the force that is the source of your existence; a force that we hope will carry you across the chasm."

I wanted to listen to what she was saying, but a strange thought kept distracting me.

Just before I had slumped to the floor, I had caught a glimpse of a rare sight.

I had noticed that the air in the hall behind that door was bubbling, just like it had in the darkness of my room the first night I had slept in the house.

As **Nelida** continued speaking, I turned to look into the hallway again, but she moved in front of me and blocked my view.

She bent over and picked up a leaf that, while I was shouting, must have fallen out of the protective bundle **Clara** had tied around my midsection.

"Perhaps this leaf will help clarify things," she said, holding it up for me to see.

She talked fast, as if she knew my attention was waning and she wanted to get as much in as she could before my mind wandered off again.

"Its texture is dry and brittle: Its shape is flat and round: Its color is brown with a touch of crimson."

"We can recognize it as a leaf because of our senses; our instruments of perception, and our thought that gives things names."

"Without them, the leaf is abstract, pure, undifferentiated energy."

"The same unreal, ethereal energy that flows through this leaf flows through and sustains everything."

"We, like everything else, are real on the one hand, and only appearances on the other."

She carefully put the leaf back on the floor as if it were so fragile that

it would shatter at the slightest touch.

Nelida paused for a moment as if to wait for my mind to assimilate what she had said, but my attention was again drawn through the open door to the hallway where I saw filaments of light streaming through a large window at the end of the hall.

I caught a fleeting glimpse of men and women; that is, three or four people for an instant had stuck their heads out of doors opening onto the hallway.

They all seemed to have been awakened at once by my shouts, and had poked their heads out of their bedrooms to see what all the commotion was about.

"You're certainly undisciplined," **Nelida** barked at me. "Your attention span is much too short."

I tried to tell **Nelida** what I had seen, but she subdued me with one look.

I felt a chill going up my spine into my neck and I ended up shivering involuntarily.

It was then, as I sat there confused and defenseless, that the strangest thought thus far occurred to me:

Nelida seemed familiar to me because I had seen her in a dream.

In fact, I had seen her not in one dream, but in a series of recurring dreams, and the people in the hall..

"Don't let your mind go beyond this point!" **Nelida** shouted at me:

"Don't you dare: Do you hear me? Don't you dare to wander away!"

"I want your undivided attention here with me."

She pulled me to my feet and told me to gather my wits.

I did my best to gather them because I was definitely intimidated by her.

I had always taken pride in believing that no one could dominate me, yet one look from this woman could stop my thoughts and fill me with awe and dread at the same time.

Nelida gave me a firm knock on the top of my head with a knuckle.

It sobered me up as easily as her shouts had unsettled me.

"I've been talking my head off because **Clara** assured me that talking is the best way to relax you and pique your interest," she said. "I want you ready to go through this door at any cost."

I told her that I had the certainty that I had seen her in my dreams. And, that was not all: I had the feeling that the people that had poked their heads into the hall were also known to me.

When I mentioned the people, **Nelida** stepped back and scrutinized me as if looking for markings on my body.

She was silent for a moment; perhaps considering whether or not to divulge something.

"We are a group of sorcerers, as the **nagual** and **Clara** have already told you.

"We are a lineage, but not a family lineage.

"In this house there are two branches of that lineage. Each has eight members.

The members of **Clara's** branch are the **Graus**, and the members of my branch are the **Abelars**.

Our origin is lost in time. We count ourselves by generations.

I am a member of the generation in power, and that means I can teach

what my group knows to someone who is like me; in this case, you. You are an **Abelar**."

She stood behind me and turned me in the direction of the hallway.

"Now, no more talking. Face the hallway and shout again the word 'intent.' I think you are ready to meet all of us in person."

I shouted "intent" three times.

This time my voice **didn't** screech, but resonated loudly beyond the walls of the house.

On the third shout, the air in the hall began to fizzle. Billions of tiny bubbles sparkled and glowed as if they had all lit up at the same instant.

I heard a soft hum that reminded me of the sound of a muffled generator.

Its mesmeric purr drew me inside past the threshold where **Nelida** and I had been standing.

My ears were plugged and I had to swallow repeatedly to unplug them.

Then the humming stopped and I found myself in the middle of a hallway that was the exact mirror image of the hallway in the right side of the house where my room was.

Only this hallway was full of people. They all had come out of their rooms, and were staring at me as if I had dropped in from another planet; materializing right in front of their very eyes.

Among them, at the far end of the hallway, I saw **Clara**.

She had a beaming smile and opened her arms inviting me to come and embrace her.

Then I saw **Manfred**, pawing the floor. He was as happy to see me as **Clara** was.

I ran toward them, but instead of feeling my steps on the wooden floor, I felt that I had been catapulted in the air.

To my agony, I flew past **Clara** and **Manfred** and all the other people in the hallway. I had no control over my movements.

All I could do was shout **Clara's** and **Manfred's** names in anguish as I flew past them beyond the hall, beyond the house, beyond the trees and the hills into a blinding glare, and finally into an absolutely black stillness.

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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I was dreaming that I was digging the ground in the garden when a sharp pain in my neck awoke me.

Without opening my eyes, I groped for the pillows in order to ease my neck into their soft comfortable folds.

But my hands searched in vain.

I **couldn't** find the pillows: I **couldn't** even feel the mattress.

I began swaying as if I had eaten or drunk too much the night before, and was feeling the unsettling effects of indigestion.

Gradually I opened my eyes.

Instead of seeing the ceiling or walls, I saw branches and green leaves.

When I tried to rise up, everything around me began moving.

I realized that I was not in my bed. I was suspended in midair in some sort of leather harness and it was I who was swaying, not the world around me.

I knew beyond a doubt that this was not a dream.

As my senses tried to make order out of chaos, I saw that I was hoisted with pulleys into the highest branch of a tree.

The sensation of unexpectedly waking up restrained, coupled with the realization that there was nothing beneath me, created in one instant a physical terror of heights. I had never been up in a tree in my life.

I began to scream for help. No one came to my rescue so I continued screaming until I lost my voice.

Exhausted, I hung there like a limp carcass. Being physically terrified had made me lose control of my excretory functions. I was a mess.

But screaming had drained me of my fears. I looked around and slowly began to assess my situation.

I noticed that my arms and hands were free, and when I turned my head downward, I saw what was suspending me.

Thick brown leather belts were buckled around my waist, chest and legs.

Around the trunk of the tree was another belt, which I could reach if I stretched my arms. That belt had the end of a rope and a pulley attached to it.

I saw then that all I had to do to free myself was to release the rope and let myself down.

It took an excruciating effort to reach the rope and then lower myself because my arms and hands were trembling.

But once I was lying on the ground, I was able to painstakingly unbuckle the straps from around my body and slip out of the harness.

I ran into the house calling for Clara.

I had a vague recollection that I wouldn't be able to find her, but it was more of a feeling than a conscious certainty.

Automatically, I began searching for her but Clara was nowhere to be found and neither was Manfred.

I became aware then that somehow everything had changed, but I didn't know what or when or even why things were different from the way they used to be. All I knew was that something had been irreparably broken.

I lapsed into a long inner monologue.

I said to myself how I wished that Clara hadn't gone off on one of her mysterious trips precisely when I needed her most.

Then I reasoned that there might be other explanations for her absence. She might be deliberately avoiding me or visiting with her relatives in the left side of the house.

Then I remembered meeting Nelida and I rushed to the door of the left side hallway and tried to open it, ignoring Clara's warning never to tamper with that door.

I found it was locked. I called out to her through the door a few times, then kicked it in anger and went to my bedroom.

To my dismay, that door was locked too.

Frantically I tried opening the doors to the other bedrooms in the hallway. All of them were locked except one which was a sort of storage

room or den.

I had never entered it: I had obeyed Clara's specific instructions to keep out of it.

But that door had always remained ajar, and every time I had passed by, I had peeked inside.

This time I went in, calling out for Clara and Nelida to show themselves.

The room was dark but filled to capacity with the most bizarre collection of objects I had ever seen.

In fact, it was so crammed with grotesque sculptures, boxes and trunks that there was hardly any room to move around.

Some light came in from a beautiful stained-glass bay window along the back wall. It was a mellow glow that cast eerie shadows on all the objects in the room.

It made me think that this was the way storage rooms of elegant but no longer in-service ocean liners that have cruised the world over must look like.

The floor underneath me suddenly began to sway and creak and the objects around me also seemed to shift.

I let out an involuntary shriek and rushed out of the room.

My heart was pounding so fast and loud that it took several minutes and quite a few deep breaths to quiet it.

In the hallway, I noticed that the large walk-in closet opposite to that storage room was open and all my clothes were there, neatly placed on hangers or folded on shelves.

Pinned to the sleeve of the jacket that Clara had given me the first day I came to the house was a note addressed to me.

It read, 'Taisha, the fact that you are reading this note tells me that you have let yourself down from the tree. Please follow my instructions to the letter. Do not go back to your old room, for it is locked. From now on, you will sleep in your harness, or in the tree house. We have all gone on an extended trip. The whole house is in your care. Do your best!'

It was signed 'Nelida.'

Stunned, I stared at the note for a long time, reading it again and again.

What did Nelida mean that the house was in my care? What was I supposed to do there all alone? The thought of sleeping in that horrible harness, hung like a side of beef, gave me the eeriest feeling of all.

I wanted tears to flood my eyes. I wanted to feel sorry for myself because they had left me alone and angry with them for leaving without warning me first, but I couldn't do any of these.

I stomped around trying to work up momentum for a tantrum. Again, I failed miserably.

It was as if something inside me had been turned off making me indifferent and incapable of expressing my familiar emotions.

But I did feel abandoned. My body began to shiver as it always had just before I burst out weeping.

However, what gushed out next was not a deluge of tears, but a stream of memories and dreamlike visions.

I was hanging in that harness, looking down. Below, people were standing at the foot of the tree laughing and clapping.

They were shouting up at me trying to get my attention.

Then all of them made a sound in unison like a lion's roar, and left. I knew that had been a dream.

But, I knew meeting Nelida had definitely not been a dream. I had her note in my hand to prove it.

What I wasn't certain of was why and how long I had been hanging from the tree.

Judging from the state of my clothes and how famished I was, I might have been there for days. But how did I get up there?

I grabbed some of my clothes from the closet and went to the outhouse to wash and change.

When I was clean again, it dawned on me that I hadn't looked in the kitchen.

I had a persistent hope that maybe Clara was there eating and hadn't heard me calling.

I pushed the door open, but the kitchen was deserted.

I poked around for food. I found a pot of my favorite stew on the stove and wanted desperately to believe that Clara had left it for me.

I tasted it and gasped with a tearless sob.

The vegetables were finely sliced, not diced, and there was hardly any meat.

I knew that Clara hadn't made it and that she was gone.

At first I didn't want to eat the stew, but I was terribly hungry.

I took my bowl from the shelf, and filled it to the brim.

It was only after I had eaten and was assessing my present situation that it occurred to me there was one other place I had forgotten to look.

I hurried to the cave with the vague hope of finding Clara or the nagual there.

But I found no one; not even Manfred.

The solitude of the cave and the hills gave me such a feeling of sadness that I would have given anything in the world to be able to weep.

I crawled inside the cave feeling the despair of a mute that only yesterday knew how to talk.

I wanted to die there on the spot, but instead I fell asleep.

When I woke up, I returned to the house.

Now that everyone was gone, I thought, I may as well leave too.

I walked to the place where my car was parked.

Clara had driven it constantly and serviced it in a garage in the city.

I started it to charge the battery, and to my relief, it worked perfectly.

After stuffing some of my things into an overnight bag, I got as far as the back door when a strong pang of guilt stopped me.

I reread Nelida's note.

In it she had asked me to take care of the house. I couldn't just abandon it.

She had said to do my best. I felt that they had entrusted me with a particular task, and that I had to stay even if it was only to find out what that task was.

I put my things back in the closet, and lay down on the couch to take stock of myself.

All the screaming I had done had definitely irritated my vocal cords. My throat was terribly sore; but other than that, I seemed to be in good physical condition.

Shock, fear and self-pity had passed; and all that was left was the

certainty that something monumental had happened to me in that left hallway.

But try as I could, I couldn't remember what happened after I had stepped over the threshold.

Aside from these fundamental concerns, I also had one serious immediate problem: I wasn't certain how to start the wood-burning stove.

Clara had demonstrated over and over how to do it, but I just couldn't get the knack of it; perhaps because I never expected that I would have to start it myself.

One solution that occurred to me was to keep the fire burning by feeding it all night. I rushed to the kitchen to place more wood on the fire before it went out.

I also boiled more water and washed my bowl with some of it.

The rest of the water I poured into the limestone filter, which looked like a thick, inverted cone.

The huge receptacle sat on a sturdy wrought-iron stand and, drop by drop, filtered the boiled water.

From the receptacle where the water collected under the filter, I poured a couple of ladles into my mug.

I drank my fill of the cool, delicious water, then decided to go back to the house.

Perhaps Clara or Nelida had left me other notes telling me more specifically what I had to do.

I looked for keys to the bedroom doors.

In a hall cabinet, I found a set that were marked with different names.

I picked one out that had Nelida's name on it. I was surprised to find that that key fit my bedroom.

Then I picked out Clara's key, and tried it in different doors until I found the lock that it fit.

I turned the key and the door opened, but when it came to going inside her room and snooping around, I couldn't do it.

I felt that even if she was gone, she was still entitled to her privacy.

I closed the door again, locked it and put the keys back where I had found them.

I returned to the living room and sat on the floor, leaning my back against the sofa the way Nelida had suggested I do when I was tense.

It definitely helped to calm my nerves. I thought of getting in my car again and leaving.

But I really had no desire to leave. I decided to accept the challenge and house-sit for as long as they were gone; even if it was forever.

Since I had nothing else in particular to do, it occurred to me that I could try reading.

I had recapitulated my early negative experiences with books, and I thought I would test myself to see if my attitude toward them had changed.

I went to browse through the bookshelves. I found that most of the books were in German, some were in English and a few were in Spanish.

I made a quick survey and saw that the majority of the German books were on botany; there were also some on zoology, geology, geography and oceanography.

On a different shelf, hidden from view, was a collection of astronomy

books in English.

The Spanish books, on a separate bookshelf, were literature, novels and poetry.

I decided that I would first read the books on astronomy, since the subject had always fascinated me.

I picked out a thin book with plenty of pictures and began to leaf through it, but soon it put me to sleep.

When I woke up, it was pitch black in the house and I had to grope my way in total darkness to the back door.

On my way to the shed where the generator was housed, I noticed light coming from the kitchen.

I realized that someone must have already turned the generator on. Elated that perhaps **Clara** had come back, I rushed toward the kitchen.

As I approached, I heard soft singing in Spanish.

It **wasn't Clara**. It was a male voice, but not the **nagual's**.

I continued with great trepidation. Before I reached the door, a man poked his head out and, upon seeing me, let out a loud scream.

I screamed at the same time.

Apparently I had frightened him as much as he had scared me. He came out the door, and for a moment, we just stood there staring at each other.

He was slim but not skinny; wiry yet muscular. He was my height or perhaps an inch taller than I, about five eight. He was wearing blue mechanic's coveralls, like those worn by gas station attendants. He had a light pinkish complexion. His hair was gray. He had a pointed nose and chin, prominent cheek bones and a small mouth.

His eyes were like those of a bird, dark and round yet shining and animated. I could hardly see the whites of his eyes.

As I stared at him, I had the impression that I **wasn't** looking at an old man, but at a boy that had wrinkled due to an exotic disease.

There was something about him that was at once old and young; winning yet unsettling.

I managed to ask him in my best high school Spanish to please tell me who he was and to explain his presence in this house.

He stared at me curiously. "I speak English," he said, with hardly an accent, "I **ve** lived for years in **Arizona** with **Clara's** relatives.

My name is **Emilito**. I **m** the caretaker. And you must be the tree dweller."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You are **Taisha**, **aren't** you?" he said, taking a few steps toward me. He moved with ease and agility.

"Yes, I am. But what was that you said about me being a tree dweller?"

"**Nelida** told me that you live in the big tree by the front door of the main house. Is that true?"

I nodded automatically, and it was only then that I became aware of something so obvious that only a thick-headed ape could have missed.

The tree was on the forbidden front part of the house, the east; the part of the grounds that I could only see from my observation post in the hills.

That revelation sent a surge of excitement through me because I

realized, too, that I was now free to explore terrain that had always been denied me.

My delight was cut short when **Emilito** shook his head as if he felt sorry for me. "What did you do, you poor girl?" he asked, patting my shoulder gently.

"I **didn't** do anything," I said, taking a step back.

The clear implication was that I had done something wrong for which I had been strung up in the tree as a form of punishment.

"Now, now, I **didn't** mean to pry," he said, smiling:

"You don't have to fight with me. I **m** nobody important. I **m** merely the caretaker; a hired hand. I **m** not one of them."

"I don't care who you are," I snapped. "I **m** telling you, I **didn't** do anything."

"Well, if you don't want to talk about it, it's all right with me," he said, turning his back to reenter the kitchen.

"There's nothing to talk about," I yelled, wanting to get, in the last word.

I had no problem in yelling at him, a thing I **wouldn't** have dared to do if he had been young and handsome.

I surprised myself again by shouting, "Don't give me a hard time. I **m** the boss. **Nelida** asked me to take care of this house. She said so in her note."

He jumped as if struck by lightning. "You are a weird one," he muttered.

Then he cleared his throat and shouted at me, "Don't you dare to come any closer. I might be old, but I **m** plenty tough. To work here **doesn't** include risking my neck or being insulted by idiots. I **ll** quit."

I **didn't** know what had come over me.

"Wait a minute," I said apologetically. "I **didn't** mean to raise my voice, but I **m** extremely nervous. **Clara** and **Nelida** left me here without any warning or explanation."

"Well, I **didn't** mean to shout either," he said, in the same apologetic tone I had used. "I was only trying to figure why they strung you up before they left.

"That's the reason I asked if you had done something wrong. I **didn't** mean to pry."

"But I assure you, sir, I **didn't** do anything, believe me."

"Why are you a tree dweller, then? These people are very serious. They **wouldn't** do this to you just for the hell of it.

"Besides, it's obvious that you are one of them. If **Nelida** leaves you notes saying to take care of the house, you have to be buddy-buddy with her. She **doesn't** give the time of the day to anyone."

"The truth is," I said, "that I don't know why they left me in the tree.

"I was with **Nelida** in the left side of the house, and then the next thing I knew, I woke up with my neck bent all out of shape and hanging from that tree. I was terrified."

Remembering my anguish upon finding myself alone, with everyone gone, I **couldn't** help becoming agitated again.

I began to shake and sweat right in front of this strange man.

"You were in the left side of the house?" His eyes widened, and the surprise on his face seemed genuine.

"For an instant I was there, but then everything went black," I said.

"And what did you see?"

"I saw people in the hallway. Lots of them."

"How many, would you say?"

"The hallway was full of people. Maybe twenty or thirty."

"That many, huh? How strange?"

"Why is that strange, sir?"

"Because there **weren't** that many people in the whole house. There were only ten people here at that time. I know, because I'm the caretaker."

"What does this all mean?"

"I'll be damned if I know! But to me, it seems that there is something very wrong with you."

My stomach knotted as a familiar cloud of doom settled over me.

It was the exact sensation I had had as a child in the doctor's office when they found out I had mononucleosis.

I had no idea what that was, but I knew I was done for; and from the grim looks on everyone's face, they seemed to know it too.

When they were going to give me a shot of penicillin, I screamed so hard that I fainted.

"Now, now," the caretaker said gently. "There's no use in being so upset."

"I **didn't** mean to hurt your feelings."

"Let me tell you what I know about that harness. Maybe it will make things clear for you."

"They use it when the person they are treating is... well... a bit off his or her rocker; if you know what I mean."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Call me **Emilito**," he said, smiling. "But, please, don't call me 'sir.' Or you can refer to me as the caretaker, just as everyone refers to John **Michael Abelar** as the **nagual**."

"Now, let's go into the kitchen, and sit at the table where we can talk more comfortably."

I followed him into the kitchen and sat down.

He poured warm water he had heated on the stove into my mug and brought it to me.

"Now, about the harness," he began, sitting down on the bench opposite me:

"It's supposed to cure mental maladies, and they usually put people in it after they've gone off the deep end."

"But I'm not crazy," I protested. "If you or anyone else is going to insinuate that I am, I'm leaving."

"But you must be crazy," he reasoned.

"That does it. I'm going back to the house." I stood up to leave.

The caretaker stopped me. "Wait, **Taisha**. I **didn't** mean to say that you're crazy."

"There may be another explanation," he said, in a conciliatory tone.

"These people mean very well."

"They probably thought that you should reinforce your mental power while they are away, not cure you from a mental disease."

"That's why they put you in the harness. It's my fault for jumping to the wrong conclusion. Please accept my apologies."

I was more than willing to let bygones be bygones, and sat down at

the table again.

Besides, I needed to be on good terms with the caretaker because he obviously knew how to light the stove.

Also, I **didn't** have the energy to continue feeling offended.

Besides, at this point, I felt he was right. I was crazy. I just **didn't** want the caretaker to know it.

"Do you live nearby, **Emilito**?" I asked, trying to sound at ease.

"No. I live here in the house. My room is across the hall from your closet."

"You mean you live in that storage room full of sculptures and things?" I gasped. "And how do you know where my closet is?"

"**Clara** told me," he replied with a grin.

"But if you live here, how come I've never seen you around?"

"**Ah**, that's because you and I obviously keep different hours. To tell you the truth, I've never seen you either."

"How is that possible, **Emilito**? I've been here for over a year."

"And I've been here for forty years, on and off."

We both laughed out loud at the absurdity of what we were saying.

What I found unsettling was that at a very deep level I knew that it was this person's presence I had so often sensed in the house.

"I know, **Emilito**, that you have been watching me," I said bluntly:

"Don't deny it, and don't ask me how I know it."

"What's more, I also know that you knew who I was when you saw me outside the kitchen door. **Isn't** that so?"

Emilito sighed and nodded. "You're right, **Taisha**. I did recognize you."

"But you still gave me a genuine fright."

"But how did you recognize me?"

"I've been watching you from my room."

"But don't get angry. I never thought that you would feel me watching you. My humble apologies if I made you feel uncomfortable."

I wanted to ask him why he had been watching me, I hoped that he would say that he found me beautiful or at least interesting, but he cut our conversation short and said that since it was dark, he felt obliged to help me hoist myself up into the tree.

"Let me make a suggestion," he said. "Sleep in the tree house instead of the harness. It's a thrilling experience."

"I, too, once was an occupant of that tree house for an extended stay, although it was quite a long time ago."

Before we left, **Emilito** served me a bowl of delicious soup and a stack of flour **tortillas**.

We ate in complete silence.

I had tried to talk to him, but he said that conversing while eating was bad for the digestion.

I told him that **Clara** and I always chatted endlessly during our meals.

"Her body and mine **aren't** even remotely alike," he muttered.

"She's made of iron, so she can do anything she wants to her body."

"I, on the other hand, can't take any chances with my puny little body. And neither can you."

I liked him for including me among the little bodies, although I had hoped what he meant was that I was frail rather than puny.

After dinner, he walked me very solicitously through the main house

to the front door.

I had never been in that section of the house, and I deliberately slowed my pace, trying to take in as much of it as I could.

I saw an enormous dining room with a long banquet table and a china cabinet full of crystal goblets, champagne glasses and dishes.

Next to the dining room was a study. As I passed, I got a glimpse of a massive mahogany desk and bookcases filled with books lining one wall.

Another room had electric lights on but I **couldn't** see inside because its door was only slightly ajar. I heard muffled voices coming from inside.

"Who's in there, **Emilito**?" I asked excitedly.

"Nobody," he said. "That whispering you heard is the wind. It plays strange tricks on the ears as it blows through the shutters."

I gave him a who-are-you-kidding stare, and he gallantly opened the door for me to look inside.

He was right: The room was empty. It was just another living room, similar to the one on the right side of the house.

However, when I looked closer I noticed something odd in the shadows cast on the floor.

A shudder went through me, for I knew the shadows were wrong. I could have sworn that they were agitated, shimmering, dancing, but there was no wind or movement in the room.

In a whisper, I told **Emilito** what I noticed.

He laughed and patted me on the back. "You sound exactly like **Clara**," he said. "But that's good.

"I'd be worried if you sounded like **Nelida**. Do you know that she has power in her pussy?"

The way he said that, his tone of voice and the curious birdlike wonder in his eyes struck me as so funny that I began to laugh, nearly to the point of tears.

My laughter vanished as suddenly as it had begun, as if a switch inside me had been turned off.

That worried me; and it worried **Emilito** too, for he looked at me warily as if questioning my mental stability.

He unlatched the main door and led me out front where the tree was.

He helped me put on the harness and showed me how to use the pulleys to hoist myself up in a sitting position.

He gave me a small flashlight and I pulled myself up.

From the top branches, I could vaguely see a wooden tree house.

It was close to the place where I had first awakened in the harness, but I **hadn't** seen it then because of my extreme fright, and because of all the foliage that surrounded it.

From the ground, the caretaker beamed his flashlight directly onto the structure and yelled up after me, "There's a maritime flashlight inside, **Taisha**, but don't use it too long. And in the morning, before you come down, be sure to disconnect its batteries."

He held his flashlight in place until I crawled onto a small landing in front of the tree house and finished unhooking the harness.

"Good night. I'm leaving now," he called up. "Pleasant dreams."

I thought I heard him chuckling as he moved his beam of light away and headed for the main house.

I entered the tree house using my own weak flashlight and I searched for what he called the maritime flashlight.

It was a huge light that was fixed to a shelf; on the floor there was a large square battery in a casing nailed to the boards. I connected it to the light and turned it on.

The tree house was one tiny room with a small raised platform that served as both a bed and a low table. It had a sleeping bag rolled up on top of it.

The structure had windows all around, with hinged shutters that could be propped open by thick sticks that lay on the floor.

In the corner of the room was a chamber pot that fit inside a basket that had a lid attached to one side.

After this cursory examination of the room, I disconnected the big flashlight and crawled into the sleeping bag.

It was absolutely dark.

I could hear the crickets and the hum of the stream in the distance.

Nearby, the wind rustled the leaves and gently rocked the whole house.

As I listened to the sounds, unknown fears began to enter my awareness and I fell prey to physical sensations I had never felt before.

Total darkness distorted and masked the sounds and movements so thoroughly that I felt them as if they were coming from inside my body.

Every time the house shook, the soles of my feet tingled.

Whenever the house creaked, the inner part of my knees twitched.

The back of my neck popped whenever a branch snapped.

Then fear entered my body as a tremor in my toes.

The vibration rose to my feet and then to my legs, until my entire lower body shook out of control.

I became drowsy and disoriented. I **didn't** know where the door or the flashlight were.

I began to feel the house tilting. It was barely perceptible at first, but it became more noticeable until it seemed that the floor was inclined at a forty-five degree angle.

I let out a scream as I felt the platform tilt even more.

The thought of having to hoist myself down petrified me. I was certain I would die by falling from the tree.

On the other hand, the sensation of being tilted was so dramatic that I was sure I would slide off the platform and out the door.

At one point the incline was so acute that I felt as if I were actually standing up instead of lying down.

I screamed at every sudden movement, holding on to one of the beams on the side to keep from sliding.

The whole tree house seemed to be coming apart.

I became nauseous from the motion. The swaying and creaking grew so intense that I knew this would be my last night on earth.

Just when I had completely given up all hope of pulling through, something inconceivable came to my rescue.

A light spilled out from within me. It poured out through all the openings of my body.

The light was a heavy luminous fluid that fixed me to the platform by covering me like a shiny armor.

It constricted my larynx and subdued my screams, but it also opened my chest area so I could breathe easier.

It soothed my nervous stomach and stopped the shaking of my legs.

The light illuminated the entire room so I could see the door a few feet in front of me.

As I basked in its glow, I grew calm. All my fears and concerns vanished so that nothing mattered anymore.

I lay perfectly still and tranquil until the dawn broke.

Totally refreshed, I hoisted myself down and went to the kitchen to make breakfast.

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 18

Version 2007.03.19

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha Abelar](#)

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Chapter 18

I found a plate of [tamales](#) on the kitchen table.

I knew that [Emilito](#) had prepared them, but he [wasn't](#) anywhere in sight.

I poured some water into my mug and ate all the [tamales](#), hoping that the caretaker had already had his breakfast.

After I washed the plate, I went to work in the vegetable garden, but I tired easily.

I made myself a nest of leaves under a tree, the way [Clara](#) had showed me, and sat on it to rest.

For a while, I watched the swaying branches of the tree across from me, and the motion of those branches brought me back to my childhood.

I must have been four or five years old; I was grabbing onto a handful of willow branches.

It [wasn't](#) that I was remembering it: I was actually there.

My feet were dangling beneath me, barely touching the ground. I was swinging. I screamed with delight as my brothers took turns pushing me.

Then they jumped up to grab higher branches; bringing their knees up, they swung back and forth, putting their feet down only to push off the ground to gain momentum for another ride.

As soon as it ended, I breathed in everything I was reliving; the joy, the laughter, the sounds, the feelings I had for my brothers.

I swept the past away with a turning motion of my head.

Gradually, my eyelids grew heavy.

I slumped down on my nest of leaves, and fell into a sound sleep.

I was awakened by a sharp poke in my ribs.

The caretaker was nudging me with a walking stick.

"Wake up, it's already afternoon," he said. "[Didn't](#) you sleep well last night in the tree house?"

As I opened my eyes, a beam of light kindled the treetop with orange hues.

The caretaker's face, too, was lit up by an eerie glow that made him look ominous.

He had on the same blue coveralls he had worn the day before, and tied to his belt were three gourds.

I sat up and watched as he carefully removed the stopper of the largest gourd, lifted it to his mouth, and took a gulp. Then he smacked his lips with satisfaction.

"[Didn't](#) you sleep well last night?" he asked again, peering at me

curiously.

"Are you kidding?" I moaned. "I can truthfully say it was one of the worst nights of my life."

A torrent of whining complaints began pouring out of me.

I stopped, horrified, when I realized that I sounded just like my mother.

Whenever I would ask her how she had slept, she would give me a similar discourse of discontent.

I had hated her for that, and to think I was doing the same thing!

"Please, [Emilito](#), forgive me for my petty outburst," I said. "It's true that I [didn't](#) sleep a wink, but I [m](#) fine."

"I heard you screaming like a banshee," he ventured. "I thought you were either having nightmares or falling out of the tree."

"I thought I was falling out of the tree," I said, wanting sympathy. "I nearly died of fright."

"But then a strange thing happened and I got through the night."

"What strange thing happened?" he asked, curious, sitting down on the ground a safe distance from me.

I saw no reason not to tell him, so I described in as much detail as I could the events of the night, culminating with the light that came to save me.

[Emilito](#) listened with genuine interest, nodding at the appropriate times as if he understood the feelings I was describing.

"I [m](#) very glad to hear that you are so resourceful," he said. "I really [didn't](#) expect you to make it through the night. I thought you would faint."

What this all boils down to is that you [re](#) not as bad off as they said you were."

"Who said I was bad off?"

"[Nelida](#) and the [nagual](#). They left me specific instructions not to interfere with your healing."

"That's why I [didn't](#) come to help you last night, even though I was greatly tempted- if for no other reason than to get some peace and quiet."

He took another gulp from his gourd. "Do you want to take a swig?" he offered, holding it out for me to take.

"What's in the gourd?" I asked, wondering if it was liquor; in which case, I [wouldn't](#) have minded having a sip.

He hesitated for a moment, then he turned the gourd upside down and gave it a few strong shakes.

"It's empty," I scoffed. "You were trying to trick me."

He shook his head. "It only seems empty," he retorted:

"It's filled to the brim with the strangest drink of all."

"Now, do you or don't you want to drink from it?"

"I don't know," I said.

For an instant, I wondered if he was toying with me. Seeing him in his neatly ironed blue coveralls with gourds tied to his belt, I had the impression that he was an escapee from a mental institution.

He shrugged and stared at me; wide-eyed.

I watched as he [recorked](#) the gourd, and securely tied it to his belt with a thin leather thong.

"All right, let me have a sip," I said, driven by curiosity, and a sudden urge to find out what his game was.

He uncorked the gourd again, and handed it to me.

I shook it and peered inside. It was indeed empty.

But, when I put it to my lips, I had a most unfamiliar oral sensation.

Whatever flowed into my mouth was somehow liquid, but it **wasn't** anything like water. It was more like a dry, almost bitter pressure that suffocated me for an instant, and then filled my throat and my entire body with a cool warmth.

It occurred to me that the gourd had a fine powder that had gotten into my mouth. To find out if that was true, I shook it onto the palm of my hand, but nothing came out.

The caretaker said, noting my surprise, "There is nothing in the gourd that the eyes can see."

I took another imaginary sip, and was jolted nearly out of my shoes.

Something electric flowed through me and made my toes tingle.

The tingling went up my legs to my spine like a lightning bolt, and when it entered my head I nearly passed out.

I saw the caretaker jumping up and down laughing like a prankster.

I grabbed onto the ground to steady myself with my hands.

When I had somewhat regained my equilibrium, I confronted him angrily. "What the hell is in this gourd?" I demanded.

In a serious tone, he said, "What's in it is called 'intent.'

"**Clara** told you a little about it. It's now up to me to tell you a bit more."

"What do you mean that it's now up to you, **Emilito**?"

"I mean that I'm your new usher. **Clara** did part of that work and I must do the rest."

My first reaction was simply not to believe him.

He himself had said that he was merely a hired hand and not part of the group. It was obvious that this was a prank, and I **wasn't** going to fall for any more of his tricks.

"You're just pulling my leg, **Emilito**," I said, forcing a laugh.

"I am now," he said, and leaped over and actually gave my leg a yank.

Before I could get up, he celebrated his own joke by tugging my leg again.

He was so animated that he hopped around in a squatting position like a rabbit; laughing playfully.

"You don't like your teacher to pull your leg?" he giggled.

I **didn't** like him to touch me, period, and definitely not my leg.

But I **didn't** like **Clara** to touch me either.

I began to toy with the idea of why I **didn't** like to be touched. Despite my having recapitulated all my encounters with people, my feeling regarding physical contact was as strong as ever.

I filed this problem away for future examination because the caretaker had settled down, and was beginning to explain something that needed all my attention.

"I'm your teacher," I heard him say. "Besides **Clara**, **Nelida** and the **nagual**, you have me to guide you."

"You're a mass of misinformation, that's what you are," I snapped.

"You yourself told me that you're merely a hired caretaker. So what's this business that you're my teacher?"

"It's true. I really am your other teacher," he said seriously.

"What could you possibly have to teach me?" I shouted, disliking the prospect immensely.

"What I have to teach you is called 'stalking with the double,'" he said, blinking like a bird.

"Where are **Clara** and **Nelida**?" I demanded.

"They are gone. **Nelida** said that in her note, **didn't** she?"

"I know they are gone, but where exactly did they go?"

"**Oh**, they went to India," he said with a grin that looked like an uncomfortable desire to burst out laughing.

"Then they won't be back for months," I said, feeling vicious.

"Right. You and I are alone. Not even the dog is here.

"You have, therefore, two options open to you.

"You can either pack your junk and leave, or you can remain here with me and settle down to work.

"I don't advise you to do the former, because you don't have any place to go."

"I don't have any intention of leaving," I informed him. "**Nelida** left me in charge to take care of the house and that's what I'm going to do."

"Good, I'm glad you've decided to follow the sorcerers' intent," he said.

Since it must have been obvious to him that I **hadn't** understood, he explained that the intent of sorcerers differs from that of average people in that sorcerers have learned to focus their attention with infinitely more force and precision.

"If you are my teacher, can you give me a concrete example to illustrate what you mean?" I asked, staring at him.

He thought for a moment as he looked around.

His face lit up and he pointed at the house. "This house is a good example," he said:

"It is the result of the intent of countless sorcerers who amassed energy and pooled it over many generations.

"By now, this house is no longer just a physical structure, but a fantastic field of energy.

"The house itself could be destroyed ten times over, which it has been, but the essence of the sorcerers' intent is still intact because it is indestructible."

"What happens when the sorcerers want to leave?" I asked. "Is their power trapped here forever?"

"If the spirit tells them to leave," **Emilito** said, "they are capable of lifting off the intent from the present spot where the house stands and placing it somewhere else."

"I have to agree that the house is really spooky," I said and told him how it had resisted my detailed measurements and calculations.

"What makes this house spooky is not the disposition of the rooms or walls or patios," the caretaker remarked, "but the intent that generations of sorcerers poured into it.

"In other words, the mystery of this house is the history of the countless sorcerers whose intent went into building it.

"You see, they not only intended it, but constructed it themselves, brick by brick, stone by stone.

"Even you have already contributed your intent and your work to it."

"What could my contribution be?" I asked, sincerely taken aback by **Emilito**'s statement. "You can't possibly mean that crooked garden path I laid."

He said, laughing, "No one in his right mind could call that a contribution. No. You **ve** made a few others."

He remarked that on the mundane level of bricks and structures, he considered my contribution to be the careful electric wiring, the pipe fitting, and the cement casing for the water pump I had installed to pump water from the stream up the hill to the vegetable garden.

"On the more ethereal level of energy flow," he went on, "I can tell you in all sincerity that one of your contributions is that never before have we witnessed in this house anyone merging her intent with **Manfred**."

At that moment something popped into my mind. "Are you the one who can call him 'toad' to his face?" I asked. "**Clara** once told me that someone could do it."

The caretaker's face beamed as he nodded. "Yes, I **m** the one.

"I found **Manfred** when he was a puppy. He had been either abandoned or he had run away; perhaps from a motor home in the area.

"When I found him he was almost dead."

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

"On Highway 8, about sixty miles from **Gila Bend, Arizona**.

"I had stopped on the side of the road to go to the bushes and I actually pissed on him.

"He was lying there almost dead from dehydration. What impressed me the most was that he had not run onto the highway as he could have done so easily.

"And, of course, that he was lying right where I went to piss."

"Then what happened?" I asked.

I was so overtaken with sympathy for poor **Manfred**'s plight that I forgot all my anger at the caretaker.

"I took **Manfred** home and put him in water, but **didn't** let him drink," the caretaker said:

"And then I offered him to the sorcerers' intent."

Emilito said that it was up to the sorcerers' intent to decide not only whether **Manfred** lived or died, but whether **Manfred** would be a dog or something else.

He lived and became something more than a dog.

"The same thing happened to you," he continued. "Maybe that's why the two of you got along so well.

"The **nagual** found you spiritually dehydrated, ready to make a shambles of your life.

"Since he was in the drive-in movie with **Nelida**, it was up to them to offer you to the sorcerers' intent, which they did."

"How did they offer me to the sorcerers' intent?" I asked.

"**Didn't** they already tell you?" he asked, surprised,

I considered for a moment before replying, "I don't think so."

"The **nagual** and **Nelida** called intent out loud, no doubt right there by the concession stand, and announced that they were putting their lives on the line for you without hesitation or regrets; without holding anything back.

"And both of them knew at once that they **couldn't** take you with them at that time, but would have to follow you around wherever you went.

"So you can say now that the sorcerers' intent took you in.

"The **nagual**'s and **Nelida**'s invocation worked. Look where you are! Talking to yours truly."

He looked at me to see if I was following his argument.

I stared back with a silent plea for a more precise elucidation of the sorcerers' intent.

He shifted to a more personal level and said that if he would take all the things I had said to **Clara** about myself as an example of intending, he would conclude that my intent is one of total defeat.

He said that I had, in a sustained fashion, always intended to be a crazy, desperate loser.

"**Clara** told me everything you told her about yourself," he said, clicking his tongue:

"For instance, I would say that you jumped into that arena in Japan not to demonstrate your martial arts skills, but to prove to the world that your intent is to lose."

He pounced on me, saying that everything I did was tainted by defeat.

Therefore the most important thing I had to do now was to set up a new intent.

He explained that this new intent was called sorcerers' intent because it **isn't** just the intent of doing something new, but the intent of joining something already established: an intent that reaches out to us through thousands of years of human toil.

He said that in that sorcerers' intent there **wasn't** room for defeat, for sorcerers have only one path open to them: to succeed in whatever they do.

But in order to have such a powerful and clear view, sorcerers have to reset their total being, and that takes both understanding and power.

Understanding comes from recapitulating their lives, and power gathers from their impeccable acts.

Emilito looked at me and tapped his gourd.

He explained that in his gourd he had stored his impeccable feelings, and that he had given me that sorcerers' intent to drink in order to counteract my defeatist attitude and prepare me for his instruction.

He said something else, but I **couldn't** pay attention to him; his voice began to make me feel drowsy.

My body got heavy all of a sudden.

As I focused on his face, I saw only a whitish haze, like fog in the twilight.

I heard him tell me to lie down and cast out my ethereal net by gradually relaxing my muscles.

I knew what he wanted me to do and automatically followed his instructions.

I lay down and began moving my awareness from my feet upward to my ankles, calves, knees, thighs, abdomen and back.

Then I relaxed my arms, shoulders, neck and head.

As I moved my awareness to the various parts of my body, I felt myself become more and more drowsy and heavy.

Then the caretaker ordered me to make small counterclockwise circles with my eyes allowing them to roll back and up into my head.

I continued relaxing until my breathing became slow and rhythmic, expanding and contracting by itself.

I was concentrating on the lulling waves of my breathing, when he

whispered that I should move my awareness out of my forehead to a place as far above me as I could, and there make a small opening.

"What kind of opening?" I muttered.

"Just an opening. A hole."

"A hole into what?"

"A hole into the nothingness your net is suspended on," he replied. "If you can move your awareness outside your body, you'll realize that there is blackness all around you. Try to pierce that blackness; make a hole in it."

"I don't think I can," I said, tensing up.

"Of course you can," he assured me. "Remember, sorcerers are never defeated, they can only succeed."

He leaned toward me and in a whisper said that after I had made the opening, I should roll my body up like a scroll and allow myself to be catapulted along a line extending from the crown of my head into the blackness.

"But I'm lying down," I protested feebly. "The crown of my head is nearly against the ground. Shouldn't I be standing up?"

"The blackness is all around us," he said. "Even if we are standing on our heads, it is still there."

He changed his tone to a hard command and ordered me to place my concentration on the hole I had just made and to let my thoughts and feelings flow through that opening.

Again my muscles tightened because I hadn't made any hole.

The caretaker urged me to relax; to let go and act and feel as if I had made that hole.

"Throw out everything that's inside you," he said. "Allow your thoughts, feelings and memories to flow out."

As I relaxed and released the tension from my body, I felt a surge of energy push through me.

I was being turned inside out: Everything was being pulled out from the top of my head; rushing along a line like an inverted cascading waterfall.

At the end of that line, I sensed an opening.

"Let yourself go even deeper," he whispered in my ear. "Offer your whole being to nothingness."

I did my best to follow his suggestions.

Whatever thoughts arose in my mind instantly joined the cascade at the top of my head.

I vaguely heard the caretaker say that if I wanted to move, I only needed to give myself the directive and the line would pull me wherever I wanted to go.

Before I could give myself the command, I felt a gentle but persistent tugging on my left side.

I relaxed and allowed this sensation to continue.

At first, only my head seemed to be pulled to the left, then the rest of my body slowly rolled to the left.

I felt as if I were falling sideways, yet I sensed that my body had not moved at all.

I heard a dull sound behind my neck, and saw the opening grow larger.

I wanted to crawl inside, to squeeze through it and disappear.

I experienced a deep stirring inside me.

My awareness began moving along the line at the crown of my head and slipped through the opening.

I felt as if I were inside a gigantic cavern. Its velvety walls enveloped me.

It was dark, but my attention was caught by a luminescent dot. It flickered on and off like a beacon, appearing and disappearing whenever I focused on it.

The area in front of me became illuminated by an intense light, then gradually everything became dark again.

My breathing seemed to cease altogether and no thoughts or images disturbed the blackness.

I no longer felt my body. My last thought was that I had dissolved.

I felt a hollow popping sound.

My thoughts returned to me all at once, tumbling down on me like a mountain of debris, and with them came the awareness of the hardness of the ground, the stiffness of my body, and some insect biting my ankle.

I opened my eyes and looked around: The caretaker had taken my shoes and socks off, and was poking the soles of my feet with a stick to revive me.

I wanted to tell him what had happened, but he shook his head.

"Don't talk or move until you're solid again," he warned.

He told me to close my eyes and breathe with my abdomen.

I lay on the ground until I felt I had regained my strength, then I sat up and leaned my back against a tree trunk.

"You opened a crack in the blackness and your double slid to the left and then went through it," the caretaker said before I had asked him anything.

I admitted, "I definitely felt a force pulling me, and I saw an intense light."

"That force was your double coming out," he said, as if he knew exactly what I was referring to. "And the light was the eye of the double."

"Since you've been recapitulating for over a year, you've also been, at the same time, casting your energy lines; and now they're beginning to move by themselves."

"But because you're still involved in talking and thinking, those energy lines don't move as easily and completely as they are going to someday."

I had no idea what he meant when he said that I had been casting my energy lines as I recapitulated. I asked him to explain.

"What's there to explain?" he said. "It's a matter of energy."

"The more energy you call back through recapitulating, the easier it is for that recovered energy to nourish your double."

"Sending energy to the double is what we call casting your energy lines."

"Someone who sees energy will see it as lines coming out of the physical body."

I asked, "But what does that mean to someone like me who doesn't see?"

"The greater your energy," he explained, "the greater your capacity to perceive extraordinary things."

"I think what has happened to me is that the greater my energy

becomes, the crazier I get," I said without trying to be facetious.

"Don't run yourself down in such a casual manner," he remarked:

"Perception is the ultimate mystery because it's totally unexplainable.

"Sorcerers as human beings are perceiving creatures, but what they perceive is neither good nor evil. Everything is just perception.

"If human beings, through discipline, can perceive more than is normally permitted, more power to them. Do you see what I mean?"

He refused to say one more word about it.

Instead, he took me through the house then out the front door to my tree.

He pointed to the top branches and said that because this particular tree had living quarters in it, it was equipped with a lightning rod.

"In this area, lightning is sudden and dangerous," he said. "There are lightning storms even without a drop of rain.

"So when it does rain, or when there are too many **cumulonimbus** clouds in the sky, go to the tree house."

"When there are too many what in the sky?" I asked.

Emilito laughed and gently patted me on the back.

He said, "When the **nagual** Julian put me in a tree house, he told me the same thing; but at that time I **didn't** dare to ask him what he meant, and he **didn't** tell me either.

"I found out much later that he meant **thunderclouds**."

He laughed at my look of dismay. "Is there any danger of lightning striking the tree?" I asked.

"Well, there is, but your tree is safe," he replied. "Now get up there while it's still light."

Before I hoisted myself up, he gave me a sack of walnuts that were cracked, but not shelled.

He said that if I had to be a tree dweller, I had to eat like a squirrel; little bits at a time and nothing at night.

That was fine with me, I told him, because I never really liked to eat anyway.

"Do you like to shit?" he asked, chuckling:

"I hope not, because the worst part about living in a tree house is when you have to evacuate your bowels.

"Human excrement is difficult to deal with. My philosophy is that the less you have of it, the better off you are."

He found his statements so utterly funny that he doubled over laughing.

Still chuckling, he turned around and left me to ponder over his philosophy.

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[Taisha Abelar](#) - The Sorcerers' Crossing: Chapter 19

Version 2007.03.19

The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by [Taisha](#)

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Chapter 19

That night it rained, and there was thunder and lightning.

But there is no way on earth for me to explain what it was like to be in a tree house while bolt after bolt of lightning ripped through the sky and fell on the trees around me.

My fear was indescribable. I screamed even harder than I had the first night when I felt my platform bed tilting.

It was an animal fright, and it paralyzed me.

The only thought that occurred to me was that I am a natural coward, and when tension is too great I always pass out.

I **didn't** regain consciousness until around noon the next day.

When I let myself down, I found **Emilito** waiting for me; sitting on a low branch with his feet nearly touching the ground.

"You look like a bat from hell," he commented. "What happened to you last night?"

"I nearly died of fright," I said.

I **wasn't** going to pretend toughness or play at being in control. I felt like I must have looked; like a living rag.

I said to him that for the first time in my life, I had commiserated with soldiers in battle: I had felt the same fear they must experience when bombs explode all around them.

"I disagree," he said. "Your fear last night was even more intense.

"Whatever was shooting at you **wasn't** human. So at the level of the double, it was a gigantic fear."

"Please, **Emilito**, explain to me what you mean by that."

"Your double is about to become aware; so under conditions of stress, like last night, it becomes partially aware, but also totally frightened.

"It's not used to perceiving the world. Your body and your mind are accustomed to it, but your double **isn't**."

I was certain that if I had been prepared for the storm, I would have relaxed.

If my fear and my thoughts about the storm **hadn't** interfered, some force inside me would have come completely out of my body, and perhaps might have even stood up, moved around, or come down from the tree.

What frightened me most was the sensation of being cooped up; trapped inside my body.

"When we enter into absolute darkness where there are no distractions," the caretaker said, "the double takes over.

"It stretches its ethereal limbs, opens its luminous eye, and looks around.

"Sometimes experiencing it can be even more frightening than what you felt last night."

"The double won't be that frightening," I assured him. "I'm ready for it."

"You **aren't** ready for anything yet," he retorted. "I'm sure your screams last night could have been heard all the way to **Tucson**."

His comment annoyed me.

There was something about him I **didn't** like, but I **couldn't** pinpoint what it was.

Perhaps it was because he looked so odd. He **wasn't** manly. He seemed to be the mere shadow of a man, and yet he was deceptively strong.

But what really bothered me was that he **didn't** let me push him around, and that irritated my competitive side no end.

In a surge of anger I asked him belligerently, "How dare you run me down every time I say something you don't like!"

The moment I said that I regretted it, and apologized profusely for my aggressiveness. "I don't know why I get so irritated with you," I ended up confessing.

"Don't feel bad," he said. "It's because you sense something about me that you can't explain. As you yourself put it, I'm not manly."

"I didn't say that," I protested.

From his look, he obviously didn't believe me. "Of course you did," he insisted. "You said it to my double just a moment ago."

"My double never ever makes mistakes or misinterprets things."

My nervousness and embarrassment reached their peak.

I didn't know what to say. My face was red and my body trembled. I couldn't understand what had caused my exaggerated reaction.

The caretaker's voice broke into my thoughts.

"You are reacting like that because your double is perceiving my double," he said:

"Your physical body is frightened because its gates are opening, and new perceptions are flowing in."

"If you think you feel bad now, imagine how much worse it'll be when all your gates are open."

He spoke so convincingly that I wondered if he was right.

"Animals and infants," he continued, "have no problem perceiving the double, and they are often disturbed by it."

I mentioned that animals didn't particularly like me and that, except for Manfred, the feeling was mutual.

"Animals don't like you," he clarified, "because some of your body gates have never been completely closed and your double is struggling to come out."

"Be prepared. For now that you're deliberately intending it, they're going to fling open."

"One of these days your double is going to awake all at once, and you might find yourself across the patio without having walked over."

I had to laugh, mostly out of nervousness and at the absurdity of what he was suggesting.

"And what about children, especially infants?" he asked. "Don't they holler when you pick them up?"

They usually did, but I didn't tell the caretaker.

"Babies like me," I lied, knowing too well that the few times I had been around infants, they had begun to cry as soon as I came near them.

I had always told myself that it was because I lacked a maternal instinct.

The caretaker shook his head in disbelief.

I challenged him to explain how animals and infants could sense the double when I didn't know it existed myself.

In fact, until Clara and the nagual told me about it, I had never heard of such a thing. Nor had I ever met anyone who knew about it.

He rebuffed me, saying that what animals and infants sense has nothing to do with knowing, but with the fact that they have the equipment to sense it: their open gates.

He added that those gates are permanently receptive in animals, but that human beings close theirs as soon as they begin to talk and think and their rational side takes over.

Thus far, I had given the caretaker my full attention because Clara

had told me that no matter who might be talking to me and no matter what he might be saying, the exercise is to listen.

But the more I listened to Emilito, the more annoyed I became, until I found myself in the throes of a bona-fide rage.

"I don't believe any of this," I said. "Why do you say that you're my teacher, anyway? You still haven't made that clear."

The caretaker laughed. "I certainly didn't volunteer for the post," he said.

"Then who appointed you?"

After a thoughtful pause, he said, "It's a long chain of circumstances."

"The first link of this chain was set when the nagual found you naked with your legs up in the air." He burst out laughing, with a shrill birdlike sound.

I resented immensely his insulting sense of humor. "Get to the point, Emilito, and tell me what's going on," I yelled.

"I'm sorry, I thought you'd enjoy an account of your doings, but I see I was wrong. We, on the other hand, have enjoyed ourselves immensely with your antics."

"For years we have laughed at the tribulations and hardships John Michael Abelar inherited because he walked into the wrong room and found a naked girl, when all he wanted to do was to piss."

He doubled up laughing.

I didn't see the humor of it. My fury was so gigantic that I wanted to lash out at him with a few punches and well-placed kicks.

He looked at me and moved back, undoubtedly sensing I was about to explode.

"Don't you find it hilarious that John Michael had to go through hell with the problem he inherited, just because he wanted to piss?"

"The nagual and I have that in common: Whereas I only found a half-dead puppy, he found a completely crazed girl; and we both are responsible for them for the rest of our lives."

"Seeing what happened to us, the members of our party got so scared that they vowed never to take another leak again before they checked and rechecked the place."

He burst out laughing so hard he had to pace back and forth to keep from choking.

Seeing that I wasn't even smiling, he quieted down.

"Well... let's continue then," he said, composing himself. "Once the first link was cast; when he found you with your legs up, it was the nagual's duty to mark you, which he promptly did."

"Then he had to keep track of you. He used Clara and Nelida to help him."

"The first time he and Nelida came to visit you was the summer you had graduated from high school, and worked as a camp counselor in a mountain resort."

"Is it true that he found me through an energy channel?" I asked, trying not to sound patronizing.

"Absolutely. He had marked your double with some of his energy so he could follow your movements," he said.

"I don't remember ever seeing them," I said.

"That's because you always believed you were having recurring dreams. But the two of them actually came to see you in the flesh."

"They continued to visit you many times over the years, especially **Nelida**.

"Then, when you came to live in **Arizona** following **Nelida**'s suggestions, all of us had a chance to visit you."

"Wait a minute. This is getting too bizarre."

"How could I follow her suggestion when I don't even remember meeting her?"

"Believe me, she kept telling you to live in **Arizona**, and you did; but of course you thought you were deciding it yourself."

As the caretaker talked, my mind flashed back to that period of my life.

I remembered thinking that **Arizona** was the place where I should be.

I did the southern horizon gazing technique to decide where to get a job, and I received the strongest feeling that I should head for **Tucson**.

I even had a dream in which someone was telling me I should work in a bookstore.

I **wasn't** fond of books and it was odd that I should be working with them, but when I got to **Tucson** I went directly to a bookstore with a 'Help Wanted' sign. I took the job typing up order forms, working the cash register, and shelving books.

"Whoever came to see you," **Emilito** went on, "always pulled your double, so you have only a vague dreamlike memory of us with the exception of **Nelida**. You know her as you know the back of your hand."

So many people came into that bookstore, but I vaguely remembered an elegantly dressed, beautiful woman who came in once and talked to me in a friendly way.

It was so unusual because no one else paid any attention to me. She might very well have been **Nelida**.

At a deep level everything **Emilito** had said made sense, but to my rational mind it seemed so far-fetched that I would have to be crazy to believe him.

"What you're saying is pure horse manure," I said, more defensively than I had intended.

My harsh reaction **didn't** perturb him in the least.

He stretched his arms above his head and rotated them in circles. "If what I said is really just a pile of manure, I dare you to explain what's happening to you," he challenged with a grin:

"And don't try to be a little girl with me and get all weepy and flustered."

I heard my cracking voice yell, "You're full of shit, you God damn-" but my burning fury ended right then.

I **couldn't** believe I was shouting **profanities**.

Immediately I began to apologize, saying that I was not accustomed to shouting or using foul language. I assured him that I had been reared in a most civil way, by a well-mannered mother who **wouldn't** dream of raising her voice.

The caretaker laughed and lifted a hand to stop me. "Enough apologizing," he said:

"It's your double that's talking. It's always direct and to the point, and since you have never allowed it expression, it is full of hatred and bitterness."

He explained that at that moment my double was extremely unstable

due to being bombarded by thunder and lightning, but especially due to the events of five days ago when **Nelida** pushed me into the left hallway so I could begin the sorcerers' crossing.

"Five days ago!" I gasped. "You mean I was hanging in the tree for two days and two nights?"

"You were there exactly two days and three nights," he said with a malevolent smirk. "We took turns hoisting ourselves up there to see if you were all right. You were out but doing fine, so we left you alone."

"But why was I strapped that way?"

"You failed miserably trying to accomplish a maneuver we call the abstract flight or the sorcerers' crossing," he said. "The attempt depleted your energy reserves."

He clarified that it **wasn't** actually a failure on my part, but rather a premature attempt that had ended in complete disaster.

"What would have happened if I had succeeded?" I asked.

He assured me that success would not have put me in a more advantageous position but that it would have served as a point of departure; a sort of lure, or a beacon that would have accurately marked the way for a future time when I would have to make the final flight all by myself.

"You are now using the energy of all of us," he went on. "We are all compelled to help you."

"In fact, you're using the energy of all the sorcerers that have preceded us and once lived in this house. You're living off their magic."

"It is exactly as if you were lying on a magic carpet that takes you to incredible places; places that exist only in the magical carpet's path."

"But I still don't understand why I am here," I said. "Is it just because the **nagual** John **Michael Abelar** made a mistake and found me?"

"No, it's not quite that simple," he said, looking at me squarely:

"In fact, John **Michael isn't** really your **nagual**."

"There is a new **nagual** and a new era. You are a member of the new **nagual**'s party."

"What are you saying, **Emilito**? What new party? Who decides that?"

"Power. The spirit. That boundless force out there decides all that."

"For us, the proof that you belong to the new era is your total similarity with **Nelida**."

"She was in her youth just like you are now; to the point that she, too, used up all her reserve energy when she first attempted the abstract flight."

"And just like you, she nearly died."

"You mean I could have actually died attempting it, **Emilito**?"

"Certainly. Not because the sorcerers' flight is so dangerous, but because you are so unstable."

Someone else doing the same thing would have merely gotten a bellyache, but not you.

"You, like **Nelida**, have to exaggerate everything, so you nearly died."

"After that, the only way to restore you was by leaving you up in the tree off the ground for whatever time it took for you to come to your senses. There was nothing else we could have done."

Incredible as it sounded, **wha** had happened gradually began making sense to me.

Something had gone dreadfully wrong during my encounter with

Nelida. Something in me had been out of control.

"I let you drink from my intent gourd yesterday to find out if your double is still unstable," **Emilito** explained:

"It is! The only way to buttress your double is with activity, and like it or not, I'm the only one who can guide your double in this activity.

"This is the reason I'm your teacher; or rather, I am the teacher of your double."

"What do you think happened to me with **Nelida**?" I asked, still uncertain as to what exactly went wrong.

"You mean what **didn't** happen," he corrected me. "You were supposed to cross the chasm gently and harmoniously and wake up your double to full awareness in the left hallway."

He went into a convoluted explanation of what they had hoped would happen.

Under **Nelida**'s direction I was supposed to shift my awareness back and forth between my body and my double.

This shifting was to have erased all the natural barriers developed through life; barriers that separate the physical body from the double.

The sorcerers' plan, he said, was to allow me to get acquainted with all of them in person since my double already knew them.

But because of my craziness, I **didn't** cross gently and harmoniously.

In other words, the awareness my double acquired had nothing to do with the daily awareness of my body.

This resulted in a sensation that I was flying and **couldn't** stop. All my reserve energy drained out of me without any restraint and my double went berserk.

"I regret to tell you this, **Emilito**, but I don't understand what you're talking about," I said.

"The sorcerers' crossing consists of shifting the awareness of daily life, which the physical body possesses, to the double," he replied:

"Listen carefully. The awareness of daily life is what we want to shift from the body to the double. The awareness of daily life!"

"But what does that mean, **Emilito**?"

"It means that we are after sobriety, measure, control. We are not interested in craziness and **helter-skelter** results."

"But what does it mean in my case?" I insisted.

"You indulged in your excesses and **didn't** shift your awareness of daily life to your double."

"What did I do?"

"You imbued your double with an unknown, uncontrollable awareness."

"Regardless of what you say, **Emilito**, it's impossible for me to believe all this," I said. "In fact, it's really inconceivable."

"Naturally, it's inconceivable," he agreed. "But, if you're after something conceivable, you don't have to sit here holding on to your doubts shouting at me. Something conceivable for you is to be naked and with your legs up."

He flashed a lecherous smile that gave me the chills.

But before I could defend myself, he changed his expression to one of utter seriousness.

He said softly, "To draw out the double gently and harmoniously, and shift to it our awareness of daily life is something without parallel. To do

that is something inconceivable.

"Now let's do something thoroughly conceivable. Let's go and eat breakfast."

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The Sorcerers' Crossing: A Woman's Journey - 1992 by **Taisha Abelar**

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Chapter 20

HTML EDITOR:

"The important point is to know that we are limited because our physical body controls our awareness.

"But if we can turn it around so that our double controls our awareness, we can do practically anything we can imagine."

END **HTML** EDITOR

My third night in the tree house was like camping out.

I simply slipped into the sleeping bag, fell into a sound sleep and woke up at dawn.

Lowering myself down was easier too. I had gotten the knack of moving the ropes and pulleys without straining my back and shoulders.

"This is the last day of your transition phase," **Emilito** announced after we had eaten breakfast. "You have much work to do. But you're fairly industrious, so it won't be too difficult."

"What do you mean by a transition phase?"

"Yours is a six-day transition from the last time you talked to **Clara** till now.

"Don't forget, you have spent six nights in the tree; three during which you were unconscious; the other three nights you were aware.

"Sorcerers always count events in sets of threes."

"Do I also have to do things in sets of threes?" I asked.

"Certainly," he said, "You're **Nelida**'s heir, **aren't** you? You're the continuation of her line."

He gave me a sly grin and added. "But for now you have to do whatever I do. Remember, for however long it takes, I'm your guide."

Hearing **Emilito** say that made me swallow hard.

Whereas I had felt a twitch of pride whenever **Nelida** included me with her in any of her statements, I **didn't** like it one bit when the caretaker joined me with him.

Noticing my discomfort, he assured me that forces beyond anyone's control had placed us together to fulfill a specific task.

Therefore, we had to abide by the rule because that was the way things were done in his sorcery tradition.

"**Clara** prepared your physical side by teaching you to recapitulate, and by loosening your gates with the sorcery passes," he explained:

"My job is to help solidify your double, and then teach it 'stalking.'"

He assured me that no one else could teach me how to stalk with the double except himself.

"Can you explain what stalking with the double is?" I asked.

"Of course I can, but it would not be wise to talk about it because stalking means doing, not talking about doing.

"Besides, you already know what it means since you have done it."

"Where and when have I done it?"

"The first night you slept in the tree house," **Emilito** said, "when you were about to die of fright.

"On that occasion your reason was at a loss as to how to handle the situation, so circumstances forced you to depend on your double.

"It was your double that came to your rescue. It flowed out of the gates that your fear had thrown wide open. I call that stalking with the double.

"The **nagual** and **Nelida** are the masters of the double and they'll give you the finishing touches," he went on, "provided I do the rough work.

"So it's up to me to get you ready for them, just like it was up to **Clara** to get you ready for me.

"And unless I get you ready, they won't be able to do anything at all with you."

"Why **couldn't Clara** continue being my teacher?" I asked, taking a sip of water.

He peered at me, then he blinked like a bird. "It's the rule to have two ushers," **Emilito** said. "Every one of us had two ushers, including myself.

"But, my final teacher was a **nagual**. That is also the rule."

Emilito explained that the **nagual** Julian **Grau** was not only his teacher, but the teacher of each of the sixteen members of the household.

The **nagual** Julian, together with his own teacher- another **nagual** by the name of **Elias Abelar**- had found each of the members one by one; and helped them on their way to freedom.

"Why is it that the names **Grau** and **Abelar** keep on recurring?"

"Those are power names," **Emilio** explained:

"Every generation of sorcerers uses them, with each **nagual**'s name following an alternate-generation rule.

"That means that John **Michael Abelar** inherited the name from **Ellas Abelar**; but the new **nagual**, the one that will come after John **Michael Abelar**, will inherit the name **Grau** from Julian **Grau**. That's the rule for the **naguals**."

"Why did **Nelida** say that I am an **Abelar**?"

"Because you are just like her, and the rule says that you will inherit her last name or her first name; or, if you wish, you can inherit both names. She herself inherited both names from her predecessor."

"Who decided on that rule and why have it in the first place?" I asked.

"The rule is a code by which sorcerers live to keep from becoming arbitrary or whimsical.

"They have to adhere to the precepts set up for them because the precepts were made by the spirit itself.

"This is what I was told and I have no reason to doubt it."

Emilito said that his other teacher was a woman named **Talia**. He described her as the most exquisite woman anyone could ever imagine existing on this earth.

"I think **Nelida** is the most exquisite being," I blurted out, but stopped myself from saying more: Otherwise I would have sounded just like **Emilito**; totally overcome with absolute devotion.

Emilito leaned across the kitchen table and with the air of a conspirator about to reveal a secret said, "I agree with you.

"But wait until **Nelida** really gets hold of you: Then you'll love her as

if there's no tomorrow."

His words **didn't** surprise me for he had correctly assessed something I already felt: I loved **Nelida** as if I had known her forever; as if she were the mother I never really had.

I told him that she was to me the kindest, most beautiful and impeccable being I had ever encountered; this in spite of the fact that until a few days ago I **didn't** even know she existed.

"But of course you knew her," **Emilito** protested. "Every one of us came to see you, and **Nelida** saw you more often than anyone.

"When you came here with **Clara**, **Nelida** had taught you endless things already."

I asked uneasily, "What do you think she's taught me?"

He scratched the top of his head for a moment, then said, "She taught you, for example, to call your double for advice."

"You say that I did that during my first night in the tree house, but I don't know what I did."

"Of course you do. You have always done it.

"What about your technique of relaxing and looking at the southern horizon to ask for advice?"

The moment he said this, something cleared in my mind.

I had completely forgotten about some dreams I had had over the years in which a beautiful, mysterious lady used to talk to me and leave gifts for me on my bedside table.

Once I dreamt that she left an opal ring and another time a gold bracelet with a tiny heart charm.

Sometimes she would sit on the edge of my bed and tell me things that upon awakening I would begin to do like gazing at the southern horizon; or wearing certain colors; or even styling my hair a certain way that was more becoming.

When I felt sad or alone, she would soothe and comfort me and whisper sweet nothings in my ear.

The thing I remember most vividly was that she told me that she loved me for what I was. She used those exact words, "I love you for what you are."

Then she would rub my back where I was tense or stroke my head and tousle my hair.

I realized that it was because of her that I **didn't** want my mother to touch me. I **didn't** want anyone to touch me except that lady.

When I woke up after any of these dreams, my feeling was that nothing in the world mattered as long as that lady held me in her heart.

I always thought that those were my fantasy dreams.

Having gone to Catholic schools, I even thought perhaps she was the Blessed Virgin or one of the saints that kept on appearing to me. I had been taught that all good things come from them.

At one time, I even thought she was my fairy godmother, but never in my wildest imagination did I think that such a being really existed.

"That was not the Virgin or a saint, you idiot," **Emilito** laughed. "That was our **Nelida**."

"And she really did give you those jewels. You'll find them in the box under the platform in the tree house.

"They were given to her by her predecessor. Now she passes them on to you."

"You mean that opal ring really exists?" I gasped.

Emilito nodded. "Go see for yourself. **Nelida** told me to tell you."

Before he could finish his statement, I ran out of the kitchen to the front of the house.

With record speed, I hoisted myself up to the tree house.

There, in a silk box hidden under the platform, were exquisite jewels. I recognized the opal ring that had red fire in it and the gold charm bracelet; and there were other rings, a gold watch, and a diamond necklace.

I took out the gold bracelet with the heart and put it on, and for the first time since **Clara** left, I found my eyes filled with tears.

They were not tears of self-pity or sadness, but of sheer joy and elation because now I knew beyond a doubt that the beautiful lady had not been merely a dream.

I called out **Nelida's** name and thanked her at the top of my voice for all her favors.

I promised to change, to be different and do whatever **Emilito** told me, anything, as long as I could see and talk to her again.

When I let myself down I found **Emilito** standing by the door in the kitchen.

I showed him the bracelet and rings and asked him how it was possible for me to have seen the same jewels years ago in my dreams.

"Sorcerers are extremely mysterious beings," **Emilito** said, "because most of the time they act from the energy of their double.

"**Nelida** is a great stalker. She stalks in dreams.

"Her power is so unique that she can not only transport herself, but bring things with her.

"That's how she could visit you, and that's why her name is **Abelar**.

"**Abelar** to us means stalker, and **Grau** means dreamer. All the sorcerers in this house are either dreamers or **stalkers**."

"What's the difference, **Emilito**?"

"**Stalkers** plan and act out their plans. They connive and invent, and change things whether they are awake or in dreams.

"Dreamers move onward without any plan or thought. They jump into the reality of the world or into the reality of dreams."

"All this is incomprehensible to me, **Emilito**," I said, examining the opal ring in the light.

"I'm guiding you so it will become comprehensible," **Emilito** replied. "And to help me guide you, you must do what I tell you.

"Everything I will say, do, or recommend that you do is either the exact replica of what my two teachers told me or it is something patterned on what they said."

He leaned closer to me. "You may not believe this," he whispered, "but you and I are basically alike."

"In what way, **Emilito**?"

"We are both a bit insane," he said with a most serious face. "Pay close attention and remember this. In order for you and me to be sane, we have to work like demons at balancing, not the body or the mind, but the double."

I saw no point in arguing or agreeing with him, but as I sat down at the kitchen table again, I asked him, "How can we be sure that we're balancing the double?"

"By opening our gates," he replied. "The first gate is in the sole of the foot, at the base of the big toe."

He reached under the table and grabbed my left foot and in one incredibly swift maneuver, he removed my shoe and sock.

Then using his index finger and thumb as a vise, he pressed the round protuberance of my big toe at the sole of my foot and the toe joint at the top of my foot.

The sharp pain and the surprise made me scream. I yanked my foot away so forcefully that I bumped my knee on the underside of the table.

I stood up and yelled, "What the hell do you think you're doing!"

He ignored my angry outburst and said, "I'm pointing out the gates to you according to the rule, so pay close attention."

He stood up and moved around to my side.

"The second gate is the area that includes the calves and the inner part of the knee," he said bending over and stroking my legs.

"The third is at the sexual organs and **tailbone**."

Before I could move away, he slid his warm hands into my crotch and lifted me up a bit as he gave me a firm squeeze.

I fought him off but he grabbed my lower back.

"The fourth and the most important is in the area of the kidneys," he said.

Unconcerned with my vexation, he pushed me down on the bench again.

He moved his hands up my back. I cringed, but for **Nelida's** sake I let him.

"The fifth point is in between the shoulder blades," he said.

"The sixth is at the base of the skull, and the seventh is at the crown of the head."

To isolate the last point, his knuckles descended hard on the very top of my head.

He moved back to his side of the table and sat down. "If our first or second centers are open, we transmit a certain kind of force that people may find intolerable," he went on:

"On the other hand, if the third and fourth gates are not as closed as they are supposed to be, we transmit a certain force that people will find most appealing."

I knew for a fact that the caretaker's lower centers were wide open because I found him as obnoxious and intolerable as anyone could be.

Half jokingly and partly out of guilt for feeling the way I did toward him, I admitted that people **didn't** take to me easily. I had always thought it was a lack of social grace for which I felt I had to compensate by being extra accommodating.

"It's only natural," he said, agreeing. "You have had the gates in your feet and calves partially open all your life.

"Another consequence of those lower centers being open is that you have trouble walking."

"Wait just a moment," I said, "there's nothing wrong with the way I walk. I practice martial arts. **Clara** told me that I move smoothly and gracefully."

At that he burst out laughing. "You can practice whatever you please," he retorted, "you still drag your feet when you walk. You have an old man's shuffle."

Emilito was worse than **Clara**. At least she had the grace to laugh with me, not at me. He had absolutely no sympathy for my feelings. He picked on me the way older children pick on younger, weaker ones who have no defenses.

"You're not offended, are you?" he asked, peering at me.

"Me, offended? Of course not." I was seething.

"Good. **Clara** assured me that you have rid yourself of most of your self-pity and self-importance through your recapitulation.

"Recapitulating your life, especially your sex life, has loosened some of your gates even more.

"The cracking sound you hear at the back of your neck is the moment when your right and left sides have separated.

"This leaves a gap directly in the middle of your body where the energy rises to the neck; the place where the sound is heard. Hearing that pop means that your double is about to become aware."

"What should I do when I hear it?"

"To know what to do **isn't** that important because there's very little we can do," he said. "We can either remain seated with our eyes shut, or we can get up and move about.

"The important point is to know that we are limited because our physical body controls our awareness.

"But if we can turn it around so that our double controls our awareness, we can do practically anything we can imagine."

He stood up and came toward me. "Now, you are not going to trick me into talking about things the way you did **Clara** and **Nelida**," he said:

"You can only learn about the double by doing. I'm talking to you only because your transition phase **hasn't** ended yet."

He took me by the arm and without another word, he practically dragged me to the back of the house.

There he positioned me under a tree, with the top of my head a few inches below a low, thick branch.

He said that he was going to see if I could project out my double again, this time in full awareness, with the help of the tree.

I seriously doubted I would be able to project out anything, and I told him so.

He insisted that if I intended it, my double would push out from inside me and expand beyond the boundaries of my physical body.

"What am I supposed to do, exactly?" I asked, hoping he would show me a procedure that was part of the sorcerers' rule.

He told me to close my eyes and concentrate on my breathing.

As I relaxed, I was to intend a force to flow upward until I could touch the top branches with a feeling that came out of the gate in the crown of my head.

He said that this was going to be fairly easy for me because I was going to use my friend the tree for support.

The tree's energy, he explained, would form a matrix for my awareness to expand.

After a time of concentrating on my breath, I felt a vibrating energy rising up my back, trying to push out of the top of my head.

Then something opened inside me.

Every time I inhaled, a line elongated to the top of the tree. When I exhaled, the line was pulled down into my body again.

The feeling of reaching the top of the tree became stronger with my every breath until I truly believed that my body expanded, becoming as tall and voluminous as the tree.

At one point, a profound affection and empathy for the tree enveloped me. It was at that same moment that something surged up my back and out my head, and I found myself viewing the world from the top branches.

This sensation lasted only an instant, for it was disrupted by the caretaker's voice commanding me to come down and flow inside my body again.

I felt something like a waterfall; an effervescence flowing downward entering the top of my head and filling my body with a familiar warmth.

"You don't want to stay mixed with the tree too long," he told me when I opened my eyes.

I had an overwhelming desire to embrace the tree, but the caretaker pulled me by the arm to a large boulder some distance away, where we sat down.

He pointed out that aided by an outside force, in this case uniting my awareness with the tree, one can easily make the double expand.

However, because it's easy, we run the risk of staying merged with the tree too long in which case we might sap the tree of the vital energy it needs to maintain itself in a strong and healthy state; or we might leave some of our own energy behind by becoming emotionally attached to the tree.

"One can merge with anything," he explained:

"If whatever or whomever you merge with is strong, your energy will be enhanced as it was whenever you merged with the magician,

Manfred.

"But if it is sick or weak, stay away.

"In any case, you must do the exercise sparingly because like everything else, it is a double-edged sword. Outside energy is always different from our own, often antagonistic to it."

I listened attentively to what the caretaker said.

One thing stood out from everything else, and I asked, "Tell me, **Emilito**, why did you call **Manfred** a magician?"

"That's our way of acknowledging his uniqueness.

"**Manfred** to us can not be anything else but a magician.

"He's more than a sorcerer. He would be a sorcerer if he had lived among his kind. He lives among human beings; and human sorcerers at that. And he is par with them.

"Only a consummate magician could accomplish that feat."

I asked him if I would ever see **Manfred** again.

The caretaker crossed his index finger over his lips in such an exaggerated fashion that I kept quiet and **didn't** press him for an answer.

He picked up a twig and drew an oval shape on the soft ground.

Then he added a horizontal line that transected it midway.

Pointing to the two partitions he explained that the double is divided into a lower and an upper section which correspond roughly in the physical body to the abdomen and chest cavities.

Two different currents of energy circulate in these two sections.

In the lower one circulates the original energy we had while still in the womb.

In the upper section circulates the thought energy which enters the body at birth with the first breath.

He said that thought energy is enhanced by experience and rises upward into the head.

The original energy sinks down into the genital area.

Usually in life these two energies become separated in the double, causing weaknesses and unbalance in the physical body.

He drew another line, this time down the center of the elliptical shape, dividing it lengthwise into two, which, he stated, corresponds to the right and left sides of the body.

These two sides also have two specific patterns of energy circulation.

In the right side, energy circulates up on the frontal part of the double, and down on the back of it.

On the left side, energy circulates down on the frontal part of the double, and up on the back.

He explained that the error many people make when trying to seek the double is to apply to it the rules of the physical body; seeking to train it, for example, as if it were made of muscle and bone.

He assured me that there is no way to condition the double through physical exercises.

"The easiest way to resolve this problem is to separate the two," the caretaker explained:

"Only when they are undeniably separate can awareness flow from one to the other.

"That is what sorcerers do so that they can dispense with the nonsense of rituals, incantations and elaborate breathing techniques that are supposed to unify them."

"But what about the breaths and sorcery passes that Clara taught me? Are they nonsense too?"

"No. She taught you only things that would help you separate your body and your double. Therefore, the breaths and sorcery passes are all useful for our purpose."

He said that perhaps our greatest human fallacy is to believe that our health and well-being is in the realm of the body when, in essence, the control of our lives is in the realm of the double.

This fallacy stems from the fact that the body controls our awareness.

He added that ordinarily our awareness is placed on the energy that circulates in the right side of the double, which results in our ability to think and reason and be effective in dealing with ideas and people.

Sometimes accidentally, but more often due to training, awareness can shift to the energy that circulates in the left side of the double which results in behavior not so conducive to intellectual pursuits or dealing with people.

"When awareness is turned steadily to the left side of the double, the double is fleshed out and emerges.

Then we are capable of performing inconceivable feats.

This shouldn't be surprising because the double is our energy source. The physical body is merely the receptacle where that energy has been placed."

I asked him if there are some people who can focus their awareness on either side of the double at will.

He nodded. "Sorcerers can do that," he replied:

"The day you can do that, you ll be a sorceress yourself."

He said that some people can shift their awareness to the right or the left side of the double after they have successfully completed the abstract flight simply by manipulating the flow of their breath.

Such people can practice sorcery or martial arts as readily as they can manipulate intricate academic constructs.

He emphasized, however, that because of the mystery and power inherent on the left; our urge to turn awareness steadily to the left it is a trap infinitely more deadly than the attractions of the world of everyday life.

"The real hope for us lies in the center," he said, touching my forehead and the center of my chest, "because in the wall that divides the two sides of the double is a hidden door that opens into a third, thin, secret compartment.

"Only when this door opens can one experience true freedom."

He grabbed my arm and pulled me off the rock. "Your transition time is nearly up," he said, hurrying me back into the house. "No more time for explanations. We ll leave the transition phase behind us with one hell of a bang. Come, let's go to my room."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

I was no longer merely ill at ease, I felt threatened.

No matter how eccentric Emilito might be; and no matter how much he talked about the ethereal double, he was still a male, and the memory of his hand grasping my private parts in the kitchen was much too vivid.

I knew that it hadn't been an impersonal touch merely for the purpose of demonstration, either: I had clearly sensed his lust when he touched me.

The caretaker peered at me with cold eyes. "What the hell do you mean that you sensed my lust when I touched you?"

I could only stare back at him with my mouth gaping. He had voiced my thought verbatim.

A surge of shame went through me, accompanied by a cold shiver that spread over my entire body.

I blurted out some lame apologies. I told him that I used to fantasize that I was so beautiful that all men found me irresistible.

"To recapitulate means to burn all that," he said. "You haven't done a thorough job.

"This, no doubt, is the reason you cracked while attempting the sorcerers' crossing."

He turned around and walked away from the house.

He said, "It's not time yet to show you what I had in mind.

"No. You need to do much more work to clean up your act. Much more.

"And from now on, you ll have to be twice as careful, too; you will have to run twice as hard because you can not afford any more slip-ups."

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Chapter 21

Emilito ended my transition period right then; attacking me for having misread his thoughts.

From then on he dropped his whimsical air of a prankster and became a most demanding taskmaster.

There were no more lengthy explanations of the double or other aspects of sorcery, hence no more solace stemming from intellectual understanding.

There was only work; pragmatic and demanding.

Every day for months from morning until night, I would be steeped in activity until, exhausted, I went to sleep in the tree house.

Besides continuing to practice **kung fu** and working in the garden, I was put in charge of cooking lunch and dinner.

Emilito showed me how to light the stove; and how to prepare some simple dishes- a thing that my mother had tried to do but had failed completely.

Because I had other duties, I would usually put all the ingredients into one pot on the stove to cook, then come back later when it was time to eat.

After several weeks of making the same stew, I got a perfect blend of flavors.

Emilito said that I turned out to be, if not a fairly good cook, at least one whose food is edible. I took this as a compliment, because nothing I had made in my entire life, from **poundcake** to **meatloaf**, had been edible.

We ate our meals in total silence; a silence that he would break if he wanted to tell me something.

But, if I wanted to converse, he would tap his stomach to remind me of his delicate digestion.

Most of my time was still devoted to recapitulating.

Emilito had instructed me to go over the same events and people I had recapitulated before, except that this time I was to do it in the tree house.

Hoisting myself up to the tree house every day made me lose my initial fear of heights.

I relished being outdoors, especially in the late afternoons; the time I set aside for this particular task.

Under **Clara**'s supervision, I had recapitulated in a dark cave. The mood of that recapitulation was heavy, earthy, somber and often terrifying.

My recapitulation under **Emilito**'s guidance in the tree house was dominated by a new mood. It was light, airy, transparent.

I remembered things with an unprecedented clarity. With my added energy, or the influence of being off the ground, I was able to remember infinitely more detail.

Everything was more vivid and pronounced, and less charged with the self-pity, moroseness, fear or regret that had characterized my previous recapitulation.

Clara had asked me to write on the ground the names of each person I had encountered in my life, then erase it with my hand after I had breathed in the memories associated with that person.

Emilito, on the other hand, had me write the names of people on dry leaves and then light a match to them after I had finished breathing in

everything I had recollected about them.

He had given me a special device to incinerate the leaves.

It was a twelve-inch metal cube with neatly perforated, round, small holes on all sides. Half of one side of the box was fitted with a glass, like a tiny window. There was a sharp pin in the center of the underside of the lid. On the side with the window, there was a lever that slid in and out where one could fasten a match and strike it from the outside against a rough surface inside the box after the lid was closed.

"In order to avoid starting a blaze," **Emilito** explained, "you have to pierce the dry leaf with the pin on the lid so when you close the lid, it will be suspended in the middle of the box. Then look inside the box through its little glass window and, using the handle, strike your match and place it under the leaf and watch it burn to cinders."

As I gazed at the flames consuming each leaf, I was to draw in the energy of the fire with my eyes; always being careful not to inhale the smoke.

He instructed me to put the ashes from the leaves into a metal urn and the used matches into a paper sack.

Each of the **matchsticks** represented the husk of the person whose name had been written on the dry leaf that had been disintegrated by that particular match.

When the urn was full, I was to empty it from the top of the tree, letting the wind scatter the ashes in all directions.

I was instructed to lower the burnt **matchsticks** in a paper bag on a separate rope; and **Emilito**, handling the bag with a pair of tongs, would put it in a special basket he always used for that purpose.

He was careful never to touch the matches or the bag. My best guess was that he buried them somewhere in the hills, or perhaps tossed them in the stream to let the water disintegrate them.

Disposing of the matches, he had assured me, was the final act in the process of breaking the ties with the world.

After about three months of recapitulating in the afternoons, **Emilito** abruptly changed my work schedule.

"I'm tired of eating your boring stew," he said one morning as he hoisted up some food he had prepared for me.

I was overjoyed, not only because I might have extra time to spend in the tree house, but because I genuinely liked eating food cooked by someone else.

The first time I tasted his cooking, I had the total certainty that **Clara** had never cooked the food she had served me.

The real cook had always been **Emilito**. He made things with a special zest that always made whatever he cooked a delight to eat.

Every morning around seven, **Emilito** would be standing at the foot of the tree ready to hoist up some food he had packed in a basket.

After eating breakfast in the tree house, I usually went back to my recapitulation, which, once I had been freed from the dread of uncovering something unpleasant, was now more than ever like an exciting adventure of examination and insight.

The more of my past I breathed in, the lighter and freer I felt.

As I broke off old, past links, I began forming new ones.

In this instance, my new links were with the unique being that was guiding me.

Emilito, although stern and determined to make sure that I kept my nose to the grindstone, was in essence as light as a feather.

At first, I was surprised that both he and **Clara** had claimed that I was like them. But upon a deeper examination, I had to agree that I was as ponderous as **Clara** and as flighty, if not as insane, as **Emilito**.

Once I became accustomed to his oddity, I found no difference between **Emilito** and **Clara**, or the **nagual**, or even **Manfred**.

My feelings for them overlapped so that I began to feel affection for **Emilito** and very naturally one day I began to rejoice in calling him **Emilito**.

The first time we met, **Emilito** had said to me that his name was **Emilito**- the Spanish diminutive for **Emilio**.

It had seemed ridiculous to me to call a mature man 'little **Emilio**,' so I did it reluctantly.

But as I got to know him better, I **couldn't** conceive of addressing him in any other way.

Whenever I thought about the four of them, they merged in my mind.

But, I could never merge them with **Nelida**.

She was special to me and I held her forever apart and above everyone else even though I had seen her only once in the real world.

I felt that the day I had focused my eyes on her, the bond that already existed between us became formalized. That single encounter in the daily world awareness, no matter how fleeting, had been enough to make that bond indestructible and everlasting.

One day after we had our lunch in the kitchen, **Emilito** handed me a package.

As I held it against me, I knew it was from **Nelida**.

I tried to find a return address on it but there was none.

Attached to the package was a cartoon drawing of a woman puckering up her lips to kiss.

Inside, written in **Nelida**'s handwriting, were these words.

'Kiss the tree.'

I ripped open the package and found a pair of soft leather ankle-high shoes that laced up the front. The soles were fitted with rubber cleats.

I held them up for **Emilito** to see. I **couldn't** conceive what they were used for.

"Those are your tree-climbing shoes," **Emilito** said, nodding in recognition:

"**Nelida** knew you have an affinity for trees in spite of your fear of falling.

"The cleats are made of rubber so you won't damage the tree bark."

The arrival of the package seemed to be the signal for **Emilito** to give me detailed instructions on tree climbing.

So far, I had only used the harness to hoist myself up to the tree house; although sometimes I dozed off or slept in the harness as if I were lying strapped in a hammock.

I had never actually climbed the tree except for one very low branch from which I had hung while propping my feet on another branch.

"Now is the time to find out what you're made of," he said in a no-nonsense tone. "Your new task won't be difficult, but if you don't give it your total concentration, it could prove to be fatal.

"You need to apply all your newly stored energy to learn what I have

to show you."

He told me to wait for him by the grove of tall trees in front of the house.

Moments later, **Emilito** met me, carrying a long flat box.

He opened it and took out several safety belts and lengths of soft rock-climbing rope.

He strapped a belt to my waist and affixed another, longer belt to it by means of safety hooks used in mountaineering.

Putting a similar belt around himself, he showed me how to climb a tree by hooking the longer belt around the tree trunk and using it as a support to move up along the trunk.

He climbed with swift and precise movements.

Along the way, he looped ropes on the branches to secure his position.

The end result was a web of ropes that allowed him to move safely around the tree from one side to the other.

He came down as agilely as he had climbed up.

"Be sure all the ropes and knots are secure," he said. "You can't have any major mistakes here.

"Little mistakes are correctable. Big ones are fatal."

"My goodness, am I supposed to do what you just did?" I asked, really astonished.

It **wasn't** that I was any longer afraid of heights.

I simply **didn't** feel I had the patience to tie all the hooks and ropes in place. It had taken me quite a while just to get used to going up and down the tree in the harness.

Emilito nodded and laughed cheerfully.

"This is a real challenge," he admitted, "but once you get the hang of it, I'm sure you will agree it's worth it.

"You'll see what I mean."

He handed me a length of rope and he patiently showed me how to tie and untie knots.

He showed me how to use pieces of rubber hose with my climbing rope pulled through them in order not to bruise the tree bark when I looped a rope around a branch to set up a new rope line to climb.

He showed me how to maneuver my feet to maintain my balance; and how to avoid disturbing birds' nests in the process of climbing.

For the following three months I worked under his constant supervision, confining myself to the lower branches.

I achieved a respectable control of the equipment; enough calluses on my hands so that I no longer needed to wear gloves; and enough maneuverability and balance in my movements so that **Emilito** let me venture into the higher branches.

I meticulously practiced on them the same maneuvers I had learned on the lower branches; and one day without even trying for it, I reached the top of the tree I was climbing.

Later that day, **Emilito** presented me with what he told me was his most meaningful gift to me.

It was a set of three green jungle camouflage overalls and matching caps, obviously bought in an army surplus store in the States.

Dressed in jungle fatigues, I lived in the grove of tall trees clustered by the front of the house.

I came down only to go to the bathroom and, occasionally, to have a meal with **Emilito**.

I climbed any tree I wanted, provided it was high enough.

There were only a few trees I would not climb; the ones that were very old and would find my presence an intrusion, or the really young ones that **were**n't strong enough to tolerate my ropes and movement.

I preferred youthful, vigorous trees, for they made me happy and optimistic.

Yet, some of the older ones were desirable too, for they had so much more to tell.

The only tree that **Emilito** allowed me to sleep in overnight was the one with the tree house in it because it was fitted with a lightning rod.

I slept on my platform bed, or secured in the leather harness.

Or, at times I slept strapped in a simple way on a branch of my choosing.

Some of my favorite branches were thick and free from protuberances.

I would lie on one face down.

Resting my head on a small pillow I always brought up with me, I embraced the branch with arms and legs; maintaining a precarious but exhilarating balance.

Of course I always made certain that a rope was tied to my waist and secured to a higher branch, just in case I lost my balance while asleep.

The feeling I had developed for the trees was beyond words.

I had the certainty that I was able to absorb their moods, know their age, their insights and what they sensed.

I could communicate with a tree directly through a sensation that came out from the inside of my body.

Often, communication began with a spilling forth of pure affection almost as intense as what I felt for **Manfred**; an affection that came out of me always unexpectedly and unsolicited.

Then I could feel the tree's roots descending into the earth.

I knew whether they needed water and which roots were extending toward the underground water source.

I could tell what it felt like to live seeking light, anticipating it, intending it; and what it felt like to feel heat, cold or be ravaged by lightning and storms.

I learned what it was like never to be able to move off one's destined spot; to be silent; to sense through the bark, and the roots; and to intake light through the leaves.

I knew beyond the shadow of doubt that trees feel pain.

And I also knew that once communication is engaged, trees pour themselves out in affection.

As I was seated on a sturdy limb with my back resting on the tree trunk, my recapitulation took on an altogether different mood.

I could remember the minutest details of my life experiences without fear of any coarse emotional involvement.

I would laugh my head off at things that at one time had been deep traumas for me.

I found my obsessions no longer capable of evoking self-pity.

I saw everything from a different perspective; not as the urbanite I had always been, but as the carefree and abandoned tree dweller that I

had become.

One night, while we were still eating a rabbit stew I had made, **Emilito** surprised me by talking to me animatedly.

He asked me to remain seated after dinner because he had something to tell me.

This was so out of the ordinary that I grew excited with anticipation.

The only beings I had talked to for months had been the trees and the birds. I prepared myself for something monumental.

"You've been a tree dweller for over six months now," he began. "It's time to find out what you've done up there.

"Let's go into the house. I have something to show you."

"What do you have to show me, **Emilito**?" I asked, remembering the time he had wanted to show me something in his room and I had refused to follow him.

The name **Emilito** suited him to perfection.

He had become a most cherished being to me, just like **Manfred**.

One of the lofty insights I had received while perched in the high branches of a tree was that **Emilito** was not human at all.

Whether he had once been a human being and the recapitulation had wiped all that away, I could only speculate.

His **nonhumanness** was a barrier that impeded anyone from crossing over to him for a subjective exchange.

No average person could ever enter into what **Emilito** thought, felt or witnessed.

But if **Emilito** so desired, he could cross over to any of us and share with us our subjective states.

His **nonhumanness** was something I had sensed from the first time I encountered him at the kitchen door.

Now I was able to be at ease with him; and although I was still separated by that barrier, I could marvel at his achievement.

I asked **Emilito** again, since he **hadn't** answered me, what he was going to show me.

"What I have to show is of ultimate importance," he said:

"But how you will see it will depend on you. It will depend on whether you have acquired the silence and balance of the trees."

We hurriedly walked across the dark patio to the house.

I followed him through the hallway to the door of his room.

It made me doubly nervous to see him stand there for a long moment and take deep breaths as if to compose himself for what was to come.

"All right, let's go in," he said, gently tugging the sleeve of my shirt:

"A word of caution.

"Don't stare at anything in the room. Look at whatever you want, but scan the things lightly, using only quick glances."

He opened the door and we entered his extravagant room.

Living in the trees had made me completely forget the first time I had walked into that room the day **Clara** and **Nelida** had left.

Now I was again startled by the bizarre objects that filled it.

The first things I saw were four floor lamps; one at the center of each wall.

I **couldn't** even begin to conceive what kind of lamps they were.

The room and everything in it was illuminated by an eerie, mellow amber light.

I was familiar enough with electrical equipment to know that no standard light bulb, even if it were seen through a **lampshade** made of the most unusual tissue, could ever give off that kind of light.

I felt **Emilito** take my arm to help me step over a foot-high fence that parceled a small square area in the southwest corner of the room.

"Welcome to my cave," he said with a grin as we stepped into the partitioned area.

In that square there was a long table half hidden by a black curtain, and a row of four most unusual looking chairs.

Each chair had a high solid oval back that curved around the body; and instead of legs had a seemingly solid round base.

All four chairs were facing the wall.

"Don't stare," **Emilito** reminded me as he helped me to sit down on one of the chairs.

I noticed that they were made of some sort of plastic material. The round seat was cushioned, although I **couldn't** tell how.

It was hard as wood, but it had a springiness that gave way when I moved up and down on the seat.

The chair also swiveled as I moved sideways.

The oval back, which seemed to wrap itself around my back, was also cushioned but equally hard.

All the chairs were painted with a vivid cerulean blue.

Emilito sat in the chair next to me.

He swiveled his chair around to face the center of the room, and in an unusually strained voice, he told me to swivel around also.

When I did, I let out a **guttural** gasp.

The room I had crossed a moment ago had disappeared.

Instead, I was staring at a vast flat space, illuminated by a peach-colored glow.

The room now extended out into seemingly infinite space right before my very eyes.

The horizon in my view was jet black.

I gasped again for I had a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I felt the floor was moving out from under my feet and I was being pulled into that space.

I no longer felt the swivel chair underneath me, although I was still sitting on it.

I heard **Emilito** say, "Let's swivel back again."

However, I had no strength to make the chair turn.

He must have done it for me, for I suddenly found myself looking at the corner of the room again.

"Incredible, **wouldn't** you say?" **Emilito** asked, smiling.

I was incapable of uttering a single word or asking questions I knew had no answers.

After a minute or two, **Emilito** made my chair swivel around once more, to give me another eyeful of infinity.

I found the immensity of that space so terrifying that I closed my eyes.

I felt him turning the chair around again.

"Now get off the chair," he said.

Automatically I obeyed him and stood there shaking involuntarily, trying to get my voice back.

He bodily turned me around to make me face the room.

Gripped with fear, I stubbornly or wisely refused to open my eyes.

Emilito gave me a sound rap on the top of my head with his knuckle which made my eyes pop open.

To my relief, the room was not black endless space, but the way it had been when I walked in.

Discarding his admonitions to only look in glances, I stared at every one of those unidentifiable objects.

"Please, **Emilito**, tell me, what is all this?" I asked.

"I am merely the caretaker," **Emilio** said. "All this is under my care." He swept his hand over the room:

"But I'll be damned if I know what it is.

"In fact, none of us knows what this is. We inherited it with the house from my teacher, the **nagual** Julian, and he inherited it from his teacher, the **nagual** **Ellas**, who had also inherited it."

"This looks like some sort of backstage prop room," I said, "but this is an illusion, **isn't** it, **Emilito**?"

"This is sorcery!"

"You can perceive it now, because you've freed enough energy to expand your perception.

"Anyone can perceive it provided they have stored enough energy.

"The tragedy is that most of our energy is trapped in nonsensical concerns.

"The recapitulation is the key.

"It releases that trapped energy and **voil**. You see infinity right in front of your eyes."

I laughed when **Emilito** said '**voil**' because it was so incongruous and unexpected.

Laughing alleviated some of my tension.

All I **couldsay** was, "But is all this real, **Emilito**, or am I dreaming?"

"You are dreaming, but all this is real.

It is so real that it can kill us by disintegrating us."

I **couldn't** rationally account for what I was seeing, thus there was no way I could either believe or doubt my perception. My dilemma was insurmountable and so was my panic.

Emilito moved closer to me.

He whispered, "Sorcery is more than black cats and naked people dancing in a graveyard at midnight; putting hexes on other people."

"Sorcery is: cold, abstract, impersonal.

"That's why we call the act of perceiving it 'the sorcerers' crossing,' or 'the flight to the abstract.'"

"To withstand its awesome pull we have to be strong and determined.

"It is not for the timid or weak-hearted: This is what the **nagual** Julian used to say."

My interest was so intense that it forced me to listen with unequalled concentration to every word **Emilito** was saying.

All the while, my eyes were riveted to those objects in the room.

My conclusion was that none of them was real.

Yet, since I was obviously perceiving them, it made me wonder if I too **wasn't** real; or if I was concocting them.

It was not that they were indescribable, they were simply unrecognizable to my mind.

"Now prepare yourself for the sorcerers' flight," **Emilito** said:

"Hold on to me for dear life.

Grab my belt if you have to or climb on my back piggyback fashion, but whatever you do, do not let go."

Before I could even ask him what he intended next, he maneuvered my walking around the chair, and made me sit down facing the wall.

Then he swiveled the chair ninety degrees so that I was once again looking at the center of the room; at that terrifying infinite space.

He helped me stand up by holding my waist, and he made me take a few steps into infinity.

I found it almost impossible to walk.

My legs seemed to weigh a ton. I felt **Emilito** pushing and lifting me up.

Suddenly an immense force sucked me in and I was no longer walking but gliding in space.

Emilito was gliding alongside me.

I remembered his warning and I grabbed onto his belt; in the nick of time too, because just then another surge of energy made me accelerate at top speed.

I yelled at him to stop me.

Quickly he eased me onto his back and I held on for dear life.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but that made no difference.

I saw the same vastness before me whether my eyes were open or closed.

We were soaring in something that **wasn't** air. It was not over the earth, either.

My greatest fear was that a monumental burst of energy was going to make me lose my hold on **Emilito's** back.

I fought with all my might to hang on, and maintain my grip and my concentration.

It all ended as abruptly as it had begun.

I was jolted by another blast of energy, and I found myself drenched in perspiration standing by the blue chair.

My body trembled uncontrollably.

I was panting and gasping for air. My hair was over my face, damp and tangled.

Emilito pushed me onto the seat and swiveled me around to face the wall.

"Don't you dare to piss in your pants while sitting on this chair," he warned harshly.

I was beyond bodily functions. I was empty of everything including fear. It all had drained out of me while soaring in that infinite space.

Nodding, **Emilito** said, "You are able to perceive as I do, but you don't have any control yet in the new world you are perceiving.

"That control comes with a lifetime of discipline and storing power."

"I'll never be able to explain this to myself," I said, and swiveled on my own to face the center of the room; to take another peek at that pinkish infinity.

Now the objects I saw in the room were tiny, like chess pieces on a chess board.

I had to deliberately seek them out to notice them.

On the other hand, the coldness and awesomeness of that space filled

my soul with unmitigated terror.

I remembered what **Clara** had said about the seers that had sought infinity; how they had stared at that immensity, and how it had stared back at them with a cold and unyielding indifference.

Clara never told me that she herself had stared at it, which now I knew she had.

So, what would have been the point of her telling me then? I would only have laughed or found her fanciful.

Now it was my turn to stare at infinity with no hope of comprehending what I was looking at.

Emilito was right: It would take me a lifetime of discipline and of storing power to understand that I'm gazing at the boundless.

"Now let's look at the other side of infinity," **Emilito** said, and gently made my chair swivel to face the wall.

He ceremoniously lifted the black curtain while I stared vacantly, trying to control my chattering teeth.

Behind the curtain there was a long narrow blue table.

It had no legs, and seemed to be attached to the wall although I could not see any hinges or braces holding it up.

He ordered me, "Prop your forearms on the table, and rest your head on your fists by placing them under your chin the way **Clara** showed you.

"Put pressure under your chin.

Hold your head gently and don't become tense. Gentleness is what we need now."

I did as he instructed.

Instantly a small window opened on the black wall, about six inches away from my nose.

Emilito was sitting to my right apparently also looking through another small window.

"Look inside," he said. "What do you see?"

I was looking at the house.

I saw the front door and the dining room on the left side of the house.

I had glanced into dining room briefly as I had passed it with **Emilio** the first time I used the main entrance.

The room was well lit and filled with people.

They were laughing and conversing in Spanish.

Some of them were helping themselves to food from a sideboard set with an assortment of tempting dishes, beautifully laid out on silver platters.

I saw the **nagual**.

Then I saw **Clara**. She was radiant and happy.

Clara was playing the guitar and singing a duet with another woman who could easily have been her sister. The other woman was as large as **Clara**, but dark complected.

The other woman did not have **Clara's** fiery green eyes: The other woman's eyes were fiery, but were dark and sinister.

Then I saw **Nelida** dancing by herself to the hauntingly beautiful tune. She was somehow different from the way I remembered her, although I **couldn't** pinpoint what the difference was.

For a while I watched them, enchanted as if I had died and gone to heaven.

The scene was: so ethereal, so joyous, so untouched by daily

concerns.

But, I was suddenly jolted out of my enjoyment when I saw a second **Nelida** entering the dining room from a side door.

I **couldn't** believe my eyes, but there were two of them.

I turned to **Emilito** and confronted him with a silent question.

He said, "The one that is dancing is **Florinda**. She and **Nelida** are exactly alike, except that **Nelida** is a bit softer looking," he peered at me and winked, "but far more ruthless."

I counted the people in the room. Besides the **nagual**, there were fourteen people; nine women and five men. There were the two **Nelidas**; **Clara** and her dark sister; and five other women who were unknown to me. Three were definitely old, but like **Clara**, **Nelida**, the **nagual** and **Emilito**, they were of an indeterminate age. The other two women were only a few years older than I, perhaps in their **midtwenties**.

Four of the five men were older, and looked as fierce as the **nagual**.

But one of the men was young. He had a dark complexion. He was short and seemed very strong. His hair was black, curly. He gesticulated in an animated way as he talked, and his face was energetic, full of expression.

There was something about him that made him stand out from all the rest.

My heart leaped, and I was instantly drawn to him.

"That one is the new **nagual**," **Emilito** said.

As we looked into the room, he explained that every **nagual** imbues his sorcery with his particular temperament and experience.

The **nagual** John **Michael Abelar**, being a Yaqui Indian, had brought to his group the pathos of the **Yaquis** as a characterizing mark of all their actions.

Their sorcery, he said, was soaked in the somber mood of those Indians.

And all of the sorcerers, myself included, were bound by the rule to familiarize ourselves with the **Yaquis**; to follow their **ups** and **downs**.

"This perspective will prevail for you until the new **nagual** takes over," he said in my ear:

"Then you will have to soak yourself in his temperament and experience. That is the rule. You will have to go to college. He's lost in academic pursuits."

"When will this take place?" I whispered.

He replied softly, "Whenever all the members of my group together face that infinity in the room behind us, and we allow it to dissolve us."

A cloud of fatigue and desperation was beginning to envelop me.

The strain of trying to understand the inconceivable was too great.

"This room, of which I am the caretaker, is the accumulated intent and range of temperament of all the **naguals** that preceded John **Michael Abelar**," he said in my ear:

"There is no way on earth I can explain what this room is.

"To me, just as it is to you. It's incomprehensible."

I moved my eyes away from the dining room with all its ebullient people and looked at **Emilito**.

I finally understood that **Emilito** was as solitary as **Manfred**; a being capable of inconceivable awareness, yet burdened by the solitude that that awareness brings.

I wanted to weep, but my desire to weep was momentary because I realized that sadness is such a base emotion when in its place I could feel awe.

"The new **nagual** will take care of you," **Emilito** said, pulling my attention back into the dining room:

"He is your final teacher; the one who will take you to freedom.

"He has many names; one for each of the different facets of sorcery he is involved with.

"For the sorcery of infinity, his name is **Dilas Grau**.

Someday you will meet him and the others.

You **couldn't** do it the day you were with **Nelida** in the left hallway, nor can you do it now here with me.

"But, you will cross over soon.

"They are waiting for you."

A nameless longing took hold of me.

I wanted to slip through that viewing hole into the room to be with them.

There was warmth and affection there.

They were waiting for me.

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: Preface

Version 2007.11.03

Encounters With The **Nagual** - 2004 by **Armando Torres**

Previous-**Pg** Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-**Pg** Next-**Pg** Preface: -by **Juan Yoliliztli**

I first got to know **Armando** when we met by chance in a place of power in the mountains of central Mexico. We felt an immediate, spontaneous friendship between us, and the subject of the conversation which ensued inspired me to tell him that I had had the privilege of knowing **Carlos Castaneda**. **Armando** told me that he also knew him, and that he had written a book about his teachings.

I became very curious and asked him to tell me more about it. He seemed uninterested, saying that this was not the appropriate time. I **didn't** insist, since I was just getting to know him.

In the course of many years of friendship, he mentioned the topic a few times, but always in reference to some other subject we were discussing. Even when I had made friends with "those who walk over there", it is only now that I have access to his work.

When I read the manuscript for the first time, I became profoundly excited, since it allowed me to comprehend one of the most obscure premises in **Carlos'** teaching - what he called "The Portion of the Rule for the Three-pronged **Nagual**", a project for the renewal of the lineages of knowledge on a global scale.

He assured me that **Carlos** had ordered him to make this information known, and asked me to support him in the execution of this task. However, since the manuscript was quite short (some thirty pages), I

suggested that he supplement it with a description of some of the numerous lectures by **Castaneda** which **Armando** had attended.

Agreeing to my proposal, he selected a selection of teachings which **Carlos** had presented, either in public lectures or in private conversations. To make them easier to read, he grouped them according to content rather than putting them in chronological order. In some instances, he also had to reconstruct the conversations. **Carlos** had an extremely emphatic way of speaking and transmitted much of the information through gestures and facial expressions, and enjoyed mixing personal stories and all manner of observations with his teachings.

As an extraordinary gift, at the end of the book **Armando** added a brief account of his own experience with another group of sorcery practitioners.

Due to the simplicity and sincerity of its narrative, this book has a power that I have not found in any other work related to the subject. For that reason, it is a great pleasure for me to be able to help **Armando** in the task of publishing it. I am certain that it will be highly appreciated by all those who love the work of **Carlos Castaneda**.

- **Juan Yoliliztli**

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Version 2007.12.22

"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres**

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My name is **Armando Torres**. I have written this book in order to complete a task that was assigned to me years ago.

In October 1984, I met **Carlos Castaneda**, a controversial anthropologist and a writer on the subject of sorcery. At the time I was still quite young. In my quest for answers, I had looked into various spiritual traditions and I wanted to find a teacher. But, from the very beginning, **Carlos** was very clear in this respect:

"I don't promise anything," he said; "I am not a guru. Freedom is an individual choice, and each one of us must assume the responsibility of fighting for it."

In one of the first talks that I attended, he severely criticized the kind of human idolatry that induces us to follow others, and to expect ready-made answers from them. He said that this attitude is a remnant of our herd mentality.

"Whoever sincerely wants to penetrate the teachings of sorcerers does not need guides. It is sufficient to have a genuine interest- and guts of steel. He will, by himself, find everything he needs through an unbending intent."

It was on these premises that our relationship evolved. Therefore, I want to state very clearly that I am not **Carlos**' apprentice in any formal sense of the word. All I did was talk with him from time to time. Yet that was enough to convince me that the true path consists of our determination to be impeccable.

The main motivation for publishing some of the experiences I had by his side, is gratitude. **Carlos** was magnificent with everyone who had the good fortune of knowing him; since it is the nature of a **nagual** to bestow gifts of power. To be near him was to receive an abundance of inspiration

and a wealth of stories, advice, and teachings of all kinds. It would be selfish then for one who has received such gifts to keep them hidden when **Carlos** himself, as a true warrior of total freedom, shared absolutely everything with those who surrounded him.

One time, **Carlos** told me that he used to sit every night and write down fragments of what he had learned from: the **nagual Juan Matus**, an old sorcerer from the Yaqui tribe of northern Mexico; and from his benefactor, Don **Genaro Flores**, a powerful **Mazatec** Indian who was a member of the men of knowledge led by Don **Juan**. He added that writing was an important aspect of his personal recapitulation and that I should do the same with everything I heard during his talks.

"What if I forget?" I asked him.

"In that case, the knowledge **wasn't** for you. Concentrate on what you remember."

He explained that the purpose of this advice was not only to help me retain information that might be valuable in the future; but that the important thing was that I acquire an initial degree of discipline so that I could undertake real exercises of sorcery later on.

He described the purpose of sorcerers as a supreme enterprise: To take a human being out of his perceptual limitations, in order to restore to him the control of his senses, and enable him to enter a path of saving energy."

Carlos insisted that everything a warrior does should be imbued with an urgent sense of the practical. Expressed in other terms, a warrior should have an unbending focus on the real purpose of human beings: Freedom.

"A warrior has no time to lose, because the challenge of awareness is total, and it demands maximum alertness twenty-four hours a day."

In my dealings with him and with other men of knowledge, I witnessed events that from a rational point of view could only be called extraordinary. For sorcerers, however, things like remote vision, knowledge of events before they happen, or journeying to parallel worlds are normal experiences in the execution of their tasks. As long as we are incapable of verifying them for ourselves, we will inevitably take them to be fantasies, or, at best, to be metaphors.

This is the nature of sorcerers' knowledge: Take it or leave it. You cannot reason it out: It is not possible to "verify it" intellectually. The only thing we can do with it is to put it into practice, exploring the extraordinary possibilities within our being.

- **Armando Torres**

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Version 2007.12.22

"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

Previous-**Pg** Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-**Pg** Next-**Pg** The Sorcerers' Revolution

We had gathered on the second floor of an elegant house in order to listen to a famous lecturer. We were a group of twelve people. I knew none of them except the friend who had invited me. While we waited, we were chatting amicably among ourselves.

Nearly two hours passed and our guest had not yet arrived. People's

faces began to show signs of fatigue. Some despaired and left. At a certain moment, I had the impulse to lean out of a window. I saw him arrive, and our eyes met.

Unexpectedly, a strong wind came into the room, making papers fly everywhere. As **Carlos** walked in, some of the people were still struggling to close the windows.

His appearance was different from what I had expected. He was short but solid, with grayish hair, and dark skin which had begun to furrow with wrinkles. He was dressed in an informal way which made him look ten years younger. His face, funny and full of life, radiated sympathy. He seemed very happy to be with us, and it was a true pleasure to be near him.

He greeted each of us with a handshake and said we had to use our time well because he was expected somewhere else later that night. Then he made himself comfortable in an armchair and asked: "What do you want to talk about?"

But before we had time to answer him, he took the initiative and flooded us with stories. His conversation was direct and absorbing; sprinkled with jokes that he finished off with expressive gestures.

During this talk, he referred to **nagualism** as a body of practices and ideas, talked about its historical development, and maintained that modern man has been granted an incredible opportunity through the revelations of the sorcerers. Later, he spoke of a complex maneuver of awareness to which seers devote themselves: The movement of the assemblage point. This topic was quite new to me, so I limited myself to listen and take notes. Fortunately, **Carlos** had a habit of repeating the main ideas, and this made it easy for me to follow him.

Towards the end, he agreed to answer some questions. One of the people present wanted to know what the sorcerers' view on war was.

Carlos looked annoyed.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked. "That they are **pacifists**? Well, they are not! Our destiny as ordinary men **doesn't** concern them at all! You should understand this once and for all! A warrior is made for combat. When he is at war, he is comfortable."

Judging from his reaction, it seemed that the question had touched on a sensitive spot. He took his time, explaining that, unlike the petty wars which we as humans constantly involve ourselves in because of social, religious, or economic reasons, the war of sorcerers is not directed against other people, but against their own weaknesses. By the same token, sorcerers' peace is not the submissive condition to which modern man has been reduced; rather, it is an imperturbable state of internal silence and discipline.

"Passivity", he said, "is a violation of our nature, because, in essence, we are all formidable combatants. Every human being is, by right, a soldier who has achieved his place in the world in a battle of life and death."

"Look at it this way: At least once, as sperms, each one of us fought a battle for life- a unique struggle against millions of other competitors- and we won! And now the battle continues since we are trapped by the forces of this world. One part of us is fighting to disintegrate and die, while another tries to maintain life and awareness at any cost. There is no peace! A warrior realizes this, and uses it to his advantage. His goal

continues to be that which inspired the spark of life that created him: Access to a new level of awareness."

He continued by saying that as we become socialized, human beings are tamed, just like an animal is domesticated, by the power of stimuli and punishments.

"We have been trained to live and die meekly following unnatural codes of behavior which soften us and make us lose that initial impulse, until our spirit is hardly noticeable. We are born as a result of a fight. By denying our basic tendencies, the society we live in eradicates the warring heritage that transforms us into magical beings."

He added that the only available way to change is to accept ourselves just as we are, and work from there.

"The warrior knows that he lives in a **predatorial** universe. He can never let his guard down. Wherever he looks, he sees an incessant fight, and he knows that it deserves his respect because it is a fight to the death. Don **Juan** was always moving, coming or going, supporting this or rejecting that, provoking tensions or discharging them in a burst, shouting his intent or remaining silent; doing something. He was alive, and his life reflected the ebb and flow of the universe.

"He told me that, from the moment when the explosion which gave us origin occurred until the moment of our death, we live within a flow. Those two episodes are unique because they prepare us for the encounter of what lies further ahead. And what aligns us with that flow? An incessant battle which only a warrior will attempt. Because of that, he lives in profound harmony with everything.

"For a warrior, to be harmonious is to flow; not to stop in the middle of the current and try to make a space of artificial and impossible peace. He knows that he can only give the very best of himself under conditions of maximum tension. For that reason, he seeks out his opponent the way a fighting rooster does- with avidity, with delight, knowing that the next step is decisive. A warrior's opponent is not his fellow man, but his own attachments and weaknesses; and his grand challenge is to compress the layers of his energy until they won't expand when his life ceases, so that his awareness does not die.

"Ask yourselves these questions: What am I doing with my life? Does it have a purpose? Is it tight enough? A warrior accepts his destiny, whatever it may be. However, he fights to change things, and he makes something exquisite of his passage on Earth. He tempers his will in such a way that nothing can deviate him from his purpose."

Another of the people present raised his hand, and asked how sorcerers are able to reconcile the principles of the warrior's way with their duties to society.

He answered:

"Sorcerers are free, they don't accept social obligations. The responsibility is to oneself, not to others. Do you know why you were given the power of perception? Have you discovered what purpose your life serves? Will you cancel your animal destiny? Those are sorcerers' questions- the only ones that can seriously change anything. If you are interested in others, then answer that!

"A warrior knows that what gives sense to his life is the challenge of death; and death is a personal matter. It is a challenge for each one of us, and one which only sincere warriors accept. Seen from this point of view,

the worries of ordinary people are just expressions of their egomania."

Carlos insisted that we must not lose track of the fact that the commitment of a warrior is to what he called 'pure understanding' - a state of being that arises from internal silence. A warrior's commitment is not to the transient attachments of the modality of the era in which he happens to live.

Carlos maintained that our social concerns are a description which has been implanted in us. Our concerns do not stem from a natural development of our consciousness. Rather, they are a product of the collective mind; of emotional disarray, feelings of fear and guilt, of a desire to lead others, or to be led.

"Modern man does not fight his own battles. Instead, he enters into extraneous wars that have nothing to do with the spirit. Naturally, a sorcerer is not moved by this!

"My teacher used to say that he **didn't** honor agreements made in his absence: 'I was not present when they decreed that I had to be an imbecile!' He was born into particularly difficult circumstances, but he had the courage to become something more than just a human reaction to those circumstances. He affirmed that humanity's situation in general is horrendous, and to put emphasis on any particular group is just a covert form of racism.

"He used to repeat that in this world, there are only two kinds of people: Those who have energy, and those who don't. He lived in a permanent fight against the blindness of his fellow men, yet he remained impeccable: He did not interfere with anybody. When I tried to explain my concern for people to him, he would point at my incipient double chin and tell me: 'Don't deceive yourself, **Carlitos!** If the human condition seriously interested you, you would not treat yourself like a pig.'

"He taught me that to feel pity for others is inappropriate for a warrior because pity for others always stems from concern for the self. He used to ask me, pointing at people we met on our way, 'Perhaps you believe yourself better than them?' He helped me to understand that the solidarity of sorcerers towards the people around them comes from a supreme command, not from human sentiment.

"Mercilessly stalking my emotional reactions, he led me by the hand to the source of my preoccupations, and I was able to realize that my concern for people was a fraud. I was trying to escape from myself by transferring my problems to others. He showed me how compassion, in the sense we use the word, is a mental illness - a psychosis that will just make us more and more powerfully entangled in our ego."

It was obvious that remembering Don **Juan** had moved **Carlos**. I could see how a wave of affection overwhelmed him. One of the people present raised his hand and commented that, in contrast to what **Carlos** was saying, compassion towards one's neighbor is the essential idea of all religions.

He made a gesture of waving away a fly.

"Forget all that! Notions based on pity are a fraud! By the power of telling ourselves the same ideas over and over, we have substituted a genuine interest in man's spirit with cheap sentimentality. We have become professionals at compassion. And so what? Has it changed anything?"

"When you feel the collective mind putting its pressure on you; trying

to convince you to concentrate on the appearances of the world, repeat this crushing truth to yourself: 'I am going to die, I am not important: Nobody is!' Knowing that is the only thing that counts."

As an example of misplaced effort, he described the situation of a donkey caught in the mire. The more it moves, the more difficult things become. Its only way out is to act with coldness; try to relieve itself of the load on its back, and concentrate on the immediacy of its problem.

"The same thing happens to us. We are beings who are going to die. We were programmed to live like beasts; carrying loads of customs and other people's beliefs until the very end. But we can change all that! The freedom which the warrior's way offers us is within the reach of your hand. Take advantage of it!"

He told us how, while he was an apprentice, he had a problem: He was addicted to cigarettes. He had tried to quit several times, but without success.

"One day, Don **Juan** told me that we were going to collect plants in a desert area and that the trip would last several days. He told me: 'you had better bring a whole carton of cigarettes! But make sure you wrap them very well, because the desert is full of animals that might steal them.

"I thanked him for his consideration and carefully did as he had suggested. But the following day, when I woke up in the middle of the chaparral, I discovered that the package had disappeared.

"I despaired; I knew that without cigarettes I would soon begin to feel bad. Don **Juan** blamed the loss on a coyote and helped me to look for it. After hours of anguish, he finally found the tracks of the animal, which we followed for the rest of the day, going further and further into the mountains. When night arrived, he admitted to me that we were completely lost.

"Without cigarettes and without knowing where I was, I felt miserable. To console me, he assured me that there had to be a town near by: It was just a matter of walking a little further and we would arrive someplace and be safe. But we spent the whole next day looking for a road, and then the next, and then another. We spent almost two weeks like this.

"A moment arrived when, almost dead from exhaustion, I let myself fall down in the sand and prepared to die. When he saw me in that state, he tried to cheer me up and make me keep going, asking: '**Aren't** you interested in smoking anymore?'

"I looked at him with rage, berated him for his incredible irresponsibility, and turning a deaf ear to him, I said that all I wanted was to die. 'Very well!' he replied with indifference; 'then we can go back now. We had been a few meters from the highway, the whole time!'"

The anecdote made the room explode with laughter. When we finally calmed down, **Carlos** remarked:

"The tragedy of today's man is not his social condition, but the lack of will to change himself. It is very easy to design collective revolutions; but to genuinely change, to put an end to self-pity, to erase the ego, to abandon our habits and whims... **ah**, that's something else entirely! Sorcerers say that true rebellion, and humanity's only way out as a species, is to stage a revolution against their own stupidity. As you can understand, this is solitary work.

"The goal of sorcerers is this sorcerers' revolution: The unrestricted

unfolding of all our perceptual possibilities. I have never known a greater revolutionary than my teacher. He **didn't** just suggest changing **tortillas** for bread; **oh** no, he went straight to the core of the matter. He proposed a deadly somersault of thought to the unknown; the release from all ties. And he demonstrated that it is possible!

"He suggested that I fill my life with decisions of power; with strategies which will bring me to awareness. He taught me that the order of the world **doesn't** have to be as we've been told; that I can toss it aside anytime. I am not obliged to uphold an image before others, or live in an inventory that **doesn't** suit me. My battle field is the path of the warrior!"

When the meeting was over, all his listeners gathered to exchange a few words with him and say their farewells. When it was my turn, **Carlos** looked me up and down. Then he asked me to tell him my name, and why I was there.

I told him my name and explained that a friend, knowing my interest for the subject, had told me about this opportunity.

His only comment was:

"I want to talk to you in private."

I was a little confused by his words, but waited until the end of his round of greetings and followed him to a corner of the room. There he invited me to have breakfast at his hotel the following day.

I assured him that it would be my pleasure.

He gave me the address, and told me:

"We'll meet tomorrow at nine o'clock."

He added that I should not tell anybody about our encounter, and that I should be punctual.

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Encounters With The [Nagual](#): Part I: Self-importance
Version 2007.12.26

"Encounters With The [Nagual](#)" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

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Self-importance
[HTML](#) editor.

Self-importance can be fought in various ways, but first of all it is necessary to know that it's there.

End [html](#) editor.

I arrived in the hotel lobby at the agreed time, and had barely waited one minute when I saw **Carlos** coming down from the rooms upstairs. We greeted each other and went into the restaurant where a delicious breakfast was served. At one point, I wanted to ask him something, but he made a gesture that I should shut my mouth. We ate in silence.

When we were done, we left to walk down to **Donceles** street, towards the **Zocalo**. [* **zocalo**- a central town square or plaza]

While we browsed through the second hand bookstores, he told me that he generally did not speak privately with people, but that my case was different because he had received an indication about it. I **didn't** know what he was talking about, and I preferred to stay quiet, since any comment I might make would only show my ignorance.

He added that I **shouldn't** confuse his deference with a personal concern.

"I have said many times that my energetic condition prevents me

from taking pupils. People are disappointed with me because of that, but there is no way!"

We talked about all kinds of things. He asked me many questions about my life, asked for my phone number, and told me that he was giving a talk at a friend's house the following night. I was invited to attend, but our relationship should remain secret. I replied that I would love to be there and he gave me the address and the schedule.

In one of the bookstores we visited, we came across a copy of one of his books, called "A Separate Reality". It was on the fiction shelf, which annoyed him a lot. He commented that people are so wrapped up in their everyday existence that they cannot even conceive of the mystery that surrounds us. When we encounter something unknown, we automatically classify it in a comfortable category and then we forget it.

I noticed that he thumbed through the books with great interest and that he would sometimes fondly and respectfully brush his hand over them. He said that they were more than just books, they were storage rooms of knowledge, and that one should surrender to knowledge, no matter in what form it was presented. He added that the information we need in order to increase our awareness hides in places we rarely think of, and if we were not so rigid, everything in our surroundings would tell us incredible secrets.

"All we need to do is open ourselves to knowledge, and it will come rushing to us like an avalanche."

While studying a table of books that were so cheap they were almost free, he was struck by how cheap used books were, compared to new ones. In his opinion, it proved that people are not really looking for information. What they look for is achieving the status of a buyer.

I asked him what kind of reading he preferred and he answered that he would like to know everything. However, today he was looking for a certain book of poetry, a particular, old edition which had never been printed again. He asked me to help him find it.

For a long time, we leafed through heaps of books. At the end, he went out with a package of them, but not the one he was looking for. With a guilty smile, he admitted:

"This always happens to me!"

Near noon, we sat down to rest on a bench in a square where various printers were offering their services. I took the opportunity to confess that his statements of the previous night had left me perplexed, and asked him to explain in more detail what 'the war of the sorcerers' was about.

He explained, in a very kind way, that it was natural that the topic should affect me, since, like all human beings, I had been taught from birth to perceive the world in much the same way as a flock of sheep. He told me stories of his cohorts, and how after many years of tenaciously fighting their weaknesses they had finally overcome this collective coercion. He advised me to be patient, and in due course things would become clear to me.

After a while of relaxed conversation, he shook my hand in what was clearly a gesture of farewell. I could not contain my curiosity and asked him what he had meant when he said he had had 'an indication' about my person.

Instead of responding, he looked attentively at a point above my left

shoulder. Immediately my ear became hot and began to hum. After a while, he told me that he **didn't** know the answer himself, because he had not been able to read the nature of the sign. But it had been something so clear that he was obliged to pay attention.

He added: "I cannot guide you, but I can put you in front of an abyss which will test all your abilities. It depends on you whether you hurl yourself off it to fly, or run to hide in the security of your routines."

His words made me even more curious. I asked him which abyss he was talking about.

He told me it was my own dream.

The answer shocked me. Somehow, **Carlos** had noticed my internal dilemma.

It was a quarter to seven when I arrived at a nice house near **Coyoacan**. A pleasant girl who seemed to be the owner of the house received me. I explained that I had been invited to the talk that **Carlos** was going to give, and she let me enter. We introduced ourselves: She told me her name was **Martha**.

There were eight people in the room. Then another two guests arrived, and after them **Carlos** appeared. As usual, he greeted us effusively. This time, he was dressed in a very formal manner, with a tie and a vest, and he was carrying a briefcase which gave him an intellectual look. He began to talk about many topics and, almost unnoticeably, he introduced the main subject of this talk: How to erase self-importance.

As a preamble, he stated that the significant role we grant ourselves in everything we do, say, or think; constitutes a kind of 'cognitive dissonance' which clouds our senses and prevents us from seeing things clearly and objectively.

"We are like atrophied birds. We were born with everything necessary to fly; however, we are permanently forced to fly in tight circles around our own self. The chain that ties us down is self-importance.

"The path which transforms an ordinary human being into a warrior is very arduous. Our sensation of being at the center of everything, and the need to always have the last word, is forever getting in the way. We feel important. And when one is important, any intent to change is a slow, complicated and painful process.

"That feeling isolates us. If not for that feeling, we would all flow in the sea of awareness, and we would know that the self **doesn't** exist for its own sake: Its destiny is to feed the Eagle.

"The sense of importance grows in a child while he is perfecting his social comprehension. We have been trained to construct a world of agreements that we can refer to in order to communicate with each other. But this gift included an annoying attachment:

Our idea of 'me'. The self is a mental construction. It came from outside, and its time for us to get rid of it."

Carlos said that all the mistakes that occur when we communicate are living proof that the agreement we have received is completely artificial.

"After experimenting for millennia with situations that alter our ways of perceiving the world, the sorcerers from ancient Mexico discovered a portentous fact: We are not forced to live in a single reality because the universe is constructed according to very fluid principles which can

accommodate almost infinite forms producing countless ranges of perception.

"Starting from this verification, they deduced that what human beings actually receive from outside is the ability to fix our attention in one of those ranges in order to explore and recognize it. We mold ourselves to it and learn how to perceive it as something unique. This is how the idea that we live in an exclusive world arose; and the feeling of being an individual self was generated in consequence.

"There is no doubt that the description we have received is a valuable possession, similar to the rigid stake that is tied to a tender sapling to strengthen and guide it. It allows us to grow up as normal people, within a society that is molded to that rigidity. To achieve it, we had to learn how to 'skim' - that is, how to make selective readings from the enormous volume of data that arrives to our senses. But once those readings are converted into 'reality', the rigidity of our attention works as an anchor, because it prevents us from becoming aware of our incredible possibilities.

"Don **Juan** claimed that what limits human perception is timidity. To be able to manage the world which surrounds us, we have had to give up our perceptual gift; that is, the possibility of witnessing everything. We sacrifice the flight of awareness in exchange for the security of the known. We can live strong, audacious, healthy lives: We can be impeccable warriors; but we don't dare!

"Our heritage is a stable house where we can live, but we have transformed it into a fort for the defense of the self; or rather, into a jail where we condemn our energy to weaken in lifelong imprisonment. Our best years, feelings, and forces are wasted in forever repairing and bolstering that house because we have wound up identifying ourselves with it.

"In the process of becoming a social being, a growing child acquires a false conviction of his own importance; and what was a healthy feeling of self-preservation in the beginning ends up transformed into a selfish clamor for attention.

"Of all the gifts we have received, self-importance is the cruelest. It converts a magical, vivid creature into a poor, arrogant, graceless devil."

Pointing at his feet, he said that feeling important forces us to do absurd things.

"Look at me! Once I bought a pair of very fine shoes, which weighed almost a kilo each. I wasted five hundred dollars for the privilege of dragging these big shoes around!

"Because of our self-importance, we are stuffed to the point of bitterness, envy, and frustration. We allow ourselves to be guided by feelings of complacency, and we escape from the task of knowing ourselves with pretexts like 'I can't be bothered' or 'how tiring!'. Behind all that, there is an anxiety which we try to silence with an internal dialogue increasingly more dense and less natural."

At this point of his talk, **Carlos** took a pause in order to respond to some questions. He took the opportunity to tell us several stories illustrating the way self-importance deforms human beings; transforming them into rigid shells. Confronted with them, a warrior **doesn't** know whether to laugh or to cry.

"After many years of studying with Don **Juan**, I became so frightened

of his practices that I went away for a while. I could not accept what he and my benefactor were doing to me. It seemed inhuman; unnecessary. I yearned for sweeter treatment! I took the opportunity to visit various spiritual teachers from all over the world, hoping to find some knowledge in their doctrines that would justify my desertion.

"Once, I met a Californian guru who considered himself the real **McCoy**. He accepted me as his pupil, and gave me the task of begging for charitable alms in a public square. Thinking that this was a new experience for me, and probably would teach me an important lesson, I mustered my courage and did what he requested. When I returned to him, I said: 'Now you do it!'. He became angry with me and expelled me from the class.

"On another trip, I went to see a well-known Hindu teacher. I went to his house early in the morning, and stood in line with others. However, this gentleman kept us waiting for hours. When he appeared at the top of a stairway, he had a condescending air, as if granting us a great favor by admitting us. He began to descend the steps in a very dignified manner, but his feet got entangled in his ample tunic, and he fell to the floor and cracked his head. He died there, right in front of us."

On another occasion, **Carlos** told us that the demon of self-importance does not only affect those who believe themselves to be masters: It is a general problem. One of the strongest ramparts of self-importance is the concern with one's personal appearance.

"That was always a sore spot for me. Don **Juan** used to stoke the fire of my resentment by making fun of my stature. He used to tell me: 'the shorter you are, the more egomaniac! You are small, and ugly as a bedbug: Your only option is to be famous because otherwise you don't exist!' He claimed that the mere sight of me made him want to vomit- for which he was infinitely grateful to me.

"I was offended by his comments, since I was convinced that he exaggerated my defects. But one day I came into a store in **Los Angeles**, and I realized that he was right. I heard someone beside me saying: 'Short!' and I felt so irritated that, without stopping to think, I turned around and punched him furiously in the face. Afterwards, I realized that the man had not made the comment about me at all. He had just been short of money.

"One piece of advice Don **Juan** gave us was that, during our training as warriors, we should abstain from using what he called 'tools for the perpetuation of the self'. This category included such objects as mirrors, the exhibition of academic titles, and albums of pictures with our personal history. The sorcerers of his group took this advice literally, but we, the apprentices, **didn't** care. However, for some reason, I interpreted his command in an extreme way, and from then on I did not even allow anyone to take pictures of me.

"Once, during a lecture, I explained that pictures are a perpetuation of self-concern; and that the purpose behind my reluctance was to maintain a measure of doubt about my person. Later I found out that a certain lady among the public, who believed herself to be a spiritual guide, had commented that, if she had had the face of a Mexican waiter, she **wouldn't** allow herself to be photographed either.

"While observing the quirks of self-importance, and the homogeneous way it contaminates absolutely everybody, the seers have

divided human beings into three categories which Don **Juan** gave the most ridiculous names he could think of: the **urines**, the farts, and the vomits. We all fit into one of them.

"The **urines** are characterized by their servility: They are toady, sticky, and cloying. They are the people who always want to do you a favor: They take care of you; They hold you back; They pamper you; They have so much compassion! In that way they hide the underlying reality: They are incapable of taking an initiative, and can never do anything by themselves. They need another person's command to feel that they are doing something. And, unfortunately for them, they assume that others are as kind as they are; and because of that they are always hurt, disappointed, and tearful.

"The farts, on the other hand, are the opposite. Irritating, mean and self-sufficient, they constantly impose themselves and interfere. Once they get hold of you, they won't leave you alone. They are the most unpleasant people you'll ever meet. If you are calm, the fart will arrive and wind you up and pull you in, and use you as much as possible. They have a natural gift as teachers and humanity's leaders. They are the kind who will kill to stay in power.

"The vomits are in-between these two categories. As neutrals, they are neither imposing nor will they be led. They are show-**offs**, ostentatious, and exhibitionistic. They give you the impression that they are something great, but in actual fact they are nothing. It's all boast. They are caricatures of people who believe too much in themselves, but, if you don't pay any attention to them, they are undone by their insignificance."

Somebody in the audience asked him if belonging to one of those categories is an obligatory characteristic, that is to say, an innate condition of our luminosity.

He answered:

"Nobody is born like this, we make ourselves this way! We get into one or the other of those categories because of some tiny incident that marked us in childhood, whether it is pressure from our parents or other imponderable factors. It starts there, and as we grow up, we become so involved in the defense of the self that at some point we can no longer remember the day we stopped being authentic, and became actors instead. When an apprentice enters the world of sorcerers, his basic personality is already formed, and nothing can cancel it out. The only option left to him is to laugh at it all.

"But, although it is not our congenital condition, sorcerers can detect what type of importance we grant ourselves through their seeing because the molding of our nature over the years produces permanent deformities in the energetic field that surrounds us."

Carlos went on to explain that self-importance feeds on the same kind of energy that lets us dream. Therefore, to lose self-importance is the basic condition of **nagualism**, because losing self-importance liberates an energy surplus for our use; and also because, without the precaution of losing self-importance, the warrior's path could turn us into aberrations.

"That is what has happened to many apprentices. They began well, saving their energy and developing their potential. But they **didn't** realize that, as they gained power, they were also nurturing a parasite

within themselves. If we are going to give in to the pressures of the ego, it is preferable that we do it as ordinary men because a sorcerer who considers himself important is the saddest thing there is.

"Keep in mind that self-importance is treacherous: It can be disguised behind a facade of almost impeccable humility; because it is not in a hurry. After an entire life of practicing, it only takes a minimum of negligence, a tiny mistake- and there it is again; like a virus that was incubated in silence; or like those frogs that wait for years under the sand of the desert, and with the first raindrops wake up from their lethargy and reproduce.

"Considering its nature, it is a benefactor's duty to attack the apprentices' self-importance until it explodes. The benefactor cannot feel pity. A warrior must learn to be humble in preparation for the arduous path ahead, or he won't have the smallest chance facing the darts of the unknown.

"Don **Juan** whipped his pupils to the point of cruelty. He recommended a twenty-four hour vigil to control the octopus of the self. Of course, we paid no attention to him! Except for **Eligio**, the most advanced of the apprentices, the rest of us surrendered in the most shameful way to our propensities. In the case of **la Gorda**, it was fatal."

He told us the story of Maria **Elena**, an advanced pupil of Don **Juan**, who had developed great power as a warrior but **didn't** know how to control the bad habits of her human stage.

"She thought that she had it all under control, but that was not the case. A very selfish concern- a personal attachment- remained in her: She expected things from the group of warriors; and that finished her.

"**La Gorda** felt offended with me because she considered me unable to lead the apprentices to freedom, and she never accepted me as the new **nagual**. Once Don **Juan**'s directive force disappeared, she began to reproach me for my inadequacy- or rather my energetic anomaly- without keeping in mind that my energetic anomaly, too, was a command of the spirit. Soon after, she allied herself with the **Genaros** and the Sisters and began to behave as if she were the leader of the party. But what exasperated her most of all was the public success of my books.

"One day, in an outburst of self-sufficiency, she gathered us all together, stood in front of us and screamed: Bunch of Suckers! I'm leaving!"

"She knew the exercise of the fire from within, by means of which she could move the assemblage point to the world of the **nagual** and meet up with Don **Juan** and Don **Genaro**. But that afternoon she was very agitated. Some of the apprentices tried to calm her, and that infuriated her even more. I could not do anything: The situation inhibited my power.

After a brutal effort, anything but impeccable, she had a stroke and fell down dead. What killed her was her egomania."

As a moral of this strange story, **Carlos** added that a warrior never allows himself to reach the point of madness, because to die from an ego attack is the stupidest way to die.

"Self-importance is deadly: It stops the free flow of the energy, and that is fatal. Self-importance is responsible for our end as individuals, and one day it will finish us as a species. When a warrior learns how to toss self-importance aside, his spirit unfolds, jubilant, like a wild animal

liberated from its cage and set free.

"Self-importance can be fought in various ways, but first of all it is necessary to know that it's there. If you have a defect and you recognize it, half the work is done already!

"So, above all, realize it. Take a board and write on it: 'Self-importance kills', and hang it in the most visible spot in the house. Read that sentence every day, try to remember it while you work, meditate about it. Maybe the moment in which it's meaning penetrates your interior will arrive, and you decide to do something. To realize it is, by and of itself, a great help, because the fight against the self generates its own impetus.

"Ordinarily, self-importance feeds on our feelings, ranging from the desire to get along with people and be accepted by others, to arrogance and sarcasm. But its favorite area of action is pity for oneself and for those who surround us. In order to stalk it, above all, we have to **deconstruct** our emotions into their smallest particles, and detect the sources that nurture them.

"Feelings rarely present themselves in a pure form. They disguise themselves. To hunt them down like rabbits, we have to proceed very delicately and strategically because they are quick, and we cannot reason with them.

"We begin with the most obvious things, like: How seriously do I take myself? How attached am I? To what do I dedicate my time? These are things that we can begin to change, accumulating enough energy to liberate a little bit of attention that in turn will allow us to go deeper into the exercise.

"For example, instead of spending hours watching television, going shopping or talking to our friends about stupid stuff, we could dedicate a small part of that time to do physical exercises; to recapitulate our history; or go alone to a park, take our shoes off and walk barefoot on the grass. It seems simple, but with those practices our sensorial panorama changes. We recover something that was always there; which we had given up for lost.

"Starting from those small changes, we can analyze elements more difficult to detect; where our vanity is projected into insanity. For example, what are my convictions? Do I consider myself immortal? Am I special? Do I deserve to be noticed? This kind of analysis enters into the field of beliefs- the very core of our feelings- so you should undertake it through internal silence, and make a very fervent commitment to honesty. Otherwise, the mind will have its own way, and use all kind of justifications."

Carlos added that these exercises should be made with a sense of alarm, because it truly is about surviving a powerful attack.

"Realize that self-importance is an implacable poison. We have no time left: Urgency is what we need. It is now or never!

"Once you have dissected your feelings, you should learn how to **rechannel** your efforts beyond human concerns to the place of no pity. For seers, that place is an area in our luminosity, every bit as functional as the area of rationality. We can learn how to evaluate the world from a detached point of view, just as we learned as children to judge it from the point of view of reason. The only difference is that detachment as a focal point is much closer to the warrior's temper.

"Without that precaution, the emotional turbulence stirred up by the exercise of stalking our self-importance can be so painful that we may turn to suicide or insanity. When the apprentice learns how to contemplate the world from the position of no pity; perceiving that behind all situations which imply an energetic drain there is an impersonal universe, he stops being just a knot of feelings and becomes a fluid being.

"The problem with compassion is that it forces us to see the world through self-indulgence. A warrior without compassion is a person who has located his will at the center of indifference, and he **doesn't** soothe himself by saying 'poor me'. He is an individual who feels no pity for his weaknesses, and he has learned to laugh at himself.

"A way to define self-importance, is to understand it as the projection of our weaknesses through social interaction. It is like the screams and threatening postures some small animals adopt, to hide the fact that they don't really have any defenses. We are self-important because we are afraid; and the more fear, the more ego.

"However, and fortunately for warriors, self-importance has a weak point: It depends on recognition to maintain itself. It's like a kite that needs a current of air to ascend and to stay high; otherwise, it will fall down and break. If we don't grant any importance to the importance, it's finished.

"Knowing this, an apprentice renovates his relationships. He learns how to escape those who confirm his self, and frequents those who don't care about anything human. He looks for criticism, not flattery. Every so often, he starts a new life, erases his history, changes his name, explores new personalities, and annuls the suffocating persistence of his ego. He puts himself in situations where his authentic self is forced to take control. A power hunter **doesn't** have pity: He **doesn't** look for recognition in anybody else's eyes.

"The state of no pity is surprising. One attempts to reach it, step by step, through years of continuous pressure; but it happens suddenly, like an instantaneous vibration that breaks our mold, and allows us to look at the world with a serene smile. For the first time in many years, we feel free of the terrible weight of being ourselves, and we see the reality that surrounds us. Once there, we are not alone. An incredible push awaits us; help which comes from the core of the Eagle and transports us in a microsecond to universes of sobriety and sanity.

"When we don't have any pity for ourselves, we can face the impact of our personal extinction with elegance. Death is the force that gives the warrior value and moderation. Only by looking through the eyes of death can we notice that we are not important.

"Then death comes to live by our side, and begins to tell us its secrets.

"The contact with death's unchangeable nature leaves an indelible mark on the character of the apprentice. He understands, once and for all, that all the energy of the universe is connected. There is no world of objects, related to each other through physical laws. What exists is a panorama of luminous emanations inextricably bundled together, within which we can make interpretations as far as the power of our attention will allow. All our actions count, because they release avalanches in the infinite. For that reason, none is worth more than any other, none is more important than any other.

"That vision destroys the tendency we have to be indulgent with ourselves. Witnessing this universal bond, the warrior is prey to contradictory feelings. On the one hand, indescribable joy and a supreme and impersonal reverence toward all that exists. On the other, a sense of the inevitable, and a deep sadness that has nothing to do with self-pity; a sadness that comes from the breast of infinity; a blast of solitude which will never leave him again.

"That purified feeling gives the warrior the sobriety, the subtlety, and the silence that he needs to venture there, where all human reasoning fail. Under such conditions, self-importance can't sustain itself."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

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One morning I received a phone call, and to my surprise it was **Carlos**. He told me that he would arrive at the airport in Mexico City in four hours, and asked me if I could pick him up. I told him it would be a pleasure. He gave me the number of his flight, and I figured that he was calling from the airport in **Los Angeles**, since that would fit the time required for the trip.

When he arrived, I accompanied him on some errands related to the printing of his book. Afterwards, we went to a cafe for a chat. Before saying goodbye, we agreed to meet at the place where he was giving a lecture that night.

The weather was terrible; perhaps that was why, when I arrived at the house where the appointment was, I found that just a few people had arrived. I placed my coat, sopping wet, over the back of a seat, and sat down in a corner near **Carlos**.

The core of his statements that evening was that the universe in its great entirety is feminine, and of a predatory nature, and there is a tenacious battle of consciousness going on, where, as always, the strongest absorbs the weakest.

"On the cosmic scale, the strength of a being is not measured by its physical capability, but by its capacity to manipulate awareness. It follows that if we are to take the next evolutionary step, it must be done by means of discipline, determination, and strategy. Those are our weapons.

"Through their seeing, sorcerers witness that struggle, and they take their place in it, ready for the worst, and without complaining about the result. For their ever-ready disposition for combat, they have won the title of 'warriors'.

"A warrior considers the world we live in to be a great mystery, and he knows that the mystery is there to be revealed to those who deliberately look for it. That attitude of audacity will occasionally move the tentacles of the unknown, making the spirit manifest itself."

He explained to us that the warrior's audacity is born out of the contact with his imminent death.

He told us the story of a girl who one day arrived at his editor's office, put a small mat down on the floor, sat down on it, and told the editor: 'I

won't leave until I speak to **Carlos Castaneda!** All attempts to discourage her were useless; the girl remained inflexible. Finally, the editor called **Carlos** and told him that a crazy girl demanded his presence.

"What could I do? I went there and met her. When I asked her the reason for her strange behavior, she told me that, being deadly sick, she had gone to the desert to die. But, while she meditated in solitude, she understood that she had still not tried everything, and she decided to play her last card. For her, that meant to know the **nagual** in person.

"Impressed by her story, I made her a unique proposition: 'Leave everything and come to the world of the sorcerers'. She answered at once: 'I'm game!' When I heard her answer, my hair stood on end, because Don **Juan** used to say the same thing to me: 'If we're going to play, then let's play! But we play to the death'.

"This is the sorcerer's feeling in front of his destiny: 'I bet my life on this intent, nothing less. I know that my end could be waiting for me anywhere, and there **isn't** anything I can do to avoid it. I walk down my path with utmost concentration. I accept the responsibility of living fully. I risk everything on this single hand'.

"A warrior knows that no victory is guaranteed when faced with death. Even so, he freely enters into his battle; not because he believes he will win, but for the excitement of his war. For him, entering the war is already a victory. And while he fights, he is happy- because, for one who is already dead, every second of life is a gift."

He continued by saying that what makes it possible for the world to exist just as we see it, is our attention and the attentions of all our fellow men focused simultaneously, and connected in a tight net of interpretations reinforced by agreement.

One of the present asked him to further clarify this topic.

He explained:

"See, the domain of attention is of supreme importance in the path of sorcerers, because attention is the primary matter of creation. In all worlds, degrees of evolution are measured by the ability to realize; to be aware.

"In order to manipulate and understand the emanations which arrive to our senses, sorcerers develop the power of their attention; sharpening it through discipline to exquisite levels which allow them to transcend human limitations, and to fulfill all the possibilities of perception. Their concentration is so intense that they can penetrate the thick armor of appearances, and expose the essence of things. Seers call that degree of increased awareness 'seeing'.

"Even though such a fixed attention may seem like stubbornness, obsession, or fanaticism, for the practitioner it's nothing but discipline."

He warned us not to confuse the discipline of sorcerers with people's repetitive routines.

"Discipline, as understood by a warrior, is creative, open, and produces freedom. It is the ability to face the unknown; transforming the feeling of knowing into reverent astonishment; of considering things that exceed the scope of our habits; and daring to face the only war that is worthwhile: The battle for awareness.

It is the courage to accept the consequences of our actions, whatever they may be, without self-pity or feelings of blame.

"Having discipline is the key to handling attention, because it takes us to the will. And this allows us to modify the world until it becomes what we want it to be; and not like the one which was imposed on us from the outside. For this reason, will is the threshold of intent for warriors. Its power is so great that when it is focused on something, it can produce the most astonishing effects."

As examples, he told us many stories about extraordinary events he had witnessed. He maintained that underlying each one of the prodigious actions of sorcerers, there is a whole life of discipline, sobriety, detachment, and analytical capability. Warriors place the highest value on these attributes, and together they constitute the state of being which they call impeccability.

He went on to explain that impeccability **doesn't** have anything to do with an intellectual position, a belief, or anything like that. It is a consequence of saving energy.

"A warrior accepts with humility what he is, and he **doesn't** squander his power on lamenting because things are not otherwise. If a door is closed, we don't kick it and punch it! Instead, we attentively study the lock and figure out how to open it. In the same way, if his life is not satisfactory, the warrior is not offended, nor does he complain. On the contrary, he designs strategies to alter the course of his destiny.

"If we learn how to curb our self-pity, and at the same time make room for the authentic 'me', we will become drivers of cosmic intent, and conduits for torrents of energy.

"In order to flow in such a way, we must learn to trust our resources and to understand that we were born with everything we need for the extravagant adventure which is our life. As a warrior, each man or woman who has entered the path of sorcery knows that he or she is responsible for him/ herself. He or she **doesn't** look aside seeking approval or trying to discharge their frustrations on others.

"Don **Juan** told me: "What you are looking for is within yourself. You have to struggle to make your actions final, and to achieve your own clarity. Commit yourself, before it's too late!"

"The aspect of impeccability which particularly concerns our daily lives is knowing how exercising our freedom affects others, and avoiding the resulting friction at any cost. Occasionally, our relationships with others will generate friction and expectations. A fighting sorcerer pays close attention to his contacts, and becomes a hunter of signs. If there are no signs, he **doesn't** interact with people. He is content to wait because, although he **doesn't** have time, he has all the patience in the world. He knows that too much is at stake, and won't risk ruining everything by one false move.

"Since he is never desperate to achieve contact with anyone, the warrior can choose his affections with sobriety and detachment; taking care at all times that the people he consents to be with are compatible with his energy. The secret to achieving such clarity of vision consists in identifying oneself and not identifying oneself. A sorcerer identifies himself with the abstract, and not with the world. And that allows him to be independent and take care of himself."

Then he told us a story about a guy who considered himself to be a great warrior, but every time he had problems at home and his wife **didn't** make him dinner or **didn't** wash or iron his clothes, he collapsed

in chaos. After a long battle with that situation, the man decided to introduce a radical change in his life; but, instead of reforming his character, like he was supposed to, he changed his wife for another one.

"Realize that, face to face with our destiny, each one of us is alone. So take control of your own life. A warrior polishes details, develops his imagination and puts his ingenuity to the test by resolving situations. It's inconceivable for him to feel destitute because he has self-control, and he **doesn't** need anything from anybody. By concentrating on details, he learns how to cultivate delicacy, subtlety, and elegance.

"Don **Vicente Medrano** said that the beauty of this struggle is shown in the invisible stitches. That is the sorcerer's trademark; the fulfillment of intent.

"The gift of independence and the control of details produce the capacity to persist where other people would desist. [* desist- choose not to consume] When arriving at this point, the warrior is barely a step away from impeccable conduct.

"Impeccability is born of a delicate balance between our internal being and the forces of the external world. It is an achievement that requires effort, time, dedication, and being permanently attentive to the objective, so that the final purpose is never lost from sight. But, mainly, it requires persistence. Persistence defeats apathy, it is as simple as that.

"The threshold of magic is an intent sustained beyond what seems possible, desirable, or reasonable. It is a mental leap to become tuned to the will of the Eagle's emanations, and to allow their command to loosen the rigidity of our limits. But few are willing to pay the price; to walk the extra mile."

He admitted that, on several occasions, he was about to abandon his teacher: He was oppressed by the magnitude of the task he was given. What saved him in the end, and gave him 'a second wind, was a wave of energy that the warrior finds within himself when everything seems lost.

"Many apprentices, after searching for years and not finding anything to satisfy their expectations, retire disappointed without knowing that maybe they were just a few steps from their goal."

He shook his head and commented sadly:

"We should not die on the beach after swimming so far..."

"Once he has gained flexibility, humility, a sense of independence, control of details, and persistence, a warrior in search of impeccability knows that he has gained the power of his decisions. He is authorized to do or not do, according to what suits him, and nobody can force him to do anything. It is at this point that he needs, more than ever, to be the owner of his emotions and of his mind because clarity joined with power make an explosive mixture. It can easily make a man reckless.

"The path of the warrior consists of saving energy: Everything that goes against that threatens his intent to be impeccable. But sometimes, because of the surplus of power which has accumulated in his luminosity, circumstances can take a particularly hard turn for him.

"His dilemma is the same which faces a hang-glider who, after struggling for hours to get up to the mountaintop carrying his heavy equipment, finds that weather conditions are no longer right for the flight. In a situation like that, it is easier for the athlete to decide to jump anyway than decide to remain on the ground. If he **hasn't** learned to control his decisions appropriately, the most probable outcome is that he

jumps to his death.

"In the same way, there will be times when the apprentice forgets that his objective is not to nourish his ego, and he enters into situations which are stronger than him. Not only can this be fatal, but it constitutes a serious breach of discipline that will plug him into the labyrinths of power. In these cases, power becomes his executioner.

"A warrior of knowledge does not senselessly surrender to the excitement of war. First he observes the conditions, gauges his possibilities, and establishes his support points. Then, depending on this evaluation, he will rush forth or retreat without the slightest hesitation. He does not deal his blows out blindly, but turns every step into an immaculate exercise of strategy.

"The apprentice who does not learn in time to decide how, when, and with whom he must enter into battle, is removed. Either because someone kills him, or because he is defeated so many times that he cannot rise again.

"The warrior's final challenge is to balance all the attributes of his path. Once he does that, his purpose becomes inflexible. He is no longer moved by a desperate desire for gain. He is the owner of his will, and can put it to his personal service. When he arrives at that point, the warrior has learned how to be impeccable. And for him to continue being impeccable depends totally on the energy he has accumulated."

He gave as an example an apprentice who uses his recently won powers to become rich. He then comes to a forked road, either entering into the **mindset** of 'I want this', 'I want that', or to cultivate intent. If he chooses the first option, he has arrived at the end of his path, because no matter how much energy he dedicates to them, the yearnings of the ego are never really satisfied. In the second option, on the other hand, he has found his route to freedom.

"Intent is the tuning of our attention to cosmic awareness, which transforms our volition into commands of the Eagle. We must be daring to attempt it deliberately, but, once there, everything becomes possible. Intent allows sorcerers to live in a non-ordinary world, and to intend a destiny of freedom. For them, freedom is a fact, not just a Utopia.

"By ignoring the principles of the warrior's way, modern man has wound up in a diabolical trap, made up of family, religious and social concerns. He works eight hours a day in order to maintain his way of life. Then he returns home, where the wife of always awaits him, and his children, identical to any other of a billion children, will demand things from him and force him to continue in his chains, until his powers are drained and he becomes a useless object who sits meditating over his memories in a corner of the house. They told him that this is happiness, but he **doesn't** feel happy, he feels shackled.

Be Warriors: Stop that! Realize your potential and free yourselves: Free yourselves from whatever! Don't impose limits on yourselves. If you can defy the force of gravity and fly, that's great! And if you still have the impetus to challenge death and buy a ticket to eternity, that is tremendous!

"Take a risk! Get out of the trap of self-reflexion and dare to perceive all that is humanly possible! A warrior of knowledge makes an effort to be authentic, and he won't accept any compromises because the object of his fight is total freedom."

"Encounters With The [Nagual](#)" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part I. A
Romance with Knowledge

Over the years, the need to understand the world had led me to store a lot of scientific or religious explanations on almost everything; which all had one common denominator: A great trust in the continuity of man. By helping me to see the universe with the eyes of a sorcerer, [Carlos](#) destroyed that sensation in me. He made me see that death is an irrevocable reality, and that to avoid acknowledging it by applying second-hand beliefs is shameful.

On one occasion, somebody asked him:

"[Carlos](#), what expectations do you have for the future?"

He jumped:

"There are no expectations! Sorcerers don't have a tomorrow!"

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That night, a large group of interested people had gathered in the auditorium of a private residence, near the area of [San Jeronimo](#). When I arrived, [Carlos](#) was already there. He was smiling, busily answering questions.

His initial topic was what he called 'not-doing': an activity specially designed to banish any trace of every-day habits from our lives. He affirmed that not-doing is the favorite exercise of apprentices because it introduces them to a marvelous environment and creates a very refreshing bewilderment for one's energy. The effect this has on one's awareness they call 'stopping the world.'

In response to some questions, he explained that not-doing cannot be reasoned out. Any effort applied towards understanding it is in fact an interpretation of the teaching- and goes automatically into the field of 'doing'.

"The premise of sorcerers for dealing with this kind of practice is inner silence, and the quality of silence required for something so enormous as stopping the world can only come from direct contact with the great truth of our existence: That we are all going to die."

He advised us:

"If you want to know yourselves, be aware of your personal death. It's not negotiable: It is the only thing that you can seriously own. Everything else may fail, but not death: You can take that as a fact. Learn how to use it to produce real effects in your lives.

"Also, stop believing in fairy tales. Nobody needs you out there. None of us is so important that it justifies inventing something as fantastic as immortality. A humble sorcerer knows that his destiny is the same as that of any other living being on Earth. So, instead of having false hopes, he works concretely and with great effort to escape the human condition, and to reach the only exit we have: The breaking of our perceptual barrier.

"While you listen to death's advice, make yourself responsible for your lives; for the totality of your actions. Explore yourself, recognize

yourself, and live intensely; like sorcerers live. Intensity is the only thing that can save us from boredom.

"Once aligned with death, you will be able to take the next step: Reducing your baggage to a minimum. This is a prison world, and we must leave it as fugitives: We can't take anything with us. Human beings are travelers by nature. To fly and to know other horizons is our destiny. Do you take your bed or your dining table with you on a trip? Synthesize your life!"

He made the comment that humanity in our time has acquired a strange habit that is symptomatic of the mental state we live in.

When we travel, we buy all kinds of useless devices in other countries; things that we certainly would never buy in our own country. Once we return home, we store them in a corner and end up forgetting their existence- until one day we notice them by chance, and toss them in the garbage.

"And we behave this way on the journey that is our life. We are like donkeys carrying a bale of useless stuff: There is nothing valuable there. Everything we did, at the end, when old age assaults us, only serves to endlessly repeat some sentence or other, like a scratched record.

"A sorcerer asks himself: What is the sense of all that? Why invest my resources in something which won't help me at all? The appointment of a sorcerer is with the unknown: He cannot commit his energy to nonsense.

"While you walk the Earth, collect something of true value from it, otherwise it **wasn't** worth it.

"The power that governs us has granted us a choice. Either we spend life prowling around our familiar habits, or we encourage ourselves to get to know other worlds. The only thing which can give us the necessary jolt is the awareness of death.

"An ordinary person spends his whole existence without ever stopping to reflect because he thinks that death is at the end of life: After all, we will always have time for it! But a warrior has discovered that this is not true. Death lives beside us, an arm's length away, permanently alert, looking at us, ready to jump at the smallest provocation. The warrior transforms his animal fear of extinction into an opportunity for joy because he knows that all he has is this moment. Think as warriors. We are all going to die!"

One of the present asked him:

"[Carlos](#), in another lecture you told us that having the spirit of a warrior means seeing death as a privilege. What does that mean?"

He answered:

"It means to leave our mental habits behind."

"We are so accustomed to coexistence that, even face to face with death, we continue thinking in group terms. Religions don't tell us about the individual in contact with the absolute, but of flocks of sheep and goats, who go to heaven or to hell according to their fortune. Even if we are atheists and don't believe that anything happens after death, that 'anything' is generic, we assume it is the same for everybody. We cannot conceive of the idea that the power of an impeccable life can change things.

"In the view of such ignorance, it is normal for an ordinary man to feel panic regarding his end, and try to deal with it with prayers and medicines, or confuse himself with the noise of the world.

"Human beings have an egocentric and extremely simplistic vision of the universe. We never stop to consider our destiny as transitory beings. However, our obsession with the future betrays us.

"The sincerity or cynicism of our convictions makes no difference, because, deep down we all know what is going to happen. That's why we all leave signs behind. We build pyramids, skyscrapers, make children, write books, or, at the very least, we draw our initials in the bark of a tree. It is the ancestral fear; the silent knowledge of death which is behind that subconscious impulse.

"But there is one group of human beings who have been able to face that fear. As opposed to ordinary people, sorcerers eagerly seek out any situation that will take them beyond social interpretations. What better opportunity than their own extinction! Thanks to their frequent excursions into the unknown, they know that death is not natural; it is magical. Natural things are subject to laws, but death is not. To die is always a personal event, and for that sole reason it is an act of power.

"Death is the gateway to infinity; a door made to the exact measure of each of us which we will all pass through someday; returning to our origin. Our lack of understanding impels us to see it as a common reducer. But no, there is nothing common about it"

A girl who took part in this conversation was clearly affected by his words, and commented that the obsessive presence of death in his teachings was a detail that contributed to darken them. She would have liked a more optimistic emphasis; more focused on life and its accomplishments.

Carlos smiled and replied:

"**Oh** sweetheart! Your words show a lack of deep experience with life. Sorcerers are not negative: They don't seek the end. But they know that what gives value to life is having an objective worth dying for.

"The future is unpredictable and inevitable. Some day you won't be here anymore, like this, you will be gone. Do you know that the tree for your coffin has probably been cut already?

"For the warrior and for an ordinary man, the urgency of living is the same because neither knows when they will take the last step. For that reason we have to be attentive to death. It can jump at us from any corner. I knew a guy who went up on a bridge and urinated above a passing electric train. The urine touched the high voltage cables which gave him an electrical shock and burned him to cinders on the spot.

"Death is not a game. It is reality. Without death, there would not be any power in what sorcerers do. It involves you personally whether you want it to or not. You can be so cynical that you discard other topics of these teachings, but you cannot make fun of your end because it is beyond your power to decide, and it is implacable.

"Destiny's coach will take all of us without distinction. But there are two kinds of travelers: warriors who can leave with the totality of themselves because they have fine-tuned every detail of their lives, and ordinary people with boring existences without creativity whose only hope is in the repetition of their stereotypes until the end; people whose end won't make any difference whether this end happens today or in thirty years. We are all there waiting on the platform of eternity, but not everyone knows it. Awareness of death is a great art.

"When a warrior has put an end to his routines; when he **doesn't** care

anymore whether he has company or is alone because he has heard the silent whisper of the spirit, then you can say that, truly, he has died. From that point on, even the simplest things in life become extraordinary for him.

"For this, a sorcerer learns how to live again. He tastes each moment as if it were the last one. He **doesn't** waste any effort on feeling dissatisfied, nor does he throw away his energy. He **doesn't** wait until he becomes old to ponder the mysteries of the world. He is ahead: He explores: He knows and marvels.

"If you want to make space for the unknown, you must be aware of your personal extinction. Accept your destiny as the unavoidable fact that it is. Purify that feeling. Become responsible for the incredible event of being alive. Don't beg in the presence of death: It will not condescend to those who give in. Invoke it, aware that you came to this world to know it. Challenge it, even knowing that whatever we do, we don't have the smallest chance of conquering it. She is as gentle with the warrior as it is merciless with the ordinary man."

After this lecture, **Carlos** gave us an exercise.

"It concerns an inventory of your loved ones; of everybody who concerns you. Once you have classified them according to the degree of feeling that you have for each, you will take them, one by one, and pass them through death."

A murmur of consternation rippled through the listeners.

Making a soothing gesture, **Carlos** added:

"Don't get scared! There is nothing macabre about death. What is macabre is that we cannot face it with deliberation.

"You should do this exercise at midnight when the fixation of our assemblage point is loosened, and we are willing to believe in ghosts. It is very simple: You will evoke your dear beings through their inevitable end. Don't think about how or when they will die. Simply make yourself aware that some day they won't be there anymore. One by one they will leave, God knows in which order, and it **doesn't** matter what you try to do to avoid it.

"When evoking them in this way, you won't harm them; on the contrary! You will be seeing them in the appropriate perspective. The focal point of death is prodigious: It restores the true values of life."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

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On many occasions when I listened to **Carlos**, he referred to the topic of energy. Each time, he would explain different aspects of it. I have gathered some of them in this chapter, to give the reader a more coherent view.

His teachings, or rather the teachings of the tradition of seers to which he belonged, begin with the fact that the universe is dual. It is formed by two forces which the old seers symbolized by means of two snakes that are intertwined. But those forces have nothing to do with the dualities we call good and bad, God and Devil, positive and negative, or

any other kind of opposing pairs we can think of coherently. Rather, they constitute an inexplicable wave of energy which the **Toltecs** called the tonal and the **nagual**.

In an axiomatic way, the **Toltecs** established that everything we can interpret or imagine in any way is the tonal; and the rest, which we cannot categorize, is the **nagual**.

To emphasize that the tonal and **nagual** are not two antagonistic realities, but rather two complementary aspects of one unique force which the **Toltecs** nicknamed 'the Eagle', the seers compared the tonal and the **nagual** with the two sides of our physical body; the right side and the left side. And they saw that, just as the basic configuration of organisms is almost totally structured from a bilateral symmetry, these are also the forms in which energy manifests itself in the Cosmos, and with it, the way we perceive.

Life is formed when a portion of the free energy of infinity- which the old seers called 'the emanations of the Eagle'- is encapsulated by an external force; becoming a new individual being, aware of himself. And they saw that the perception of the world happens when something they called 'the assemblage point of perception' comes into play.

Although that center of selection is in operation in every living being in the universe, the deliberate awareness of oneself, on this Earth, can only be achieved by human beings and a group of species lacking physical organization whom the seers of antiquity called 'allies'. Interaction between man and these beings is not only feasible, it is something that frequently happens in our dreams.

Sorcerers cultivate this interaction since the consciousness of inorganic beings, who are much older than us, is filled with something that we all covet: Knowledge.

Having taken on the work of investigating the modes of energy, the sages from old Mexico were urged to describe to their contemporaries what they had discovered. In their effort to find the most appropriate terms, they said that all that exists is divided into light and dark, like day and night. And from there they derived every thinkable binary description. It is a command which reflects the great cosmic duality.

Through their seeing, they discovered that the world of energy is made up of extensive areas of darkness, sprinkled with tiny points of light, and they perceived that the dark areas correspond to the feminine part of the energy, while bright areas correspond to the masculine. They arrived at the inevitable conclusion that the universe is almost in its entirety feminine, and that the bright energy, the masculine, is rare.

By definition, they associated darkness with the left side, the **nagual**, the unknown, and the feminine; and luminosity with the right side, the tonal, the known, and the masculine.

Continuing their observations, they saw that the act of galactic creation happens when the cosmic darkness contracts itself, and from it arises an explosion of light, a spark that expands, giving origin to the order of time and space. The law of this order is that things always have an end, which again implies that the unique and perennial principle of the universe is the dark energy; feminine, creative, and eternal.

Likewise, man is divided into the tonal, represented by his daytime vigil, and the **nagual**, represented by his dreams at night.

From these observations, the rest of the wisdom of the **naguals** is

derived. They teach that dreams are a doorway to power because, ultimately, what sustains us is the dark energy to which we go periodically to be renewed. Consequently, they directed all their power towards perfecting the art of becoming conscious while in the state of dreaming. They called that special kind of attention 'dreaming', and they used dreaming to deliberately explore the dark energy and come into contact with the source of the universe. In that way, the initial observation of the wise **Toltecs** became a practical knowledge.

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One of **Carlos**' more frequent statements was that the opinions that we form about everything transform our world into something more and more predictable, until the possibility of visiting other worlds becomes a fairy tale.

"For modern man", he said on one occasion, "absolutely everything that exists is put into definite categories. We are labeling machines. We classify the world, and the world classifies us. If once you killed a dog, you are the dog-killer for the rest of your life, even if you never touched another one. And those classifications are inherited!"

He mentioned a series of funny and expressive last names that were related to the characteristics of a particular person, but then the names were bequeathed as an imposition on their descendants. It went to show that, energetically, people are marked.

He asserted that the greatest example of that absurd propensity to classify us is what believers call 'original sin', the sin of **Adam** and Eve, which makes us all forever sinful, and also, makes us all behave as sinners.

"We have become perceptual jailers of each other. The chain of human thought is powerful.

"Even our deepest feelings are classified and ordered so that nothing can escape. One example is the way we alienate ourselves from the actual time we are living in, in order to mindlessly go around repeating stereotypes. We have a collection of preset days: Mother's Day, All Saints' Day, Valentine Day, birthday anniversaries and weddings... They are like stakes we tie our life to so we won't get lost, and thus we walk the Earth, revolving around our descriptions like beasts tied by the neck."

He told us about when he and Don **Juan** once traveled to a small town in the north of Mexico, and sat down to rest on a bench in the church square. Suddenly, ten or twelve youths came carrying a Judas figure made of cloth and canes. It was dressed in a blanket and sandals, like an Indian. They installed it in the town square, and that night there was a public burning. Everybody drank, and everybody took turns insulting the puppet as part of the ritual.

"With customs like that, people keep Judas alive. They remember him: They sustain him: They keep him in a true hell with their memories. And, after burning him, next year they resuscitate him, and kill him again. The rigidity of human behavior is revealed in those routines."

A person in the audience requested permission to speak and asked him whether his statement, regarding how by remembering him the town keeps Judas alive, was meant literally or was just a metaphor.

He answered:

"Sorcerers affirm that as long as there is memory, there is awareness

of being, since the current of thought is an injection of life. True death is oblivion.

"The idea that time moves in a straight line from past to future is completely primitive; something that goes against the experience of sorcerers and even of modern science. Due to that limited interpretation, most of humanity is kept prisoner in a tunnel of time where their destiny becomes an infinite repetition of the same.

"The reality of our condition is that we are energetically blocked, due to what sorcerers call 'the collective fixation of the assemblage point.'

"A remarkable consequence of that fixation is the way we specialize. When preparing for a profession, for example, instead of widening our scope, we usually end up becoming sedentary, boring individuals, without creativity and without motivation. In a few years, our life becomes tedious, but, far from taking responsibility and changing ourselves, we blame our circumstances.

"One of the most serious habits that shape our inventory, is the habit of telling others everything we do, or stop doing. It is an important part of socialization. We want to generate an exclusive image of ourselves, but the image ends up molding itself to other people's expectations; and we become imitations of what we could be. Once they consider us as facts, we have to follow certain behavioral patterns even when we are sick of them, or even if we don't believe in them, because any intent to change puts us up against the wall.

"Most people feel empty when they don't have love or friends because they have built their life on a superficial base of relationships; and most people don't have any time left to ponder their destiny. Unfortunately, friendship is generally based on an exchange of intimacies, while a basic premise of mundane relationships is that everything we say some day will be used against us. It's a sad fact that the ones we care about the most, are also our worst headaches!

"Sorcerers maintain that talking about ourselves makes us accessible and weak, while learning how to be quiet fills us with power. A principle of the path of knowledge is to turn your own life into something so unpredictable that not even you yourself knows what's going to happen.

"The only way of leaving the collective inventory is moving away from those who know us well. After a time, mental walls that trap us become a little softer and they start to give in. That's when genuine opportunities for change appear and we can take control of our lives.

"If we were able to transcend interpretation and face pure perception without prejudice, the impression of a world of objects would vanish. In its place, we would witness energy as it flows in the universe. Under such conditions, the chain of other people's thoughts would no longer have the smallest effect on us and we would not feel obliged to be or do anything. Then our senses would have no limits. That's seeing."

He defined it further:

"The sorcerer's objective is to break the fixation of social interpretations, and to see energy directly. To see is a total perceptual experience."

"Seeing energy as it flows is an imperious need on the path of knowledge. Ultimately, all the effort of sorcerers is guided to that end. It is not enough for a warrior to know that the universe is energy: He, or she, has to verify it for him or herself."

"Seeing is a practical matter which has immediate consequences and far-reaching effects on our lives. The most dramatic of them is that sorcerers learn to see time as an objective dimension." He continued by saying that energy is distributed through the universe in layers. All conscious beings belong to one of these

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"Everyday love ends up becoming a debt when others claim from us the same attention they gave us. And a debt of feelings is something fatal!

"For these reasons, one of priorities of a teacher is to destroy the apprentice's sexual patterns. This is a crucial matter that requires lifelong work, but it is necessary to begin from the first moment; because becoming a member of a party of sorcerers cannot be used as a pretext for sexual deficiencies. If we don't solve that matter as ordinary men and women, our chances to advance on the warrior's path are very slim.

"Sorcerers have many ways of correcting an apprentice. Some don't have any scruples, and subject the pupil to real tortures; attacking his weaknesses until he gets cured or he cracks. Others, like my teacher don **Juan**, are extremely delicate on this point, and prefer to work with the energy from inside; making the apprentice become aware of himself, and react. But any method is legitimate as long as it produces the results desired.

"The **nagual** Julian, for example, combined a merciless efficiency with a tremendous ability to become what he wanted- it is not that he acted; rather, he genuinely transformed himself by moving his assemblage point to the position corresponding to the form of an animal or another person. One of his favorites was the form of a woman. Once, in the shape of a beautiful girl, he seduced his apprentice **Juan Matus** who at that time was barely twenty years old, and hot as a young bull. When they were both in bed, the **nagual** Julian moved his assemblage point back to its habitual position and was a man again, which made the youth **Juan Matus** run terrified from the room.

"For a mentality like the one **Juan Matus** had at that time, the impact was devastating. It demolished his stereotypes. It was a grotesque joke, but uniquely effective. In one slash, it broke his inclination to surrender to the first female who made herself available.

"Don **Juan** never forgave his teacher for the joke, but as time passed, he learned how to laugh at the story."

At this point, **Carlos** allowed a small round of questions.

One of the present interrogated him regarding celibacy; whether it was indispensable or not for sorcerers, and what the advantages were.

He answered:

"A priori, sorcerers are neither for nor against celibacy. They see that everything depends on the congenital disposition of energy. There are some who are born with the necessary passion to make love every day, while others don't even have enough for a masturbation. Some recover their luminous totality by means of discipline: Others have the appearance of strainers and will die incomplete. All these factors modify and determine the behavior of sorcerers regarding sex.

"What characterizes sorcerers is their refusal to be victims of the collective reproductive command; and their ability to choose a responsible use for their energy. Also, none of them can be trapped in any sexual category. They are free: They proceed every moment according to

what power indicates to them. To have that vision, they cultivate a sobriety that the ordinary person **doesn't** know."

He explained that, in general, the new seers **opt** for a position of celibacy and self-sufficiency because they are very greedy with their energy and they prefer to dedicate it to the expansion of their awareness. They have witnessed worlds on their journeys into infinity that make all other things seem pale and without attraction; even the sexual act.

"Don **Juan** said that making love is for those who don't have attachments."

Responding to another question, he said that there is no such thing as 'a sexual problem', only individuals with their own and very particular dilemmas to solve.

"To see anything, including sex, in a generic form is a trap because it makes us dilute our responsibility; and excuse ourselves with the notion that everybody else is the same as we are. Like birth and death, to procreate is an individual act; a gift which the Eagle has granted us. What sorcerers demand is something very simple: Responsibility.

"The society in which we live is a school where they force us to comply with astonishingly cruel orders. We become old, and making love turns into a grotesque parody. Society imposes a drainage on us, a preset behavior that **doesn't** stop until there is not a single blink of light left in us.

"I had an example of this in my grandfather. The old man used to say: 'You cannot fuck them all, but you have to try!' He already had one foot in the grave, and still kept reacting the way they had taught him. He spent half his time getting a woman, and the other half working to maintain her; and he never realized that he had never been shown

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"Finally, on his deathbed, the old man became bitter with the idea that his lovers **didn't** want him for his manliness anymore, but for his money. 'She **doesn't** love me!' he whimpered, and his grandsons assured him: 'She does love you, grandpa!' The stupid man died this way, screaming: 'Here I come, mommy!'

"Is it necessary to be a sorcerer to grasp that this is not all we can have as human beings?"

He admitted that, before deciding to practice the warrior's way, he believed he was a seductive man and he behaved as one; driven by the latin male stereotype.

"Once I seduced a girl and brought her to my car. We both got so horny that the windshield got all steamed up with all the kisses and **hugs** we gave each other. When I was most turned on, I discovered that the supposed girl was a man!

"Another time I fell sincerely in love with a young girl, but eventually I began to suspect that she cheated on me. I changed my car and stayed watching from the corner of her house. The other one arrived. When I asked her to explain, she told me: 'With you, it's love, and with him it's just sex!'

"These kind of encounters made me decide to behave with more moderation in my love affairs. But the pressure of my stereotype was too strong. I continued to spend my energy on sex according to the pattern of my race, until Don **Juan** gave me the choice: Either I had to calm down, or abandon the apprenticeship."

Responding to another question, he maintained that the best way of stopping the energy drainage that takes place through sexuality, is learning how to make magnanimous gestures which counter and loosen the fixation of our attention.

"We have received life as a cosmic gift, and it is our privilege to reflect that gesture with total detachment. Thanks to his indifference, the warrior is in the position of turning his love into a blank check; unconditional; an abstract affection because it does not start from desire. What a marvelous thing!

"Contrary to what a man in the street thinks, the nature of sorcerers is telluric; passionate. But the object of their passion is no longer carnal. Sorcerers have seen the glue that ties all things together; a wave of passion that floods the universe, and cannot be stopped; because, should that happen, everything would be reduced to nothing.

"Through their seeing, sorcerers have established their base on the cornerstone of awareness; the most powerful state of individual attention. Their love is an overpowering reality that vibrates in every breath, is expressed in every gesture, and gives meaning in every word. It is a force which impels them to explore, to take risks, and to evolve; constantly bringing out the best of themselves.

"Sorcerers have discovered the most refined form of love because they love themselves. They know that all we give out is a reflection of what we have inside. They have put the power of passion to the service of being, and it gives them the necessary impulse to undertake the only quest that counts: The quest for oneself."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

Previous-**Pg** Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-**Pg** Next-**Pg** Recapitulation

When revising my notes, I discovered that another topic **Carlos** repeatedly referred to in his talks was the concept of recapitulation. He claimed that it is the exercise to which sorcerers dedicate most of their time.

Once he remarked that, in spite of the energy drainage we are subjected to through social interaction, we all have an option; because the sealed nature of our luminous configuration allows us to restart from zero any time, and to recover our totality.

"It is never too late", he said. "While we are alive, there is always a way of conquering any kind of blockage. The best way to recover the luminous fibers we have lost is by calling our energy back. The most important part is to take the first step. For those who are interested in saving and recovering their energy, the best way open to us is the recapitulation.

"A sorcerer knows that if we don't go for our ghosts, they will come for us. For that reason a sorcerer leaves nothing unresolved. He recounts his past; looks for the magical joint- the exact moment when he was involved in somebody's destiny- and applies all his concentration to that point, and unties the knots of intent.

"Sorcerers say that we live our life from a distance as if it were a

memory. We spend life hooked; hurt by something that happened thirty years ago, and we carry a burden that **doesn't** make sense anymore. 'I don't forgive it!' we scream, but it is not true: It is ourselves we don't forgive!

"The emotional commitments we make with people are like investments we have made along the way. We must be completely insane to leave our heritage thrown away like that!

"The only way we can become complete again is by picking up that investment, reconciling ourselves with our energy, and dissipating the heavy burden of feelings. The best method the sorcerers have discovered for this is to remember the events of our personal history until we have completely digested them. Recapitulation takes you out of the past, and inserts you into the now.

"We cannot escape having been born as bored fucks; nor having invested most of our luminosity in making children, or in maintaining tiring relationships. But we can recapitulate: It cancels out the negative energetic effects of those acts.

"Fortunately, in the realm of energy, things like time and space don't exist. So it is possible to return to the place and to the same moment when the events happened, and relive them. It is not very difficult since we all know very well where we are hurting.

"To recapitulate is to stalk our routines; subjecting them to a systematic and merciless scrutiny. It is an activity that allows us to visualize our life as a totality, and not just as a succession of moments. However, and although this may seem strange, only sorcerers recapitulate as an exercise: Other people only happen to do it by chance.

"Recapitulation is the heritage of the old seers. It is a basic practice and is the essence of sorcery. Without it, there is no path. Don **Juan** used to disparagingly refer to apprentices who had not recapitulated as 'radioactive'. Don **Genaro** would not even shake hands with me; and if I touched him accidentally, he would run to wash himself as if I had infected him. He said I was full of dirt and it was seeping out through every pore of my skin. With that comedy routine, he installed in me the idea that recapitulating is an elementary act of hygiene."

In another lecture, **Carlos** referred to a kind of luminous stagnation, which he described as a fixation of our attention that blocks the flow of energy. He said that this happens when we refuse to face facts, and try to protect ourselves by hiding behind evasive actions; or, when we leave pending matters unresolved, or make commitments that tie us down.

The consequence of that kind of stagnation is that the person ceases to be himself. When being pressured by the chain of decisions that he has made during his life, he can no longer act in a deliberate manner and he becomes entangled in the circumstances. This situation can escalate to the point of mental or physical illness, and can only be resolved through recapitulation.

Carlos maintained that, in essence, to recapitulate consists of making a list of wounds caused by our interactions. The next step is to travel back to the moment when the events took place in order to reabsorb what belongs to us, and return what belongs to others.

"The warrior begins rewinding his day. He reconstructs conversations; deciphers meanings, remembers faces and names, looks for shades and insinuations, dissects his own emotional reactions and

those of others. He **doesn't** leave anything to chance, grabs the memories of the day one by one, and cleans them through his breathing.

"He also examines entire chapters and categories of his life; for example: partners he has had, houses he has lived in, schools, work places, friends and enemies, fights and happy moments, and so on. The ideal thing is to attack the task in chronological order from the most recent memory until the most distant that it is possible to evoke. But in the beginning it is easier to do it by topics.

"A very profitable form of the exercise accessible to all of us is the fortuitous recapitulation. If you think about it, we are constantly recapitulating. All memories which conform to our internal dialogue can be called that. However, we evoke them in an involuntary way. Instead of stalking them in silence, we judge them and interact with them viscerally. That is pitiful. A warrior takes advantage of the opportunity, because those memories, seemingly random, are warnings from our silent side."

He pointed out that to recapitulate, no special conditions are necessary. We can try the exercise any time, or any place; wherever we feel moved to do it.

"Warriors recapitulate when they are walking down the road, in the bathroom, when working, or when eating; whenever it is possible. The important thing is to do it."

He added that it takes no definite posture. The only requirement is to be comfortable so the physical body **doesn't** demand attention, or interfere with the memories.

"However, sorcerers take the exercise very seriously. Some use wooden boxes, raised sleeping platforms, closets, or caves. Others build a seat in the highest branches of a big tree; or dig a hole in the ground, and cover it with branches. A good practice is to recapitulate sitting on the bed, in darkness, before lying down to sleep. Any means that isolates us from the environment is good for formal recapitulation.

"Once we have located an event, and recreated each of its parts, we have to inhale to recover the energy that we left behind, and exhale fibers that others deposited in us. Breathing is magical because it is a function that gives life."

Carlos explained that this kind of breathing should be accompanied by a lateral movement of the head, which sorcerers call 'to fan the event.'

Somebody asked him if it is necessary to breathe from right to left or vice versa.

He answered:

"What does it matter? It is energy work: There is no fixed pattern. What counts is the intent. Breathe in when you try to recover something, and blow back all that **doesn't** belong to you. If you do that with the totality of your history, you will stop living entangled in a chain of memories; and instead, you will be focused in the present. Seers describe that effect as facing facts as they are; or as seeing time objectively."

They asked him what we have to do with our memories once we locate them; whether it means to examine them with some psychoanalytical method, or something like that.

He answered:

"It is not necessary to do anything in particular. Memories will find their own course, and luminosity is reordered by itself through the breathing. Just try it. Make yourself available: The spirit will tell you how

to do it.

"Recapitulation starts from inside, and sustains itself. It is matter of silencing the mind, and our energy body will take control; doing what is a delight for it to do. You feel well and comforted; far from draining you, it gives you rest. Your body perceives it as an inexplicable energy bath.

"But you should have the correct attitude. Don't confuse the exercise with a psychological question. If what you need is interpretations, go to the psychiatrist! He will tell you what to do; to continue being the idiot that you are.

"Neither should you try to find a 'lesson'. Stories with a moral only exist in children's books.

"Recapitulation is a specialized form of stalking, and should be undertaken with a high sense of strategy. Recapitulation is about understanding and putting our existence in order; seeing it as it is without remorse, reproaches, or congratulations; with total indifference and in a spirit of fluidity and even of humor, because nothing in our history is more important than anything else; and all relationships, in the end, are ephemeral.

"The important thing is to begin, because the energy we recover from the first intent will give us the power to continue recapitulating more and more intricate aspects of our lives. First it is necessary to go for the strongest investments which are the most harrowing feelings. Then we go for those memories that are buried so deeply that we thought we had forgotten them; but they are there.

"In the beginning, recapitulating can be hard work because our mind is not accustomed to that discipline. But, after closing the most painful wounds, energy will recognize itself and we become addicted to the exercise. In that way, each particle of light which we recover helps us to gain more.

"The moment you begin to prepare to voluntarily unravel the plots of your personal history, you will be taking a decisive step."

Responding to another question, he said that recapitulation **doesn't** have an end: It should last until the end of our days and beyond.

"I stretch my fibers every night while remembering what happened during the day. This way, my list of events stays updated. But once a year, I give myself over to a more complete and total exercise for which I move away from everything for several weeks."

He warned us that, just because it's a daily practice, we must not see the exercise as a routine.

"If we don't recover the totality of our energy, we will never achieve the power of our decisions: There will always be a background noise; a foreign command. And without the power of his decisions, a man is nothing.

"Reliving events is ideal because it cleans the wounds of the past, and clears up any congestion of the energy conduits. In this way, you break the fixation of other people's gaze, you expose the patterns of people's behavior, and nothing can hook you again.

"You become a sovereign being: 'You' decide what you want to make of yourself."

Another question concerned the effects of recapitulation on awareness.

He maintained that the exercise has two main effects.

"The immediate effect is that it stops our internal dialogue. When a warrior is able to stop his dialogue, he tightens the relationship with his energy. It liberates him from the obligation of memory, and from the burden of feelings; and leaves a residual energy that he can invest toward enlarging the frontiers of his perception. A warrior begins to appreciate the real thing, not the interpretation of it. For the first time, he comes into contact with the consensus of sorcerers, which is the description of a reality inconceivably integrated.

"It's normal that a warrior at this stage begins to laugh at anything, because energy provides happiness. Thanks to his recapitulation, he is happy, overflowing, or jumps like a child. On the other hand, he begins to become a fearsome person, since, having his luminosity intact and his life clean, decisions will no longer be an obstacle for him. He will decide what is necessary the moment he wants to, and that, to other people, is scary.

"This is also the time when the warrior requires an extra dose of sobriety and sanity, because without it he would take unnecessary risks, endangering both his own security and the security of others.

"Another effect of recapitulation is that it works as an invitation to the spirit, and makes it want to come and live with us. In other words, to remember our past is the most effective method to unite the physical body and the energy body, which have been separated for years."

He went on to say that the sorcerer who has managed to compress the thickest part of his energy is in a state where he may intend a feat of perceptual prowess; intending a copy of his life experience in order to deceive death.

"That is the final objective of recapitulation; to create a double, and get ready to leave. You don't have to be a sorcerer to understand the importance of all this. To die in debt is a pitiful way of dying. On the other hand, to have a double to offer the Eagle guarantees that you will be able to continue ahead.

"The fight of sorcerers is heroic. Recapitulating impeccably the content of their lives, they pick up the fibers which drained their attention, and return to those they have known all the attention they have given them. In that way, they arrive at a state of balance which allows them to leave with all their awareness. Their memories, coherent, refined, and integrated, work as an independent being which serves as a ticket they hand over in exchange for their awareness. The Eagle accepts that effort as a payment, and steps aside. Our replica is sufficient to satisfy its demand.

"Seers see that moment as an explosion of energy which aligns their encapsulated awareness with the totality of emanations out there, and their assemblage point expands infinitely, like a vortex of light."

In another talk, he referred to a method designed by the new seers, which can be helpful in the exercise of recapitulation. He stated:

"One of the tasks of sorcerers is to constantly analyze the insinuations of the spirit. For this purpose, sorcerers often use a book of memorable events; a map of those occasions when the spirit intervened in their lives, forcing them to make decisions- voluntarily or involuntarily."

He explained that the advantage of this technique is that when we write, we detach ourselves from things and events, at least to a minimal extent, and thus we are able to focus on them with more objectivity.

"It is not about describing our daily routines, but of being attentive to

the strange moments in which intent is manifested. Those are magical junctures because they produce changes, and they put us face to face with the meaning of our existence."

As requested, he gave us some examples of this kind of event.

"Although signs of the spirit are a personal matter, there are ordinary events that in general mark people's life, like being born, choosing a career, intertwining your destiny with another person, or having children; also illnesses and serious accidents because they establish a nexus with death. For those who have the fortune of finding a conduit of spirit in the shape of a **nagual**, this is, certainly, the most memorable event of all.

"The interventions of intent are precursors; very significant memories for a warrior and they can be used as reference points of where to start when one is exploring episodes of personal history. It requires speed and clarity to select the memorable events and to synthesize them; extracting the personal stuff and leaving the magical essence. When properly done, one's collection of the interventions of intent becomes what the new seers call abstract centers of perception; a matrix of intent, which a warrior has the duty of deciphering."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part I. A Romance with Knowledge

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One of **Carlos**' characteristics was that he was unpredictable.

Sometimes he arrived on time to his appointments, other times he was an hour late. The system had its advantages; it made the less interested stand up and leave, and forced the more committed to cultivate patience.

That afternoon the appointment was at the University of Mexico.

Among many other questions, he was asked if he believed in God.

In answering, **Carlos** asked us not to confuse his words with a religious message.

"Sorcerers," he said, "abide by their experience. They have changed 'believing' for seeing. They speak of the spirit, not because they believe in its existence, but because they have seen it. But they don't see it as a loving father who watches over us from up above. For them, the spirit is something much more direct and immediate; a state of awareness which transcends reason.

"Everything that reaches our senses is a sign. The only thing you need to have is the necessary speed to silence your mind and capture the message. By means of these indications, the spirit talks to us in a very clear voice."

One of the people present remarked that, even taken as a metaphor, the idea of listening to the spirit or speaking with it had an excessively religious air.

But **Carlos** was adamant in his definition:

"That voice is not a metaphor! It is literal! Sometimes it speaks in words. Other times it just whispers, or presents a scene before our eyes, like a movie. In that way, the spirit transmits its commands to us, which can be summarized in a single expression: 'Intent, intent!'

"The voice of the spirit speaks equally to everyone, but we don't realize it. We are so preoccupied with our thoughts that instead of making silence and listening, we prefer all kinds of subterfuges. That's why the reminding voice exists."

They asked him what the reminding voice was.

He answered:

"It's a resource of attention; a way of accessing another level of awareness. We can use almost anything to tune in to the spirit, because, finally, it is behind all that exists. But certain things attract us more than others.

"In general, people have their prayers, their amulets; or elaborate rituals, private and collective. The ancient sorcerers were prone to mysticism: They used astrology, oracles and incantations, magical sticks; anything that could deceive the vigilance of reason.

"But for the new seers, those resources are a waste and they hide a danger: They can deviate a person's attention so that, instead of focusing on his immediate bond with the spirit, he becomes addicted to symbols. Today's warriors prefer less ostentatious methods. Don **Juan** recommended intending inner silence directly."

Emphasizing the words, he specified that sorcery is the art of silence.

"Silence is a passageway between worlds. When our mind stays silent, incredible aspects of our being emerge. Starting from that moment, a person becomes a vehicle of intent, and all his acts begin to ooze power.

"During my apprenticeship, my benefactor showed me inexplicable feats which frightened me, but at the same time stirred up my ambition: I wanted to be as powerful as he was! I often asked him how I could learn his tricks, but he placed a finger on his lips and stared at me. It took years before I could appreciate the magnificent lesson of his answer. The key to sorcery is silence."

One of the present asked him to define that concept.

He answered:

"It is not definable. When you practice it, you perceive it. If you try to understand it, you block it. Don't see it as something difficult or complex because it is not something from another world: It is just silencing the mind.

"I could tell you that silence is like a dock where ships arrive; if the dock is occupied, there is no space for anything new. That's my image of the matter, but the truth is I don't know how to speak about it."

He explained that inner silence is not only the absence of thoughts. Rather, it is about suspending judgment; witnessing without interpreting. He maintained that entering silence could be defined, in the typically contradictory way of sorcerers, as learning 'how to think without words.'

"For many of you, what I am saying **doesn't** make sense because you are accustomed to consult your mind about everything. The ironic thing is that, for starters, our thoughts are not even ours. They sound through us, which is different. And since they have been pestering us ever since we learnt to use our reason, we have ended up getting used to them.

"If you ask the mind, it will tell you that the purpose of sorcerers is nonsense because it cannot be rationally demonstrated. Instead of advising you to go and verify that purpose honestly, it will order you to hide behind a solid block of interpretations. Therefore, if you want to have a chance, there is only one possible way out: Disconnect the mind!

Freedom is achieved without thinking.

"I know people who were able to stop their internal dialogue, and they no longer interpret, they are pure perception. They are never disappointed or regretful because everything they do starts from the center for decisions. They have learned to deal with their mind in terms of authority, and they live in the most authentic state of freedom."

He continued by saying that silence is our natural condition.

"We were born from silence and there we will return. What contaminate us are all the superfluous ideas that percolate through us due to our collective way of living.

"Our relatives, the primates, have very ingrained social customs whose objective is to diminish the levels of tension inside the group. For example, they dedicate much of their time to caressing each other, smelling each other, or picking each other's lice.

"Those customs are genetic, so they have not died: They are here inside; within you and within me. It's just that human beings have learned how to substitute them with the exchange of words. Every time we have an opportunity, we tranquilize each other by talking about something. After millennia of coexistence, we have internalized these exchanges to the point that, whether we are asleep or awake, our mind is never quiet. It is always talking to itself.

"Don **Juan** affirmed that we are predatory animals who, by the power of domestication, have been converted into grass-eaters. We spend our lives regurgitating an endless list of opinions on almost everything. We receive thoughts in clusters: One connects with the other one until the entire space of the mind is packed full. That noise has no use because practically, and in its entirety, it is devoted to the enlargement of the ego.

"Because silence goes against everything that we've been taught since we were children, silence should be attempted in a spirit of combat. At this time you have a great advantage: The experience of **stalkers**. Sorcerers nowadays recommend that we pass through the world without getting any attention; treating everything equally. A warrior stalker becomes the owner of the situation- for better or for worse- because there is something terribly effective about acting without the mind."

They asked him to give us some practical exercises to achieve silence.

He answered that that was a very private matter because the sources of the internal dialogue are fed by our personal history.

"However, through millennia of practice, sorcerers have observed that, deep down, we are very similar; and there are situations that have the effect of silencing all of us.

"My teacher gave me various techniques to silence my mind which, when they are well understood, can be reduced to one: Intent. Silence is intended crudely; by making the effort. It is about insisting; over and over again. It does not mean to repress our thoughts, but rather learning how to control them.

"Silence begins with a command; an act of will which becomes the command of the Eagle. However, we must keep in mind that if, and as long as, we 'impose' silence on ourselves, we will never truly be there, but rather we will be trapped in the imposition. We have to learn to transform will into intent.

"Silence is calm. It is to yield; to let yourself go. It produces a sensation of absence like the one a child feels when he stares at fire. How

wonderful to remember that feeling, and know that it can be evoked again!

"Silence is the fundamental condition of the path. I spent a lot of years battling to achieve it, but all I did was get entangled in my own attempt. In addition to the habitual conversation that was always going on in my mind, I began to blame myself for not being able to understand what it was that Don **Juan** expected from me. Everything changed one day while I was absent-mindedly contemplating some trees; silence came rushing from them like a wild beast, stopping my world, and hurtling me into a paradoxical state; for it was new and at the same time well-known.

"The technique of observation- that is, of contemplating the world without preconceived ideas- works very well with the elements; for example: with flames, running water, cloud formations, or the sunset. The new seers call it 'to deceive the machine', because, in essence, it consists of learning to intend a new description.

"We have to fight boldly to get it, but, after it happens, the new state of awareness is sustained naturally. You have a foot inside the door, the door is already open, and it is just a matter of accumulating enough energy to pass through to the other side.

"It's important that our intent is intelligent. The effort it takes to achieve silence would count for nothing if we **didn't** first create conditions favorable to sustaining it. Therefore, besides the training using observation of the elements, a warrior is forced to do something very simple but very difficult: Ordering his life.

"We all live in a chain of intensity which we call 'time'. Since we can't see its source, we never stop to think of its end. While we are young we feel eternal, and when we grow old, the only thing left is to complain about the 'wasted time'. But that is an illusion, time is not wasted, we waste ourselves!

"The idea that we have time is a misunderstanding that makes us waste energy on all kinds of commitments. When a man connects with inner silence, he puts a new value on his time. So another way to define it would be to say that silence is an acute awareness of the present.

"An infallible method for reaching silence is not-doing; an activity that we program with our mind, but which has the virtue of silencing our thoughts once it is in motion. Don **Juan** called that kind of technique 'to remove one thorn with another'."

As examples of not-doings, he mentioned: listening in the dark; changing the priority of our senses, and changing the command that compels us to fall asleep as soon as we close our eyes; also: to talk with plants, to stand on our heads, to walk backwards; to observe the shadows, and the distance or spaces between the leaves of trees.

"All those activities are among the most effective to silence our internal dialogue, but they have a defect: We cannot sustain them for a long time. After a while, we are forced to return to our routines. A not-doing that is exaggerated will automatically lose its power and become a doing.

"If what we want is to accumulate deep silence with a lasting effect, the best not-doing is solitude. Together with energy saving, and abandoning those who consider us 'facts', learning how to be alone is the third practical principle of the path.

"The warrior's world is the most solitary thing there is. Even when

several apprentices unite to travel the routes of power together, each one knows that he is alone; that he cannot expect anything from the others, nor can he depend on anybody. The only thing he can do is to share his path with those who accompany him.

"To be alone requires a great effort, because we haven't learned how to overcome the genetic command of socialization yet. In the beginning, an apprentice should be forced by his teacher, through traps if necessary. But after a while the apprentice learns how to enjoy it. It is normal that sorcerers look for silence in the solitude of mountains or in the desert, and that they live alone during long periods."

Somebody commented that this was 'a hideous perspective'.

Carlos replied:

"Hideous is to spend our old age like weeping children!

"One of the ironies of modern life is that the more communication increases, the more solitary we feel. Ordinary man's existence is one of harrowing loneliness. He looks for company, but cannot find himself. His love has been **devaluated**; his dream is pure fantasy. His natural curiosity has become a strictly personal concern, and the only thing he has left is his attachments.

"On the other hand, the warrior's solitude is like a lovers' retreat, a place for those who seek a remote niche to write poems to their love. And the warrior's love is everywhere because his love is for this Earth where he will wander for such a brief time. So, wherever he goes, the warrior surrenders to his romance. Naturally, he will sometimes avoid dealing with the world; inner silence is solitary."

Carlos went on to say that the sorcerers of antiquity used power plants to stop the internal dialogue. But today's warriors prefer less risky and more controlled conditions.

"The same results produced by power plants can be obtained when we are up against the wall. When facing extreme situations- like danger, fear, sensorial saturation, or aggression- something in us reacts and takes control. The mind becomes alert and automatically suspends its chatter. Deliberately creating that situation is called stalking.

"However, the favorite method of warriors is recapitulation. Recapitulation stops the mind in a natural way.

"The main detonators of our thoughts are pending matters, expectations, and defense of the ego. It is very difficult to find a person whose internal dialogue is sincere. Usually, we hide our frustrations, and go to the opposite extreme: The content of our mind turns into an ode to 'me'.

"To recapitulate puts an end to all that. After a time of sustained effort, something crystallizes there inside us. The habitual dialogue becomes incoherent, uncomfortable; the only remedy is to stop it.

"An apprentice in this phase will normally find himself facing a cross-fire. On the one hand is the homogenization [* homogenization- The act of making something uniform in composition] of his assemblage point; and on the other, some enormous parentheses of silence which strains through his mind, breaking it into fragments.

"When the inertia of the internal dialogue is broken, the world is made over and becomes new. The wave of energy feels like an unbearable vacuum opening under his feet. Because of this, a warrior may spend years in an unstable state of mind. The only thing that

comforts him in such a situation is to keep the purpose of his path clear to himself, and not lose, under any circumstances, his perspective of freedom. An impeccable warrior never loses his sanity.

"If, when applying some of these techniques, warriors feel that their minds shiver, and a voice that is not the habitual one begins to whisper things to them, that is normal and they should not be scared. They are not going mad, they are entering into the consensus of sorcerers."

They asked him if moving the assemblage point also attracts silence. He answered:

"It is the opposite. Inner silence induces displacements of the assemblage point, and these displacements are cumulative. Once a certain threshold is reached, silence can move the point a great distance by itself; but not before inner silence is reached."

He explained that the force of collective consent creates a certain inertia that varies from person to person according to their energetic characteristics; so resistance to the world's description can vary from some seconds to an hour or more- but it is not eternal. To conquer the world's description by means of a sustained intent is what sorcerers call 'arriving at the threshold of silence.'

"That rupture is felt physically, as a crack in the base of the skull or as the sound of a bell. From that starting point, it becomes a matter of how much power has been accumulated.

"There are those who have stopped their dialogue for some seconds and immediately get scared; and begin to wonder about things, or begin to describe what they feel to themselves. Others learn how to remain in that state for hours or days, and they even use it for useful activities. For example, there you have my books; on Don **Juan**'s demand, I have written them from a basic state of silence. But experienced sorcerers go even further than that: They can enter the other world in a definite form.

"I met a warrior who lived there almost permanently. When I asked him something, he answered by telling me what he was seeing; without caring if that answer was coherent with my question. He lived beyond my syntax. From my apprentice point of view, of course, he was crazy.

"In spite of its indefinable nature, we can measure silence through its results. Its final effect- the one that sorcerers look for with avidity- is that it brings us in tune with a magnificent dimension of our being where we have access to an instantaneous and total knowledge that is not composed of reasons, but of certainties. Old traditions describe that state as 'the kingdom of Heaven', but sorcerers prefer to give it a less personal name: Silent knowledge.

"You can say that a man who controls silence has cleansed his bond with the spirit, and power rains down on him in streams. A snap of the fingers, **pow!**, and the world is another. Don **Juan** referred to that state as 'the deadly somersault of thought', because we begin in the everyday world, but we never return there again."

The strange power of fascination that **Carlos**' talks had on me, made the mere idea of missing one of those encounters unbearably painful.

I remarked on it once, and he responded:

"You are already hooked! Don **Juan** always incited everyone who surrounded him to have a romance with knowledge."

I asked him what he meant.

He explained:

"It is the pure desire to know- not to feel apathy- to be vividly interested in what the spirit comes to tell you without your expecting anything from it. Having a passionate romance with knowledge is the only thing that can give us the power we need not to falter when signs are pointing in the direction of the unknown.

"When his path no longer corresponds to human expectations; when it takes him to situations that challenge his reason, then we can say that a warrior has begun an intimate relationship with knowledge.

"You have had extraordinary luck silencing your mind for a moment and allowing power to point you out, but that is not enough. Now you have to adjust yourself to its message, so that your life becomes the life of a warrior. From now on, your work will consist of cultivating an honest and clean bond with infinity."

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"Encounters With The [Nagual](#)" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part [II](#). Warriors' Dialogue

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I once told [Carlos](#) once how difficult it was for me to understand the postulates of sorcery, and asked him for some definitions which could guide my rationality. But he told me that this was neither possible nor useful, since he [didn't](#) live in a reality of ordinary consensus.

"Not even I understand myself," he assured me with absolute seriousness.

He maintained that 'to comprehend' is to fix our attention on a specific point from where things can be explained. The more accepted that point is by people in general, the truer we find it.

"But the universe is not reasonable. Its essence is beyond all description. Security and common sense are islands floating around in a bottomless sea, and we only cling to them out of fear.

"If you continue on the path of knowledge, you will soon discover that explanations are only placebos since they never fulfill what they promise. For each thing they clarify, they generate a trail of contradictions. In fact, we never understand anything: True learning is physical and we only get it after years of fighting. That is the nature of the lessons of the [nagual](#).

"However, sorcerers have found that it is possible to understand things without reasoning them out, and that has led them to practice. An hour of practice can sweep years of explanations off the table, and real results appear; results that stay with you forever. As you turn yourself into a witness of power, the obsessive pressure of your mind to be in charge will be cancelled out, and in its place the childlike spirit of adventure and discovery will be reborn in you. In that state you don't think anymore: You act."

Then he asked me to what extent my interest in the knowledge of the sorcerers of ancient Mexico was honest. I assured him that there could be no doubts about my sincerity, and that I was willing to make any effort, except to transgress my principles concerning honesty and charity.

He shook my hand effusively.

"You are the ideal candidate!" he exclaimed, I don't know whether he was joking or sincere.

To my surprise, he stated that my principles- which were not mine, but those of any intelligent and normal person- were a very good base to work from.

"They are your basic materials. But now you have to transform them into an unbending intent, because, as long as they just remain 'good intentions', they won't serve you in any way."

After a pause, he added:

"I can help you to elucidate the beliefs of the seers of ancient Mexico by means of a combination of studies and experiences."

Interpreting my silence as agreement, he continued by describing an action program that I should incorporate in my daily life based on three points: stopping my internal dialogue with the help of pure intent, compacting my energy by means of rearranging my way of life, and loosening the bounds of my mind in order to dream. He said the program was designed to help me loosen a little the collective fixations, and encourage me to enter into a practical commitment with the postulates of sorcerers.

I accepted his proposal and prepared to listen. But [Carlos](#) was anything but a good instructor. When I read his books, at least I had the opportunity to pause, to reread a sentence, or to leave everything for later. But when I was right there beside him, his impatience and his [uncontainable](#) torrent of words overwhelmed me. Also, he gave the impression that he was avoiding, in every possible way, establishing a human relationship.

When I pointed out to him that his method [didn't](#) work, he told me that it was a deliberate hunting strategy. Apparently, he was stalking the routines of my mind through what he called 'conceptual saturation.'

I asked him what he meant by that, and he explained:

"Reason becomes saturated when you give to it too much content to work with. Don [Juan](#) used to say that strange concepts, like those sorcerers deal with, should be repeated to the point of fatigue. That way they gain a definite place in our awareness which is otherwise burdened by the weight of so many trivial matters.

"What scares us in front of a sorcerers' lesson is that even if we don't want to, we are constantly evaluating everything that comes to us. When the object of that analysis is an irrational proposition, it requires a lot of power to avoid prejudice.

"If you want to know the magical side of the world, be implacable with your reason. Don't let it make itself comfortable: Take your rational thoughts to their limit; to the point of rupture. Under such circumstances, your mind will only have two options: to impose itself, forcing you to abandon the apprenticeship; or to be quiet, leaving you alone."

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"Encounters With The [Nagual](#)" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part [II](#). Warriors' Dialogue

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"How is your recapitulation going?"

His question caught me unaware. I answered that I had still not tried the exercise, because I was waiting for conditions at home to be

favorable.

He gave me a very serious, almost reproachful look and commented that, for sorcerers, the totality of a path can be summed up in its first step.

"That means that the ideal conditions are here and now."

Softening the tone of his voice, he granted:

"It happens to everyone at first. To observe our life is an agitating exercise because to get to the bottom of things scares us, and it is easy to postpone it from one day to the next. But, if we insist, after a time of scrutiny we begin to discover that what we always found to be obvious and correct ways of thinking are in fact implanted beliefs.

"The ideas we become addicted to are made up of the densest matter in our mental contamination. In general, they all start from a defect of syntax. If the way we speak changes, our old ideas stop making sense, and are substituted by new ideas. That's why there are so many belief systems in the world.

"From the center of silent knowledge we all know that. That is why we are so rarely willing to practice our beliefs. We can spend a lifetime speaking of loving our fellow man, or turning the other cheek, but who dares to actually do it? There you have the wars for religion motives, where people are killed because of the peculiar way they pronounce God's name.

"Sorcerers know that beliefs based on ideas are false."

He explained to me that the starting point of our convictions is usually something that someone told us in an imperative or persuasive tone when we were children- before we had our own inventory of experiences for comparison. Or our convictions are one of the effects of the massive and subliminal propaganda to which modern man is subjected. Frequently, they come from a sudden and deep emotional outburst, like that suffered by those who allow themselves to be swept away by religious hysteria. That modality of belief is merely associative.

"At the core of each one of our actions, customs, or reactions, there is a hidden belief. Therefore, the initial task on the path of knowledge is to make an inventory of all those things we have placed our faith in."

He suggested that I dedicate a new notebook to that exercise, where I should write down all my beliefs. He assured me that this practice would help to make a map of my motivations and attachments.

"In each case," he said, "you should look for the source of your beliefs, and make a profound analysis of each one. Determine when and why it arose, what was there before that, how you felt, and how much your faith has changed over the years. The intention is not to justify anything, but rather simply to get things clear. This exercise is called 'stalking the believer'."

He predicted that the result of the practice would be to liberate me of my second-hand convictions, and emphasized that in the world of sorcerers, only direct experimentation is valid.

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Believing Without Believing

I accepted the exercise because I found it inoffensive. For a couple of weeks, I was devoted to classifying everything with which I felt mentally identified. I hoped my inventory would be simple and clear, but I was soon surprised to find that an endless list of thought patterns appeared, sometimes not very coherent in relation to each other.

For example, one of my beliefs was that only when something can be proven and demonstrated can it be called 'certain'. At the same time, another of my beliefs was that a supreme reality, a divine being beyond all experimentation, exists. No matter how much I tried, I could not resolve that contradiction.

In the field of non-beliefs I also had my surprises. The most unpleasant was to discover the way a simple suggestion had blocked an enormous area of possibilities for me. When I began to investigate why it was not honestly possible for me to accept [Carlos](#)' statements regarding how, through dreams, you can access other real and complete worlds, I remembered that when I was a child and had a nightmare, my mother used to repeat the refrain of a children's story which said: "Dreams are just dreams."

When we met again, I gave [Carlos](#) a superficial account of the results of my investigations. He told me that it was enough: There was already sufficient material to attack the second part of the exercise. Then he suggested that I select the most important one of my beliefs, which served as a base to all the other ones, and stop believing it for a moment. I should do this with each one of them, according to their degree of importance.

"I assure you that it is not difficult!" he added, seeing my bewildered face. "And above all, it won't harm your faith. Remember, it is only an exercise."

I protested. In a decisive tone, I told him that the basis of my principles was my certainty that God exists, and that I was not willing to question it or even analyze that point.

"It is not true!" he screamed. "Your most ingrained conviction is that you are sinful and for that reason you are justified! You can make mistakes, squander your energy, and give in to anger, lasciviousness, whims and fear: After all, you are human, and God always forgives you!

"Don't fool yourself. Either you choose your belief, or it chooses you. In the first case, it is authentic. It is your ally. It sustains you, and it allows you to manipulate it at will. In the second case, it is an imposition and not worthwhile."

I replied that the exercise that he proposed- treating my faith as casually as a man changing his shirt - was not only blasphemous and mercenary, but the practice would probably end up throwing me into a state of internal confusion.

He observed:

"You don't have to be clear to enter the world of sorcerers!

"Our idea that truth goes hand-in-hand with clarity is a trap, because the spirit is too inaccessible to be understood with our fragile human mind. As you well know, the essence of religion is not clarity, but faith. However, faith is worth nothing in comparison with experience!

"Sorcerers are practical; from their point of view, what we believe or stop believing is absolutely irrelevant. The stories that we tell ourselves

don't matter in the least: What matters is the spirit. When there is power, the content of the mind is something secondary. A sorcerer can be an atheist, or a believer; Buddhist, Muslim or Christian, and yet cultivate impeccability- which automatically brings him to power."

His words irritated me beyond reason. When I realized it, I was surprised to find how deeply the Catholic doctrines I learned during my childhood had penetrated. Now that **Carlos** questioned them, it felt as if he was unfairly robbing me of something very valuable.

He noticed my dilemma and began to laugh.

"Don't confuse things," he told me. "Religions are not remedies, but consequences of the pitiful state of awareness man is in. They are replete with good intentions, but very few people are prepared to fulfill them. If their commitment meant anything of real value, the world would be full of saints, not sinners!"

"The moment ideologies- including **nagualism**- become widespread, they become cultural **mafias**; schools to make people sleepy. No matter how subtle their postulates are, and no matter how much they try to validate them with personal corroboration, they end up conditioning our actions according to some form of reward or punishment; and by doing that, they pervert the very essence of the search. If the pillar of my faith is a salary, what merit does it have?"

"Sorcerers love the purity of the abstract. For them, the value of the path with heart is not so much where it takes us but how intensely we enjoy it. Faith certainly has value in an ordinary life, but it is useless against death. Our only hope when facing the inevitable is the warrior's path.

"Sorcerers call the ability to manipulate their mental attachments 'believing without believing'. They have perfected that art to the point where they can identify sincerely with any idea, live it, love it, and discard it if it comes to that, without remorse. And inside that freedom of choice, they ask sorcerers' questions. For example, why accept myself as a sinner, if I can be impeccable?"

After some resistance, I agreed with **Carlos** that there could not be anything wrong with subjecting my beliefs to a shake.

What I found to be the main effect of the technique of "believing without believing," was that it showed how incredibly fragile my catalog of ideas was. It was prone to disintegrate at the slightest blow. I understood why Don **Juan** claimed that the world we live in is a magic fabric; the magic of 'the first ring of power'.

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As a base for inner silence, **Carlos** suggested that I fight against what he called my 'domestic condition'; that is, my membership in a social group. He referred to it as a first step toward freedom.

"To put our interactions on trial means to analyze all over again a heap of things we have always considered as facts, beginning with our sexual role, and ending with family obligations and the religious and civic

commitments we usually involve ourselves in. The purpose is not to judge or to subvert anything, but to observe. Observing, in itself, has an effect on things."

I asked him to explain how the passive act of witnessing can modify anything.

He answered that attention, however tenuous, is never passive, because it is made from the same matter which makes up the universe. Even the mere act of exercising the attention implies an energy transfer.

"It is like the velocity which when being applied to an object, adds mass to it. Likewise, the focus of attention adds reality to things, and that reality has a limit. Beyond that limit, the world we know disintegrates.

"The secret of the sorcerers' marvels is the channeling of attention. It **doesn't** matter how they apply it; for good or for bad. What changes is the intention, not the force of the focus. For new seers, the magic of sorcery is not in its results, but in the ways we get to them. Therefore, your best intent as an apprentice is to silence your mind."

When I returned to see him I admitted that, although I had spent much time trying to follow his advice, I **didn't** notice any substantial advance in my struggle to achieve inner silence. On the contrary, I had noticed that my thoughts were more agitated and more confused than ever.

He explained that this sensation is a normal consequence of the practice.

"Like all beginners, you are trying to classify silence like another element in your inventory of beliefs.

"The objective of your inventory was to make you aware of the weight of our prejudices. We use almost all our available energy on maintaining an image of the world, and we do it by means of conscious or unconscious suggestions.

"When an apprentice is liberated from that jail, he has the sensation that he has had fallen into an ocean of peace and silence. It **doesn't** matter if he speaks, sings, cries, or meditates: That sensation remains.

"In the first stages of the path, it's very difficult to handle silence as a practice, because as soon as we detect an absence of thoughts, a mischievous little voice congratulates us for it. And that automatically breaks the state.

"The problem happens because you confuse the objective of sorcerers with an ideal. The concept of 'silence' is too delicate for a mind like yours; accustomed to classifications. It is obvious that you have thought about the exercise in auditory terms, as a lack of sound. But that's not what it is about.

"What sorcerers want is something simpler. They try to resist the suggestions, and that's all. If you are able to make yourself the owner of your mind, and you are able to think properly, without prejudice or false convictions, you will be able to cancel out the domesticated part of your nature: A supreme achievement. Otherwise, you will not even understand what the exercise is about.

"Once we learn how to prevent the commands of the mind without being offended by them nor giving them any kind of attention, they will stay in our interior for some time, but eventually they will leave. So it is not a question of getting rid of them, but rather killing them with boredom.

"To reach that state, you have to rattle your inventory of ideas. I asked you to begin with your beliefs, but it would have worked equally well if, for example, you had listed all your relationships and affections; or the most attractive elements in your personal history; or your hopes, goals, and concerns; or your likes, preferences, and aversions. The important thing is that you become aware of your thought patterns.

"The magic of all inventories is based in the order of its components. When we rattle that order; when it lacks some of the pieces that we gave it, the whole pattern begins to crumble. This is the way it is with routines of the mind. You change one parameter- suddenly there is an open door where it should be a wall- and that changes everything. The mind trembles!

"That is what you have been experiencing as an extraordinary activation of your interior dialogue. You didn't even notice it before, but now you know it is there. Some day that presence will be so heavy that you will do something about it. That day you will stop being an ordinary man and will become a sorcerer."

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In a lecture in which he was explaining to us various methods [naguals](#) used to help their apprentices, one of the present, interrupting him, threw this at him:

"[Carlos](#), you always say that without the [nagual](#) there is no freedom, but that's because you had a teacher! What can we do, those of us who weren't so lucky?"

He exploded:

"It is not true, you have all the information you need! What more do you want? Do you hope to get everything for free, without any effort? If you believe that somebody else will do the work for you, you are fucked up!"

In a reproachful tone, he made fun of the human laziness which makes us hope that others will do things and give us the greatest possible advantage. He called this 'the antithesis of a warrior's behavior.'

"All that a man needs is the minimal chance: To be made aware of the possibilities discovered by sorcerers. A warrior doesn't go around hoping they will come and kick him in the butt to make him move: He is ahead and he says: 'I can do it! And I can do it alone!'"

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Another time, I asked him:

"[Carlos](#), what determines an ordinary man's access to the sorcerers' knowledge?"

"Intent," he answered. "Man's intent has to make an offer to the spirit, and spirit must accept it, putting the means of evolution in his path. In other times, the only available way was to be directly pointed out to a [nagual](#). Nowadays, an ordinary man has the opportunity to be guided through publications.

"When seeking access to the world of sorcerers, one must be prepared. An accidental encounter with power won't lead to anything, except to a brutal fright for the seeker who, from then on, will swear that sorcery is demon's work, or that everything is sheer falsehood.

"But a poorly conducted preparation, one which foments [* foments- bathes with warm water or medicated lotions] self- importance, instead of increasing wonder and a desire to learn, becomes a near total obstacle for the apprentice. One who comes to the [nagual](#) saturated with beliefs on almost everything won't get the chance to continue.

"Therefore, the next requirement before entering the path of knowledge is a profound honesty. It is necessary to empty the harbor to make room for the new ship arriving, and to recognize that when it comes down to it, we don't know anything. Once that degree of preparation has been reached, the rest is a matter of luck. The spirit determines who will be chosen and who won't.

"The answer of the spirit is inscrutable. It happens in unexpected ways and in terms that are almost always incomprehensible to our reason. All we can do is be attentive to the signs; placing ourselves deliberately in their path. When man's intent seals an alliance with the spirit, it is unavoidable that the teacher appears."

I asked him if the [nagual](#) could be considered a teacher in the same way as the oriental instructors.

He answered emphatically:

"No! There is no comparison for a very simple reason: A [nagual](#) never chooses his apprentices. The spirit is the one who determines through omens who can and who can't be part of a lineage.

"A real teacher is an impeccable warrior who has lost his human form and has a very clear bond with the abstract. So, he doesn't accept volunteers.

"Education systems based on the seeker's spontaneous desire don't get very far, because they are not geared towards realization, but towards the concerns of the ego. All the followers do is to imitate and that doesn't lead anywhere. Therefore, there is no need for teachers.

"After years of learning, I am convinced that all a seeker needs is the opportunity to be made aware of his possibilities, and a commitment to the death with his purpose."

I observed that his statements were contradicting his repeated statements about how, without Don [Juan](#), he would not have achieved anything. He replied:

"Sorcerers make a clear distinction between the concepts of 'spiritual guide' and '[nagual](#) teacher'. The first is an individual who specializes in directing flocks, and the other is an impeccable warrior who knows that his role is limited to serving as a connection with the spirit. The first one will tell you what you want to hear and he will give you the miracles that you want to see, because you interest him as an acolyte; while the second will be guided by commands of an impersonal power. His help is not altruistic, [* altruistic- showing unselfish concern for the welfare of

others] but a way of paying his old debt with the spirit of man.

"The **nagual** is not a benevolent type: He **doesn't** come to please us, but to wake us up, and he will do it with a stick if necessary, because he **doesn't** feel any compassion. When intervening in the life of his apprentices, he can produce a condition of such agitation in them that their latent energies are activated."

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The conversation turned to the tendency that human beings have of behaving in imitative ways; something that he categorized as 'the behavior of primates.'

"Our great opportunity and at the same time our great anxiety, is an abyss of silent knowledge which is still inside each one of us. Below the noise of the mind, we all have the sensation that there is something indefinite; something that makes us grab anything which will alleviate this pressure of the unknown. Frequently, that feeling takes us to fanaticism, and there are always those willing to profit from other people's faith."

"Are all teachers frauds, then?"

"What I have seen is that most of them are as asleep as their followers, but they have learned how to hide it. Imagine a planet where all the residents are blind; among them circulates the myth that it is possible to see, but no one has verified it. One day someone arrives and says: 'I can see!' What can they do? Either believe or not believe, and there will always be some who hope. It **doesn't** matter if the teacher is also blind; it's very easy for him to take advantage of the situation.

"The Eagle **doesn't** demand that you revere it, only that you fill yourself with awareness. To fall on your knees before the unknown is totally useless, but to do it before another human being is the pinnacle of idiocy.

"The ape that we have inside yearns to have someone to guide him: He needs to believe that there are superior entities who can magically solve his problems. As children, we are always hoping that somebody will show up and take care of the situation. From this, cults are born that, in essence, are ways of leaving the responsibility for one's own growth in other people's hands.

"We have been deceived. We have been told that we are special because we are rational, but that is not true. The human being wants desperately to obey, and dies from fear when his valuable beliefs are removed. We are like the fish that clean fish tanks, always with the mouth open, devouring any debris that is thrown to us. Meanwhile, we ignore the source of life and knowledge that we have inside.

"I am going to tell you a very old and well-known, but always new story. The gods were wondering where to hide wisdom, to get it out of man's reach. In the mountains? He would climb them. In the ocean? He would find it. Space, the moon and stars were equally discarded; some day they would be explored. Finally, the gods came to the conclusion that

the best place to hide it was inside man, because that's one place he will never look for it.

"And what did man do? Instead of examining himself with total honesty, he looked for a teacher.

"To become responsible for one's own existence is an anomaly; a violation of laws; a state of passion out of the ordinary; a fight that demands your entire life. It is the only procedure that will renew our energy. I don't know if you will be able to understand this detail: To know yourself is an intent of warriors. Nobody can intend it for you!"

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A man was sitting on a bench, almost hidden behind a newspaper stand. I noticed him, but in such a subconscious way that I had walked some twenty meters past him before it struck me. I turned: The man looked at me smiling. It was **Carlos**.

He hugged me effusively and remarked that an encounter of that nature had to be taken as an omen.

"Now, I am all yours," he exclaimed. "Ask!"

I saw my opportunity.

In various conversations, **Carlos** had categorically stated that hallucinogenic plants are not advisable for a seeker of knowledge. However, in his first books he had written exactly the opposite, and he even gave extensive exercises on their use, presenting himself as an example of the power of those plants.

This was a matter that interested me intensely, I had never experienced in my own body the incredible forms of perception that he described and I felt a great curiosity. So, taking advantage of his good mood, I asked him to clear up the contradiction.

When he heard my question, his enthusiasm cooled down. The topic seemed to affect him deeply. After a few seconds of reflection he told me that a sign from the spirit had determined the change in his perspective.

"In 1971, after publishing my second book, I received an uncomfortable visit. United States government agents came to one of my presentations and they informed me that I was becoming an idol of juvenile drug addicts, and that they would expel me from the country unless I modified my attitude.

"At first I **didn't** see any reason to concern myself with these threats. But later I investigated a little, and the situation made an impression on me. Many students were taking Don **Juan's** teachings as an academic permission to get high. My name was mentioned everywhere as an authority on drugs. But I **didn't** want to be the patron saint of anything!

"I took my dilemma to Don **Juan**, who laughed at the whole thing and told me that a principle of **stalkers** is not to confront anybody, and certainly not people more powerful than themselves. 'You have blundered in among the hooves of horses, and you have to get yourself out of there. I suggest you take care of your learning: The rest, what does it matter?' That advice made me decide to have a more cautious-attitude

in my next publications.

"Personally, I neither approve nor disapprove of anything, since I am not one to judge in the matter and, also, my learning was a result of such techniques. However, in public I cannot encourage use of the plants, because my books are read by all kinds of people and everyone interprets them in their own way.

"Without qualified supervision, power plants can produce regrettable results, since they move the assemblage point abruptly and erratically, and in the long term, they take their toll on a person's health and sanity; and sometimes they will take a practitioner's life. On one occasion, they warned me that the father of a student was looking for me with a gun to kill me, because he blamed me for his son's death after experimenting with drugs.

"It is a very delicate matter, all this about power plants. If you want to understand it, you have to abandon the folkloric vision that almost everybody has of sorcerers. True **Toltec** warriors are not fanatical about dope or about anything else. Their behavior is strictly dictated by impeccability.

"I have already explained to you that Don **Juan** only used plants with me in the beginning of my apprenticeship, and only because I was exceptionally fixed in my routines. The more obstinate I got, the more plants he gave me. In that way he was able to loosen my assemblage point the minimum necessary for me to grasp the premises of his teachings. However, in spite of his careful conduct, it had a high cost for me and it's one of the main reasons why today my health is so deteriorated.

"Power plants have a limit and a sorcerer finds it very soon. They are an initial stimulus, but they cannot become a base to work from, because they don't have the capacity to take us to complete worlds, which is what a seer looks for."

"Do you mean that the movement they induce in the assemblage point is not sufficiently great?"

"It's the opposite, they produce a deep and unpredictable shake. A real sorcerer can manage that, but not an apprentice. If he uses them to break his perceptual limits, the beginner will be tempted to classify everything he is witnessing as hallucinations: After all, everything started from a plant! In that way, he will never reach the degree of commitment needed to fix his assemblage point in a new position. Plants take you quickly and easily to another world, but they don't allow you to stalk it: That is their limitation.

"The best way of deploying our perception is through dreaming. As a method, dreaming is just as simple but less risky, more comprehensive and, above all, much more natural.

"The goal of an apprentice is to take the reins of his assemblage point. Once he is able to displace it, he has to repeat those movements without external help; by force of discipline and impeccability. Then we can say the warrior has found an ally."

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The Trap of Fixation

In one of his lectures, **Carlos** explained that nothing is as fragile as the fixation of the assemblage point. He maintained that the art of agreeing is so special that we spend twenty years of daily training to achieve it. Those who do achieve it, we call 'adults', and those who don't are 'crazy'.

"However, nothing is easier for us than moving to new universes. To do it, we just have to return to what we were."

He explained that the fixation of the assemblage point consumes enormous quantities of energy, and produces a static vision of the world. The energy used in that way is dispersed all through our luminosity and it winds up crammed in along its borders, where it forms dense masses that create a reflection of the self. Under these circumstances, to change the fixation becomes an exhausting task.

"To break the trap of fixation, one should try any recourse. In most cases, only a push coming from the outside can cause the movement of a person's assemblage point. When we have a great, great deal of luck, we receive that push through the blow of a **nagual**.

"Once the initial displacement is achieved, the warrior should fight for control of his attention, by means of exercises of intent and practicing dreaming. Dreaming is the escape door for the human race, and it is the only thing that can give our existence its appropriate dimension."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: Dreaming and Awakening
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Dreaming and Awakening

Carlos had a great ability to turn conversations towards the practical side of things. In spite of the extraordinary sharpness of his intellect, he hated it if conversations sank to the level of mere speculations. I often watched how he in an ingenious but firm manner would unravel the argumentation of the most rigid speakers, confronting them with the topic of results.

In my case, his method for silencing my attacks of rationality consisted of reducing everything to an immediate proposition and, according to him, something not very difficult: The control of dreams.

However, for me dreaming was the hardest aspect of his teaching. First, because I could not distinguish the concept of 'dreaming' from ordinary dreams, which are two totally different things for a sorcerer. Second, because the idea of focusing my attention on sleeping instead of on awakening was contrary to everything that I had learned in my philosophical search.

Both these considerations very quickly made me avoid dreaming without ever accepting it as an authentic and reachable possibility. Whenever I listened to him talking about it, I was filled with apprehension. And I justified all this by saying to myself that such an irrational topic **wasn't** even worth the pain of trying to analyze it.

That afternoon he asked how my practice was going. I admitted that my prejudices had prevented me from making a serious decision and, not

surprisingly, I had not obtained any positive result.

He commented:

"Maybe you just haven't been lucky. My teacher said that each human being brings his basic inclination with him at birth. Not everybody can be a good dreamer: Some find stalking easier. The important thing is that you insist."

But his words **didn't** console me. I began explaining to him that my incredulity seemed to be the result of some mental block implanted in my earliest childhood.

He **didn't** allow me to finish. Making an imperative gesture with his hand, he replied:

"You have not done enough. If you promise yourself that you will not eat, or pronounce a single word, until you dream, you will see what happens! Something in your interior becomes soft, the dialogue gives in and... **kaboom!**

"Keep in mind that, for you, dreaming is not just an option, it's something basic. If you don't accomplish it, you cannot continue on the path."

Alarmed by his words, I asked:

"But what do I have to do to achieve it?"

"You must want to do it!" he answered. "It is as simple as that. You are exaggerating the difficulty of this exercise. Dreaming is open to everybody, because to start, it barely requires the minimum of deliberation that is necessary to learn how to type or to drive a car."

I commented that it was very difficult for me to understand how the handling of dreams could take us to internal awakening.

He observed:

"You are confused by the words. When sorcerers speak of dreaming and awakening, the terms don't have anything to do with the physical states you know. I don't have any choice but to use your language, because otherwise you would not understand me at all. But if you don't do your part, and put aside everyday meanings and try to penetrate the meaning of what I'm telling you, you will never get out of this state of mistrust.

"I can only guarantee you that, once you discard the laziness that prevents you from facing the challenge, and you attack dreaming directly and without hesitations, your mental mess will clear up by itself."

I apologized for my stubbornness and asked him to elucidate the meaning of dreaming once more.

Instead of getting involved in a theoretical explanation, which was what I wanted, **Carlos** gave me an illustration.

"Imagine a confirmed believer; one of those who cannot do anything without requesting permission from his god beforehand. Once he falls asleep, what happens with his convictions? Where do they go?"

I **didn't** know what to answer. He continued:

"They turn off, like the flame of a candle in the wind. When you dream, you are not the owner of yourself. Your visions are isolated bubbles, without connections to each other and without memory of the self. Of course, the force of habit will almost always take you to dreams where you are yourself, but you might be brave or a coward, young or old, man or woman. Truly, you are only an assemblage point which moves at random; nothing personal.

"For the ordinary man, the difference between being awake and dreaming is that in the first state his attention flows with continuity, and in the second it flows in a disordered manner; but in both experiences, the degree of participation from the will is minimal. A person will wake up in the place where, as always, he puts on his personality like a shirt and goes out to fulfill his routine tasks. Upon falling asleep, he gets disconnected again, because he **doesn't** know he can do something else.

"The everyday wakefulness **doesn't** leave us room to stop and wonder if this world that we are perceiving now is as real as it seems. And the same thing must be said of any ordinary dream: While it lasts, we accept it as an unquestionable fact. We never judge it; or, to put it in more practical terms, we never intend to remember, while inside the dream, some command or agreement made while awake.

"But there is another way of directing attention, and the result of that can neither be called 'dreaming' nor 'awake', because it starts from a deliberate use of intent. What happens there is that we take charge of our awareness, and it is the same whether we are sleeping or awake, because it is something that transcends both states. That is the true awakening; to take charge of our attention!

"The **Toltec** teachings emphasize dreaming. It **doesn't** matter how it is described, the result is that the perceptive chaos of an ordinary dream is transformed into a practical space where we can act intelligently."

"A practical space?"

"That's right. A dreamer can remember himself under any circumstance. He always has a password on hand; a pact he has made with his will which lets him align with the warrior's intent in a microsecond. He can sustain the vision of his dream, whatever it may be, and return to it as many times as he wants to explore and analyze it. And better still, within that vision, he can meet other warriors: That is what sorcerers call 'stalking in dreaming'.

"This technique allows us to intend objectives and pursue actions, just as we do in the daily world. We can solve problems and learn things. What you learn there is coherent: It works. Maybe you cannot explain how you received that knowledge, but you won't forget it."

I asked him what kind of knowledge he was talking about. He answered:

"Life is learned by living it. The same happens in dreams, but there we learn how to dream. But those on the path sometimes hit upon other abilities. Don **Juan**, for example, used to use his dreaming body to look for hidden treasures, buried things from the war. The products of those operations were invested in various things, like petroleum, plantations of tobacco..."

My face must have shown the mixture of astonishment and incredulity I felt, because he exclaimed:

"It is not so extraordinary! We can all carry out similar feats: It is not even difficult to understand how it happens! Imagine somebody teaches you a new language while you sleep: The result is that you learn that language and you can remember it when you wake up. In the same way, if you witness something in that state, like a lost object or an event that is happening somewhere else, you can go and verify it later: If it is just as you dreamt it, then it was a dream.

"Learning in dreaming is a resource much used by sorcerers. I

learned much about plants in that way and I still remember all of it.

"Don't underestimate your resources. Everything the spirit has put inside us has a transcendent meaning. It means dreams are there to be used: If it were not so, they would not exist. The techniques I have described to you are not speculations: I have personally checked them out. The art of dreaming is my message to people, but nobody pays any attention!"

When I heard the sad tone of this last observation, I was suddenly struck by the unbearable timidity of my imagination. For years and years, without fail, he had encouraged us to expand our vision, not out of any selfish concern on his part, but for the sheer pleasure of transmitting to us his superior state of awareness. And here I was, wallowing in my second-hand beliefs and my habitual doubts!

I wanted to be on his side in the world. I got up from the bench with the intention of shaking his hand to show my gratitude. I was about to promise him something, but he stopped me.

"Better don't say anything, don't waste your time! Maybe it's not your destiny to be a brilliant flying warrior, but you don't have any excuses. Like everyone, you too are splendidly equipped for dreaming. If you don't get it, it is because you don't want to."

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The Door of Perception

In another of his conversations, he explained that any state of awareness that involves an unusual position of the assemblage point is technically a dream. He said that the advantage of dreams over everyday states of attention, is that they allow us to cover a wider sensory spectrum, and to better synthesize the information we receive. In other words, we learn how to live with more intensity. The result: Greater clarity in our perceptual processes.

"Above all," he said, "dreaming gives us access to critical events in our past, such as our birth and early childhood, and it illuminates traumatic situations and altered states of awareness in our past. A sorcerer cannot leave aside his most harrowing experiences!"

Towards the end of his lecture he gave a definition that I considered very important, because he touched on what I felt was a sensitive topic.

He said:

"Dreaming is not something impossible, it is just a kind of deep meditation."

For years, I had been doing some spiritual exercises called 'meditation'. These practices were quite different from what [Carlos](#) was proposing, both regarding their form and their results. As soon as I had an opportunity, I asked him to clarify the distinctions between the concept of dreaming, and meditation.

He answered: "What you're asking is difficult, because there is no way of meditating without dreaming, both terms describe the same phenomenon."

"Then why haven't my exercises produced any of the things you talk

about?"

"You had better answer that yourself. In my opinion, what you have practiced up to now has not been meditation, but some kind of auto-suggestion. It is common for people to confuse both things that, for a sorcerer, are not the same.

"Pacifying the mind is not meditation, but drowsiness. On the other hand, dreaming is something dynamic: It is the consequence of a process of sustained concentration, which implies a veritable battle against our lack of attention. If it were just the result of a dulling of the senses, practitioners would not call themselves 'warriors'.

"A dreamer can be the very incarnation of ferocity or seem profoundly calm, but none of that has any real importance, because he does not identify himself with his mental states. He knows that any definite sensation is nothing but a fixation of the assemblage point.

"Dreaming happens when we achieve a certain balance in our daily life, and only after silencing the internal dialogue. The term 'dreaming' is not the most appropriate to describe an exercise of awareness which has nothing to do with the content of the mind. I use it out of respect for the tradition of my lineage, but the ancient seers called it something else.

"Expert sorcerers dream, starting from their state of vigil as easily as from sleeping, because for them it is not about 'to close the eyes and snore', but to witness other worlds which are out there.

"From the point of view of the will, what distinguishes a dream from the daytime vigil of a sorcerer, is that the energy body obeys other laws: He can carry out incredible feats like passing through a wall or moving to the ends of the universe in the blink of an eye. Such experiences are complete and accumulative, and only somebody who has not lived them himself would cling to logical categories to explain them.

"But that kind of manifestations, however valuable, are not the objective of dreaming. To dream is essential for you, because access to the [nagual](#) happens almost exclusively in that state."

I asked him why this was so. He answered:

"The reason is evident. People who have a natural tendency to dream, and a surplus of energy, qualify to find other, more advanced dreamers, either accidentally or because they deliberately look for them.

Occasionally, these traveling companions accept to take charge of instructing them more deeply in the art. Once an apprentice begins to shine, it is inevitable that he will attract the attention of a [nagual](#).

"[Naguals](#) are like Eagles, constantly stalking. As soon as they detect an increment of awareness, they swoop in, because a voluntary dreamer is a rarity. For a teacher, it is much easier to stimulate an effort that has already begun, than creating one from nothing."

[Carlos](#) told me that he maintained contact with many warriors from various parts of the world through dreaming.

He went on to say that another reason why dreaming is a door to knowledge, is that its practice allows you to resolve a thousand problems derived from learning; like the lack of clarity and attention in a beginner, his mistrust regarding his instructor's activities, and the intrinsic danger of some of the techniques.

"This art softens the obsessive nature of the emanations of the Eagle, which could otherwise destroy the psychological balance and the will of an apprentice."

"Then," I asked him, "what can those of us who don't dream do, in order to gain access to these teachings?"

He seemed bothered by my question. He grunted:

"You have the wrong focus! The true question would be: What should I do to dream?"

"A warrior cannot walk around in the world leaving loose ends with every step. If you genuinely cannot consider your dreams a part of your life; if you cannot visualize them as what they are- avenues to power-; if you do not even understand what they are or what purpose they serve; well, then you have a lot of work before you."

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"Within our sphere of perception, there is a force separated from what we call 'oneself, which is detectable through dreaming. That force can be made aware of itself, absorbing the principles of our personality, and behaving with independence. The sensation that dealing with it produces in us is unspeakable; because it is an inorganic being."

"Inorganic?"

"Of course! We call our everyday attention 'organic' because it depends on a body made up of organs, right?"

I agreed.

"Then what would you call the body with which you perceive and act when you dream?"

"I would say that it is an apparition," I answered cautiously.

"I agree! It is an inorganic being; it has appearance, but no mass. For you, it is only a mental projection. However, from that being's point of view, it is our physical body that lives in an imaginary world. If you had the energy and the necessary concentration to become aware of your other self, and you asked that being what it thinks of your everyday world, he would answer that he considers it quite unreal, almost a myth. And, you know what? It would be right!

"Our dreaming body has many uses. It can move in no time to whatever place you want and discover things. It can even be materialized, creating a visual double; something that other people can see whether they are sleeping or awake. However, it continues being a mere appearance: It does not have any bodily functions. A human being sees it as person, but an animal would see it differently."

I interrupted him:

"How do you know all that?"

"It is so simple! I verify it permanently, because my dreaming double receives all my attention. When I want to know something from it or about the world where it moves, I ask it and it tells me. You can also do it: It is not that difficult. You can contact your energy this very night, as soon as you fall asleep."

"How?"

"There are many ways. For example, look for a mirror in your dreams, lean towards it and look yourself in the eyes: You'll see what a surprise

awaits you!"

I had read something about the double in his books, but my prejudices prevented me from approaching that matter with an open mind, and in my mind there was a great confusion about concepts like the 'luminous egg' or magnetic field that surrounds living beings, the 'energy body', and the 'dreaming double'. I asked him if they were the same thing or if there was some difference between them.

He was surprised by my question.

"But haven't you understood anything? We are speaking of awareness, not of physical objects. Those entities, even the perceptive unit we call 'the physical body', are descriptions of the same thing, because there are not two of you. You are you! You don't 'have' an energy body, you are energy. You are an assemblage point that assembles emanations; and you are only one! You can have various dreams and have a different appearance in each one, either human, animal, or inorganic, or you can even dream that you are several people at the same time, but you cannot fragment your being aware."

He told me that confusing the description of our various vehicles of awareness with our sense of being is common, particularly for people who have a robust and intellectual internal dialogue.

"Once I went to see an oriental teacher, and our conversation relapsed into dreaming. The man called himself an expert, he showed off to me: 'I have seven dreaming bodies!' Overwhelmed by this revelation, I **didn't** know what to answer. I admitted: 'Don [Juan](#) only taught me one.'

When he said this, [Carlos](#) pulled his head down between his shoulders, as if he was very shy, but was hiding a cynical giggle.

I asked:

"So when you speak of the dreaming double and of the energy body, you are talking about the same thing?"

"Practically. The first one can be reached through dreaming and the second by means of stalking. Or put in another way, the energy body is the dreaming double with voluntary control on the part of the dreamer; but both are one and the same thing. The difference lies in the way one reaches it.

"The ancient sorcerers molded their dreaming by the power of their will, and tried to reproduce the physical body down to the smallest detail. Calling it a 'double' stems from that tradition. The idea makes practical sense, since we are so accustomed to see ourselves in a certain way and only that way. In the beginning, it is very comfortable for the dreamer to consider himself in physical terms. But the new seers say that taking this intent to its furthest consequences is a useless waste, because it forces us to dedicate huge quantities of attention to details that will never have any practical use. They have learned to see ourselves as what we really are; bubbles of light."

I asked him if, in the classic [nagualism](#) of [prehispanic](#) people, sorcerers' ability to become animals consisted of trying to see themselves with animal bodies.

He looked at me as if saying: "Elementary!"

"Dreaming is the deliberate use of the energy body. Energy is plastic, and if you apply a constant pressure to it, it will eventually adopt the form you want. The double is the [nagual](#), the 'other', the stamp of [nagualism](#). When you control it, you are on the road to become whatever

you want, from a free being to a beast.

"Of course, to achieve something so specialized as becoming an animal can't just be improvised, there are procedures. The double is managed through the fixation of the assemblage point in new positions. Such a fixation has an obsessive nature, and it should be evoked with sorcerers' methods. For example, if your yearning is to be a hawk and you attempt it with inflexibility, you will end up becoming one! Each one of us will achieve what we look for. That is the trick of the **nagual**; to manage his obsessions.

"However, you should know that people who focus on objectives that are not exclusively those of freedom and sobriety, become blocked, which can take them to madness, or to the most crass ordinariness. Truly, that is what we all do: We choose to be men, and we are! Any obsession not properly managed means slavery.

"The problem with many **naguals** of modern Mexico is that they have forgotten the abstract possibilities. There are sorcerers who prefer to become turkeys, and they don't come out of there. What's more, many don't have any idea that they can do something more with their energy than pursue strong sensations and scare others.

"That decadence of the teachings is what moved seers of Don **Juan's** lineage to attempt freedom in the most impersonal way possible, abandoning all the capricious positions of the assemblage point which they had inherited from their ancestors. The purpose of freedom is absolutely clean and displaces all others. By attempting it, new seers have restored the purity of **nagualism**."

I asked him about the enormous effort which is undoubtedly required, in order to prepare a double in the environment of dreaming.

He answered:

"For most sorcerers, that effort is the other option; the door to another realm of awareness; an awareness which will allow them, at the proper moment, to intend the definitive step into the third attention. By providing autonomy [* autonomy- immunity from arbitrary exercise of authority: political or personal independence] and purpose to their double, they are preparing to remain conscious after death. When that body is complete and the moment arrives, their awareness abandons the human shell for good. The physical body withers and dies, but the sense of being continues."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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Little by little, **Carlos's** stories had had their effect on me. One day, I sat down to seriously consider the amount of effort I invested in sustaining my self-importance; not in the coarse and common forms it usually shows itself, like self-sufficiency, or whining for attention, but in its more subtle aspects linked to fundamental ideas that I had about the world.

These reflections **didn't** bring me any certainty. On the contrary, I began to notice how the enormity of the ideological framework in which I

lived, and which I had always taken for granted, trembled. When I told **Carlos** this, he saw it as something quite natural.

"You are learning how to stalk yourself," he told me. "It is what you should have done ever since you learned to use your reason."

I had already read about the art of stalking; a hunting strategy which consists of using your prey's own habits and routines to catch it. We can apply this strategy to ordinary life; for example, to business. But we can also project stalking strategies against our internal demons, like doubt, laziness, and self-indulgence.

Taking advantage of this opportunity- we had some free time before his lecture began- I asked him to tell me more about this.

But, to my complete astonishment, he told me that he could not do it as long as I **wasn't** committed to the point of death to the teachings.

"Why?"

"Because you would wind up turning against me. Learning about dreaming **doesn't** offend anyone: The worst you can do is not believe that such a thing is possible. Stalking, on the other hand, the way sorcerers practice it, is very offensive to reason. Many warriors avoid speaking about it, because they don't have the stomach for it. In the initial phase, the apprentice is under **crossfire** and is very frustrated; not able to let go of his ego.

"Like a coin, stalking has two faces. On the one hand, it is the easiest thing in the world: On the other, it is a very difficult technique, not because it's complex, but because it deals with aspects of oneself that people usually don't want to deal with.

"Stalking induces minuscule, but very solid movements of the assemblage point; not like dreaming which moves you deeply but bounces you like a rubber ball and returns you immediately to what you were. When you look around, you see everything the same way as you always did, so you will continue to use your everyday approach to things. If, in this situation, you are forced to make some change by your instructor, I'll bet you anything that you will leave offended, or wounded in your pride, and quit the teaching."

I asked him how, then, sorcerers taught this art.

He answered that, traditionally, it is taught in state of heightened awareness, and it is left until the end.

"Stalking is not something that's openly talked about: One must read between the lines. This part of the knowledge belongs to the teachings for the left side. It takes many years to remember what it is all about, and many more to become able to practice it.

"On the level where you are now, the only thing that allows you to handle stalking is to approach it with dreaming methods. If at any point you should feel that I am touching on topics that are too personal; or you have an attack of suspicions, look at your hands, or use any other reminder you have chosen. The dreaming attention will help you break your fixation."

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The Mark Of The Nagual

In spite of his reticence, [* reticence- the trait of being uncommunicative; not volunteering anything more than necessary] on another occasion Carlos himself accepted answering my questions on the topic of stalking as long as we kept to theoretical considerations.

Taking advantage of his goodwill, I asked him to explain the practical uses of the art of stalking.

He explained:

"Stalking is the central activity of an energy tracker. Although it can be applied with astonishing results to our dealings with people, it is designed mainly to tune the practitioner. Manipulating and controlling others is an arduous task, but it is incomparably more difficult to control ourselves. For that reason, stalking is the technique that distinguishes the nagual.

"Stalking can be defined as the ability to fix the assemblage point in new positions.

"The warrior who is stalking is a hunter. But, as opposed to an ordinary hunter who has his mind set on his material interests, the warrior pursues a bigger prey; his self-importance. That prepares him to face the challenge of dealing with his fellow men-something that dreaming by itself cannot resolve. Sorcerers who don't learn how to stalk, turn into grumpy people."

"Why?"

"Because they don't have the patience to tolerate people's stupidity.

"Stalking is natural to us due to a characteristic of our animal heritage: To survive, we have all developed habits of behavior which mold our energy and help us adapt. By studying those routines, an attentive observer can accurately predict the behavior of an animal or a human being at any given moment.

"Warriors know that any habit is an addiction. It can tie you to the consumption of drugs, or going to church every Sunday: The difference is in form, not in essence. In the same way, when we get used to thinking that the world is reasonable, or that the things we believe in are the only reality, we are victims of a habit which clouds our senses, and makes us see only what's familiar to us.

"Routines are templates of behavior, which we mechanically follow even when they don't make sense anymore. To be a stalker, you must have freed yourself from these imperatives of survival.

"Because he is the owner of his decisions, a warrior stalker is a person who has banished from his life all vestiges of addiction. He only has to recover his energetic integrity to be free. And since he has freedom of choice, he can be involved in calculated forms of behavior; either to deal with people or with other conscious entities.

"The result of this maneuver is not a routine participation, but stalking; because it consists of studying the behaviors of others."

"What is the sense of all this?"

He answered:

"From your point of view, none. Freedom doesn't obey reasons. However, your entire being shakes when you break your routines, because it exposes the myth of immortality."

Pointing at people returning from work, he told me:

"What do you believe they went out to do? These people went out to

live their last day! The sad thing is that probably very few of them know it. Every day is unique, and the world is not the way everyone has told us it is. To cancel the force of habit is a decision that you make once and for all. Starting from that act, a warrior becomes a stalker."

"And couldn't it happen that the warrior may end up making of his purpose something ordinary"

"No. This is something that you have to understand, because otherwise your search for impeccability will lose its freshness and you will end up betraying it. To break routines is not the purpose of the path; it is only one of its means. The goal is to be aware. Keeping that in mind, another definition of stalking is 'an unbending attention on a total result'.

"That kind of attention applied to an animal results in a hunting piece. If we apply unbending attention to another person, it produces a client, a pupil, or a romantic relationship. And applied to an inorganic being, it provides what sorcerers call 'an ally'. But only if we apply stalking to ourselves, can it be considered a Toltec art, because it produces something precious: Awareness."

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In spite of his explanations, the practical dimension of stalking continued, from my point of view, to be one of the darkest themes in the teachings. Over the years, I accomplished some of the other exercises, like recapitulation and inner silence: I even dreamt. But when I tried stalking, I only got ambiguous results, or wound up feeling ridiculous.

Apparently, Carlos was aware of my efforts, because at one point he called me, and told me:

"Don't get complicated. You are making a caricature of the teachings. If you want to stalk, observe yourself. We are all excellent hunters: Stalking is our natural gift. When hunger presses us, we sharpen ourselves: Children cry and achieve what they want: Women entrap men; and men get even with each other, swindling in business. Stalking is to be able to get away with what you want.

"If you become aware of the world you live in, you will understand that simply staying attentive to it is a kind of stalking. Since we learned to do that long before our capacity to discriminate was developed, we feel it as something perfectly natural and hardly ever question it. But all our actions, even the most altruistic, [* altruistic- showing unselfish concern for the welfare of others] are imbued with the hunter's spirit.

"Ordinary man doesn't know he is stalking, because his character has been subjugated by socialization. He is convinced that his existence is important, so his actions are at the service of his self-importance; not the expansion of his awareness."

He added that one of the characteristics of self-importance is that it betrays us.

"Important people don't flow: They give themselves airs, show off their attributes, and lack the necessary grace and the speed to hide.

Their luminosity is too rigid, and can only achieve flexibility when

they no longer have anything to defend.

"The stalking method of sorcerers consists of focusing on the reality in which we live, but in a new way. Rather than just accumulating information, what they seek is to compact their energy.

"A warrior is someone who has learned to stalk himself, and is no longer burdened with a heavy image to present to others. Nobody can detect him, if he **doesn't** want them to, because he **doesn't** have attachments. He is above the hunter, because he has learned to laugh at himself."

He told me how his instructor Dona **Florinda Matus** taught him to be inconspicuous.

"Just at the time when my books transformed me into a rich man, she sent me to fry hamburgers in a highway restaurant! For years, I worked with my money in plain sight, without being able to spend it. She said that would teach me not to lose the appropriate perspective. And I learned my lesson!

"Some time after that, I was given another opportunity to be invisible. I had taken some cactuses to the house of a friend and began to plant them. Suddenly, two reporters from The Times, who had spent a long time trying to find me, appeared. They figured I was a peon and asked for the owner of the house. 'Knock there', I told them, and pointed at the door. My friend answered their questions: 'No, I haven't seen him', and the reporters left, wondering where the hell **Castaneda** could be."

He went on saying that since the problem of self-importance is a personal matter, each warrior should adapt the teachings to his own conditions. Therefore, the stalking techniques are extremely flexible. But the training is the same for everyone, and it concerns getting rid of superfluous routines, and acquiring enough discipline to recognize the signs of intent. Both achievements constitute true feats of character.

"The best way of acquiring that degree of discipline is to deal actively with a petty tyrant."

In response to my queries, he explained that a petty tyrant is somebody who makes our life impossible. In past times, this kind of people could hurt us physically or even kill us: Nowadays, that kind of petty tyrants practically don't exist. However, due to the high level of importance that we grant ourselves, anyone in a position of bothering us works as a petty tyrant. Far from avoiding it, we should face, not the petty tyrant, but our own stupidity.

"The petty tyrant is necessary because most of us are too lazy to change by ourselves. A petty tyrant moves the fixation of 'me', making our weaknesses appear. He makes us see the truth- that we are not important- and he is willing to demonstrate it with actions. To learn how to treat him is the only really effective way to refine stalking.

"A petty tyrant is so important for the task that it can become an obsession for an apprentice to look for one and get in touch with him. A sincere gratitude is the only appropriate feeling for a warrior who has found one to fit his measure.

"Petty tyrants are plentiful, what is not plentiful is the guts to look for them, establish a connection with them by means of stalking, and cause their anger, putting oneself within their reach and, at the same time, scheming devastating strategies. Instead, we spend our life running away from situations that produce pain, irritation, fear, or confusion. In that

way, we lose one of the most valuable tools that spirit has put in our path."

"What is the strategy to confront that kind of enemies?"

"Above all, don't see them as enemies; they are involuntary allies in your own cause. Don't lose sight of the fact that the battle is not fought for the ego, but for energy. The important thing is to win, not that the other one loses. A petty tyrant **doesn't** know that, and that is his weakness.

"In my case, I had the privilege of dealing with several of those people, although I was never given an encounter of the exquisite quality that my teacher had."

Carlos told me that, when his apprenticeship began, his main impediment to approaching the art of stalking was impatience. To help him, Don **Juan** once demanded that he establish a friendship with a certain person who lived in an old age home.

"When I met him, he turned out to be an annoying old man who was in the habit of telling everyone how in his youth, in the 1920s, he had been witness to a spectacular event. He was sitting in an Italian coffee shop. Suddenly, a car stopped in front of the door, and out came several people armed with machine guns, and they began to shoot towards the establishment. Thanks to his lucky star, my friend could hide under some tables and was unhurt.

"The anecdote apparently constituted the only treasure in this old man's life. Unfortunately for us who knew him, the old man suffered from amnesia and was always forgetting whom he had told it to. I had to suffer through it again and again for years. Every time I arrived at the retirement home, he would invariably cling to my arm and wonder: 'Did I ever tell you how I was attacked by some gangsters?'

"I felt pity for him, because somehow he made me think of my own uncertain future. But at the end I had enough; I returned to Don **Juan** and told him: 'I can't stand this old man anymore! He is really infuriating! What is the point of making me visit him?'

"But Don **Juan** was inflexible; he ordered that, starting from that day, I had to go visit the old man every day, or give up my apprenticeship.

"Alarmed by this threat, I gathered all my patience and tried to complete the task. Sometimes I fantasized, thinking of the possibility that the old man was not the person he seemed to be. That gave me encouragement to continue with my task. One day, when I arrived at the retirement home and asked for my friend, they informed me that he had died."

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That afternoon, **Carlos** was talking to us about certain characteristics of perception. He told us that human beings have inherited from the dinosaurs the trait of seeing the sky as a blue color. On the other hand, he claimed that our relatives, the primates, see it as a yellow color.

Answering a question from someone, he described the world in which

we live as 'a conglomerate of interpretation units.'

Understanding that this definition was an obscure one for his listeners, he explained:

"Man belongs to the primate group. His great fortune is that he can achieve unique expressions of awareness due to his capacity for attention and analysis. However, pure perception is always interfered with by the way we interpret. Therefore, our reality molds itself to our description.

"The goal of sorcerers is to perceive all that is humanly possible. Since we cannot escape our biological condition, let us be sublime monkeys!"

He added, "To perfect our understanding, the path of attention is all we've got."

That same night I had an opportunity to talk with him, and I asked him to break his statements into smaller pieces for me.

He said that due to our biological condition, we all work as units of perception; and it is possible for us to make 'a miracle of attention: Perceptual homogenization'.

"What does 'units of perception' mean?" I asked.

"It means that, since we are autonomous [* autonomous- not controlled by outside forces] beings, our perception could also be autonomous. But it is not, because by coming to an agreement with our fellow men, we all perceive the same thing. That extraordinary ability, which began as a voluntary consent aimed at survival, has ended up tying us to our own descriptions"

He affirmed that the flow of the Eagle's emanations is continually new and disconcerting, but we don't see it because we live three steps removed from the real world by our innate sensitivity, our biological interpretation, and our social agreement.

Those steps do not happen simultaneously, but their speed is superior to anything we can consciously determine; because of that, we take for a fact the world we perceive.

I asked him to give an example.

He answered:

"Imagine that at this moment you witness a group of the Eagle's emanations. Automatically, you transform it into something sensorial, with characteristics like brightness, sound, movement, etc. Then memory intervenes, which is under the obligation to give everything meaning, and you recognize it, for example, as another person. Lastly, your social inventory classifies it, by comparing the person with those you know: That classification allows you to identify him. Already, you are a good distance away from the real fact, which is indescribable, because it is unique.

"The same thing happens with everything we see. Our comprehension is the result of a long process of purifications or skimmings', as Don Juan called them. We skim everything, and in that way we modify the world that surrounds us to such an extent that there is very little left of the original. Although this situation helps us to live under better conditions, it also enslaves us to our own creation, and makes us predictable.

"When we homogenize our assemblage points, the only things we allow ourselves to perceive are those which do not go against our preconceived idea of the world. We are like horses who after learning a

path can no longer enjoy their freedom; all they do is to repeat a pattern.

"That homogeneity is frightful: It is too much. Start thinking! Something is missing!"

He maintained that any preconceived idea, even something as simple as the names we give things, keeps us tied to reason, because it forces us to create mechanisms of judgement.

"For example, when you say: 'I believe in God', in fact you are saying: 'They told me certain ideas and I have chosen to adopt them: Now I even kill for them'.

"Then you are not the one who decides! It is the other; the implanted judgement.

"The ideal thing is that you determine your life starting from your own experience. If your belief takes something away from you, beware! Everything that doesn't make you free, enslaves you.

"Being focused on a particular aspect of the human inventory has two effects: it turns us into specialists in our field, but, at the same time, it will fossilize the energy conduits, which will then only react to certain stimuli, saturating our self with ideas and opinions.

"A warrior cannot have the luxury of following people's ways, nor can he be a reactionary, because his freedom means to exercise other alternatives."

I asked him which alternatives he meant, but he gave me a pat on the shoulder and told me that it was too late.

"We will continue another day."

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"Encounters With The Nagual" - 2004 by Armando Torres Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

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Our conversation was not resumed before several years had passed. On that occasion- one of his informal meetings- Carlos brought up an entirely new and frightening concept, which gave rise to the most passionate controversies.

"Man," he said, "is a magical being: He has the same capacity to fly into the universe as any one of the millions of awareness that exist. But, at some point in his history, he lost his freedom. Now his mind is no longer his own, it is an implant."

He claimed that human beings are hostages to a group of cosmic entities who are devoted predators, and who sorcerers call 'flyers'.

He said this had been a very secret topic among the ancient seers, but due to an omen, he had realized that the time had come to disclose it. The omen was a picture that his friend Tony, a Christian Buddhist, had taken. In it appeared the sharply outlined figure of a dark and ominous creature, floating above a multitude of the faithful gathered among the pyramids of Teotihuacan.

"My cohorts and I decided that it is time to let you know our true situation as social beings, even at the cost of all the distrust that this information may generate in the public."

When I had the opportunity, I asked him to tell me more about the flyers, and then he told me one of the most terrifying aspects of Don

Juan's world: That we are prisoners of beings who came from the confines of the universe, and that they use us as casually as we use chickens.

He explained:

"The portion of the universe accessible to us is the operative field of two radically different kinds of awareness. One, which includes plants and animals, and also human beings, is a whitish awareness: It is young; a generator of energy. The other one is an infinitely older and more parasitic awareness; possessor of an immense quantity of knowledge.

"Besides men and other beings that inhabit this Earth, there is in the universe an immense range of inorganic entities. They are present among us, and occasionally they are visible. We call them ghosts or apparitions. One of those species, which seers describe as enormous, black, flying shapes, arrived here at some point from the depths of cosmos, and found an oasis of awareness in our world. They have specialized in 'milking us'."

"That is incredible!" I exclaimed.

"I know, but it is the pure and terrifying truth. Have you never wondered about people's energetic and emotional ups and downs? It is the predator, who shows up periodically to pick up his quota of awareness. They only leave enough so that we may continue living, and sometimes not even that."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes they take too much, and the person becomes gravely ill, and may even die."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Do you mean we are being eaten alive?" I asked.

He smiled.

"Well, they don't literally 'eat' us, what they do is a vibratory transfer. Awareness is energy and they can align with us. Since by nature they are always hungry, and we, on the other hand, exude light, the result of that alignment can be described as energy robbery."

"But why do they do it?"

"Because, on the cosmic plane, energy is the most powerful currency, and we all want it, and we humans are a vital race stuffed with nourishment. Every living being eats other beings, and the most powerful always comes out the winner. Who said man is at the top of the food chain? That idea could only have come from a human being. To inorganic beings, we are the prey."

I commented that it was inconceivable to me that entities that are even more aware than us could be predatory to that extent.

He replied:

"But what do you think you re doing when you eat a lettuce or a beefsteak? You are eating life! Your sensibility is hypocritical. Cosmic predators are no more and no less cruel than we are. When a stronger race consumes another inferior one, it is helping its energy to evolve.

"I have already told you that in the universe there is only war. The confrontations of men are a reflection of what happens out there. It is normal for one species to try to consume another: A warrior does not complain about it, and tries to survive."

"And how do they consume us?"

"Through our emotions, properly directed by the internal dialogue. They have designed our social environment in such a way that we are

constantly shooting off waves of emotions which are immediately absorbed. Best of all, they like attacks of ego: For them, that is an exquisite mouthful. Such emotions are the same anywhere in the universe where they occur, and they have learned how to metabolize them.

"Some consume us for our lust, anger, or fear. Others prefer more delicate feelings, like love or fondness. But they are all after the same thing. Normally, they attack us around the area of the head, heart, or stomach, where we store the thickest part of our energy."

"Do they attack animals, too?"

"These creatures use everything that's available, but they prefer organized awareness. They drain animals and plants in the part of their attention that is not too fixed. They even attack other inorganic beings, but they can see them and avoid them, like we avoid mosquitoes. The only ones who are completely trapped by them are human beings."

"How is it possible that all this is happening without us realizing it?"

"Because we inherit the exchange with those beings almost like a genetic condition, and it feels natural to us. When someone is born, the mother offers it like food, without realizing it, because her mind is also controlled. Baptizing the child is like signing an agreement. Starting from there, she devotes herself to install acceptable behavior patterns: She tames the child, reduces its warring side, and transforms it into a meek sheep.

"When a boy has sufficient energy to reject that imposition, but not enough to enter the path of the warrior, he becomes a rebel, or socially maladjusted.

"The flyers' advantage stems from the difference between our levels of awareness. They are very powerful and vast entities: The idea that we have of them is equivalent to the one an ant will have of us.

"However, their presence is painful and you can measure it in various ways. For example, when they provoke us into attacks of rationality or distrust, or when we are tempted to violate our own decisions. Lunatics can detect them very easily- too easily, I would say- since they feel physically how these beings settle on their shoulders, generating paranoia. Suicide is the stamp of flyers, because the flyers' mind is potentially homicidal."

"You say that it is an exchange, but what do we gain from such plunder?"

"In exchange for our energy, the flyers have given us our mind, our attachments, and our ego. For them, we are not their slaves, but a kind of salaried workers. They bestowed these privileges on a primitive race and gave us the gift of thinking, which made us evolve; indeed, they have civilized us. If not for them, we would still be hiding in caves or making nests on treetops.

"The flyers control us through our traditions and customs. They are the masters of religion, the creators of history. We hear their voice on the radio and we read their ideas in the newspapers. They manage all our means of information, and our belief systems. Their strategy is magnificent. For example, there was an honest man who spoke of love and freedom: They have transformed it into self-pity and servility. They do it with everyone, even with neguals. For that reason, the work of a sorcerer is solitary.

"For millennia, flyers have concocted plans to collectivize us. There was a time when they became so shameless that they were even seen in public, and people made representations of them in stone. Those were dark times: They were everywhere. But now their strategy has become so intelligent that we don't even know they exist. In the past, they hooked us through our credulity; today, through our materialism. They are responsible for modern man's ambition not to have to think for himself; just observe how long somebody will tolerate silence!"

"Why the change in their strategy?"

"Because, at this time, they are running a great risk. Humanity is in very quick and constant contact, and information can reach anyone. Either they must fill our heads, bombarding us day and night with all kind of suggestions, or there will be some who will realize and warn the others."

"What would happen if we were able to repel those entities?"

"In one week, we would recover our vitality and we would be shining again. But, as normal human beings, we cannot think about that possibility, because it would imply to go against all that is socially acceptable. Fortunately, sorcerers have one weapon: Discipline.

"The encounter with inorganic beings happens gradually. In the beginning, we don't notice them. But an apprentice begins to see them in his dreams and then while he is awake- something that can drive him crazy if he **doesn't** learn how to act as a warrior. Once he understands, he can confront them.

"Sorcerers manipulate the foreign mind, turning into energy hunters. It is for that purpose my cohorts and I have designed **Tensegrity** exercises for the masses. They have the virtue of liberating us from the flyer's mind.

"In this sense, sorcerers are **opportunists**. They take advantage of the push they've been given and say to their captors: 'Thanks for everything: See you later! The agreement you made was with my ancestors, not with me'. When recapitulating their life, they are literally snatching the food out of the flyer's mouth. It is like going to the store and returning a product to the shopkeeper, demanding your money back. The inorganic beings don't like it, but they can't do anything about it.

"Our advantage is that we are dispensable, there is a lot of food around! A position of total alertness, which is nothing but discipline, creates such conditions in our attention that we don't taste good any more to those beings. In that case, they turn away and leave us in peace."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

Previous-[Pg](#) Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-[Pg](#) Next-[Pg](#) Losing the Mind

In another conversation, **Carlos** said that our 'reason' is a **byproduct** of the foreign mind, and that we **shouldn't** trust it. For someone with my mental make-up, this was very difficult to accept.

When I asked him about this, he explained that what sorcerers reject is not the capacity of reason to reach conclusions, but the way it is imposed on our life as if it is the only alternative.

"Rationality makes us feel like a solid block, and we begin to grant the greatest importance to concepts like 'reality'. When we face unusual situations, like those which assault the sorcerer, we tell ourselves: 'It is not reasonable', and it seems we have said everything there is to say.

"The world of our mind is dictatorial, but fragile. After some years of continuous use, the self becomes so heavy that it is just common sense to give it a rest in order to continue ahead.

"A warrior fights to break the description of the world which has been injected into him; in order to open up a space for new things. His war is against the self. For that purpose, he tries to be permanently aware of his potential. Since the content of perception depends on the position of the assemblage point, a warrior tries with all his might to loosen the fixation of that point. Instead of creating a cult out of his speculations, he pays attention to certain premises of the path of sorcerers.

"Those premises say that, in the first place, only a high level of energy can enable one to deal adequately with the world. And second: Rationality is a consequence of the fixation of the assemblage point in the position of reason, and that point moves when we achieve internal silence. Third: In our luminous field, there are other positions every bit as pragmatic as rationality. Fourth: When we achieve a point of view which includes reason as well as its twin center, silent knowledge, concepts like truth and lies stop being operative, and it becomes patently clear that man's true dilemma is to have energy, or not have it.

"Sorcerers reason in a different way than ordinary people. For them, to anchor attention is insanity, and to make it flow is common sense. They call the fixing of the assemblage point in non-habitual areas 'seeing'. Staying sane is imperative, but they have found out that rationality is not always sane. To stay sane is a voluntary act, while to be reasonable is just to fix our attention on an area of collective consent."

I asked, "Are sorcerers opposed to reason, then?"

"I have already told you: They are opposed to its dictatorship. They know the center of reason can take us very far. Absolute reason is merciless: It **doesn't** stop halfway. That is why people are afraid of it. When we are able to focus on absolute reason with inflexibility, it generates an obligation to be impeccable; because not to be so is not reasonable. To do things with impeccability is to do all that is humanly possible, and a little more. Therefore, reason also takes you to a movement of the assemblage point.

"To act within the precepts of the warrior's path, you need clarity of purpose, the courage to take on the task, and an unbending intent. If you look around, you will see that most people 'of reason' are not, in fact, located in that center, but on its periphery."

"Why?"

"Because they lack energy. Their holes prevent them from having any objectivity. Their attention always fluctuates, and because of that their perception is hybrid: It is ambiguous. They drift like a rudderless boat in the current at the mercy of their emotions, and without a clear view of either shore- the bank of pure reasoning on one side; the bank of the abstract on the other.

"What is required of a modern warrior is a condition of sustained energy gain until his attention can flow between reason and silent

knowledge. When moving in that way, he is more sane than ever, and yet he is not a rational being. From whichever position he assumes, he will always be sighting the other side, and his vision acquires perspective and depth. Sorcerers describe this condition as 'being double' or 'losing the mind'.

"We can arrive at silent knowledge in exactly the same way as our teachers taught us to arrive at reason: By induction. [* induction- a formal entry into an organization or position or office] It is like controlling both sides of a bridge. From one side, you can see reason like a net of agreements, which transforms collective interpretations into common sense through the customs of concern. From the other side, you can sense silent knowledge as an unfathomable, creative darkness which extends beyond the threshold of non-pity. Upon crossing this threshold, the ancient sorcerers arrived at the source of pure understanding.

"To be double is to make a connection with oneself, to flow between two points. It is something practically indescribable, but an apprentice experiences it as soon as he saves enough energy. Starting from there, he learns how to deal with reason like a free being, neither reverent nor abject. He acquires what Don **Juan** called 'intensity'; that is, the capacity to store information in a perceptual block."

I found the concept of 'intensity' totally obscure. I asked him to explain it further.

He answered that perception is composed of content and intensity. Extreme situations, like a sharp awareness of danger, proximity of death, or the effect of power plants, generate great intensity. A sorcerer learns how to store those experiences in the movement of the assemblage point.

He added that what is proposed by 'the way of knowledge' is a change of values in how we understand our social interaction as a species; pulling our energy out from everyday life and concentrating it on situations which require that intensive way of living.

"It is about returning man to marvel, to power, to what he has dreamt about; to reconnect him with astonishment and the capacity to create. That rupture is the only thing which can liberate our luminosity from our perceptual uniformity."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

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On another occasion, talking to a small group of friends, **Carlos** explained that another effect of the movement of the assemblage point is that things acquire new forms. The clarity of appearances gives way to a deeper and more essential clarity, and live beings adopt the form of enormous, round fields of light.

He said that the luminous configuration of a man or woman is a portrait of their existence. Seers look at each detail, and in that way they determine whether a person is prepared for apprenticeship or not.

"Most people mistreat their tonal: In consequence, their fibers fall like the pleats of an old curtain. Those 'tired' fibers work as a kind of glue, blocking the natural course of energy. Don **Juan** called them 'tonal bells',

because they are shaped like that: They are dark and give the impression of a heavy weight. When moving, those fields slither, or give brief jumps as if they are dragging something; or as if the person has put on a bear suit too big for him.

"In warriors, on the other hand, the pleats have tension. Their cocoons are almost spherical and they overflow with vigor: The lower part is compact like a solid rubber ball and it bounces, lifting off from the ground. When they advance, these globes do not slither sorely, but rather jump with joy and sometimes drift over a long distance. Don **Juan** called them precisely that, 'the planers', and said it was a pleasure to bump into one of them on the street.

"But only seers are able to redesign their luminosity in such a way that they can take completely off from the Earth, and fly. Some are able to break their limits, which is perceived as if those warriors have ruptured the skin which imprisoned their energy, exposing the radiant central core. They are traveling sorcerers, and they do not depend on their physical body to be aware and to act anymore.

"The task of an apprentice is to **re**-center his energy body through acts of impeccability, and force that lead to the movement of the assemblage point. Above all, he should achieve mobility for his energy, making it flow in a natural way. In that way, his fibers stretch out and begin to shine with an amber shade.

"Perception takes place in a point of intense white light that is generally rigidly fixed inside a very specific area, which sorcerers call 'the human band'. That point aligns emanations we receive from the outside with those which are found inside our luminous field, similar to the way an antenna picks up radio waves and transforms them into sound."

To our surprise, he assured us that to see that point is a relatively simple matter, which happens already in the early stages of the path.

"It's enough to suggest it in the appropriate way. An apprentice should never say: 'I am useless, I don't see anything', but the opposite: 'I might see it... yes, there it is!' If we repeat that intent over and over, sooner or later the assemblage point will enter into our perceptive field, and that is the first step towards moving it deliberately."

One in the group asked him how we could witness our own perception.

He explained that, since we have no way of perceiving anything if it does not pass through the assemblage point, the only way of understanding this matter is to say that the point perceives itself. Whatever we see is the result of its operation. Because of that, we have the sensation of a flame burning where our emanations join with those from the outside. He said that we might equally well describe the phenomenon in auditory terms, or as an electric crack that signals alignment.

"The important thing is to verify it for yourselves, because that will put you beyond the mind: It will fill you with silent knowledge. The mere act of seeing the assemblage point has an impact which moves the fixation it."

He continued by saying that an experienced sorcerer is able to displace his attention very far from the human band. This enlarges the reach of his perception considerably.

"Some go on a trip to the realm of the inorganic beings: That

alignment is very gratifying for his energy, and the traveler returns home renewed. Others have an inclination to go to the lower area, the area of the beast, the most sordid corner of awareness. For human beings, that is a dangerous place, because to remain there for a long period can produce physical lesions."

They asked him where the self stays while the assemblage point moves to the low area.

He answered:

"It seems you are thinking that the assemblage point fits inside your inventory of reasonable things, but that's not so. Don't see it as a solid object or as another part of your body. We don't have an assemblage point, we are it!

"While a warrior is imprisoned within the limits of the human form, the furthest place he can transfer his assemblage point is to an area of interpretive vacuum, which new seers call 'limbo'. That is a real space on the frontier of the other world; a transition area on the periphery of the other attention.

"These movements accumulate and serve to condense our personal power until they finally crystallize in a kind of luminous matrix that Don **Juan** called 'the dreaming positions'. Through exploration of those positions, the individual experience of a sorcerer leaves the human groove and becomes practically limitless.

"The movement of the assemblage point is not just propelled by an interest in accessing astonishing visions, but is above all directed by the fact that each controlled displacement liberates enormous quantities of energy. Ideally, the warrior applies his unbending intent and lights up his energy field as if he becomes one gigantic assemblage point; to witness everything once and for all. In that case, the point shoots out and up: The traveler becomes a blast of light, and he never recovers his form again. This is the greatest challenge, the union of our awareness with infinity."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

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Although **Carlos** frequently mentioned the topic of death, he avoided talking about what happens after a person dies. This occasion seemed like a good opportunity to investigate his opinion on it.

"**Carlos**," I asked him, "what happens to us when we die?"

"It depends," he answered. "Death touches us all, but it is not the same for all. Everything depends on one's energy level."

He assured me that the death of an ordinary person is the end of his journey; the moment when he has to return to the Eagle all the awareness he obtained while alive.

"If we don't have anything else than our life force to offer it, we will be finished. That kind of death erases any feeling of unity."

I asked him if that was his particular opinion, or part of the traditional knowledge of seers.

He answered:

"It is not an opinion; I have been on the other side and I know. I have

seen children and adults wandering over there and I have observed their efforts to remember themselves. For those who dissipated their energy, death is like a fleeting dream, filled with bubbles of steadily fading memories, and then nothing."

"Do you mean that when we dream, we approach the state of the dead?"

"We don't just approach it, we are there! But since the vitality of our body remains intact, we can return. To die is literally a dream.

"You see, when an ordinary person dreams, he is not able to focus his attention on anything: He **doesn't** have anything but his fragmented memories, fed with experiences he has accumulated in the course of his life. If that person dies, the difference is that his dream lengthens and he **doesn't** wake up again. It is the dream of death.

"The journey of death can take him to a virtual world of appearances, where he will contemplate the materialization of his beliefs, of his heavens and private hells, but nothing else. Such visions start disappearing in time, as the impulses of memory wear out."

"And what happens to the souls of those who die?"

"The soul **doesn't** exist: What exists is energy. Once the physical body disappears, the only thing left is an energy entity fed by memory.

"Some individuals are so oblivious of themselves that they die almost without realizing it. They are like people with amnesia; people who have a blockage of the assemblage point and can no longer align memories. They don't have any continuity. As such, they feel permanently on the brink of oblivion. When they die, those people disintegrate almost instantaneously: The impulse of their lives only lasts for a few years at the most.

"However, most people take a little longer disintegrating, between one hundred and two hundred years. The ones who had lives full of meaning can resist for half a millennium. The range expands even more for those who were able to create bonds with masses of people: They can retain their awareness during entire millennia."

"How do they achieve that?"

"Through the attention of their followers. Memory creates bonds among live beings and those who have left. That's how they stay aware. And that's why cults of historical personalities are so pernicious. [*pernicious- exceedingly harmful] That was the intent of those who, in the past, were mummified: To preserve their name in history. Ironically, it is the greatest damage that can be inflicted on energy. If you seriously want to punish a person, bury him in a lead casket: His confusion never ends.

"It **doesn't** matter what he does or how he has lived; an ordinary person **doesn't** have the smallest chance of continuing ahead. For sorcerers who live facing eternity, five years or five millennia are nothing. That's why they say that death is instantaneous disintegration."

I wanted to know if dead people can return to contact the living.

He answered:

"Relationships among residents of various spheres of awareness can only be made through the alignment of the assemblage point. Death is a final perceptive barrier. Living people can go to the realm of the dead through dreams, but that is the kind of thing a warrior won't enter into, because it only wears away his energy. Something very different, on the other hand, it is to contact sorcerers who have left."

"Why?"

"Because they were able to reach their energy double, and retained their individuality through their techniques."

"How can we enter into relationships with that kind of awareness?"

"In dreaming. However, it is very difficult for a sorcerer who has already left to fix his attention on this world, unless he has some specific task to complete, and it is even more difficult for an ordinary man to support that contact.

"Interaction with these beings is gratifying for warriors, but terrifying for others, because an inorganic sorcerer is not a ghost, but an intense source of aware and implacable energy, able to damage those who come near him through recklessness. That kind of contact can be even more dangerous than an exchange with a live sorcerer."

"What does the danger consist of?"

"It is the nature of energy. If you believe sorcerers are friendly people, you are mistaken; they are **naguals**!

"There is a very morbid feature in our constitution that impels us to use any means necessary. It is something natural: We cannot avoid it. That feature is exacerbated in a sorcerer, and magnified after his departure, because there are no longer any inhibitions to counteract it. When the sorcerer becomes inorganic, he returns to what he always was: A cosmic, predatory emanation."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: Cyclical Beings
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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**.
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Cyclical Beings

Before I met **Carlos**, influenced by my oriental readings, I had been in favor of the doctrine of reincarnation. It seemed a logical alternative to the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. However, in one of his conversations, **Carlos** observed that the dogmas of Christianity and of the Eastern religions were suspiciously similar, because they start from a common denominator: The fear of death.

His comment threw me into a state of perplexity. It was a totally new focus on something that had always fascinated me.

When I asked his opinion, **Carlos** tried to deviate my interest to another topic, as if it were not worthwhile to speak of that matter. But later, changing tactics, he told me that all my beliefs about the survival of the personality were the result of social suggestions.

"They have told you that we have time; that there is a second opportunity. Lies!

"Seers affirm that a human being is like a drop of water that separated from the ocean of life and began to shine by itself. That shine is the point of assembling perception. But, once the luminous cocoon is dissolved, individual awareness disintegrates and becomes cosmic. How could it return? For sorcerers, each life is unique, but you are hoping to repeat it?

"Your ideas originate in the high opinion you have of your own unity. But, like everything else, you are not a solid block: You are flowing. Your 'me' is a sum of beliefs; a memory; nothing concrete!"

I asked him why religions preach their very different doctrines. He answered:

"It is easy to understand. They are answers to the ancestral fears of human beings. Each culture generated its own explanatory propositions, but only seers were beyond beliefs; corroborating those aspects of emanations of the Eagle for themselves."

He explained that there are energy clusters in the universe, to which we are hooked like the beads of a rosary are hooked to each other. We are cyclical: We are the result of a luminous stamp, and every time a new being is born, he embodies the nature of that pattern. But the chain that unites us is not of a personal nature: It **doesn't** imply transfers of memory or personality, or anything like that.

"To survive death, it is necessary to be a sorcerer. By satisfying the Eagle with a living replica, sorcerers are able to keep the flame of their individual awareness burning for eternities. But that is a feat. Do you think this greatest achievement of a warrior should be a free gift?"

I commented that recent studies had demonstrated that some people, under very special circumstances, are able to remember events of a past life.

He insisted that it was an erroneous interpretation of facts.

"It is true that anyone can tune in to certain living emanations that took place in other times, and feel that he has lived not only one, but many lives. But that is only one alignment among millions of possible alignments."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: The Sorcerer's Alternative
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The Sorcerer's Alternative

I asked him if an ordinary person has any chance of surviving death.

He answered that there is always one possibility: The way of the warrior.

"If you want to understand this, don't look at it in black and white. See it more in terms of movements of the assemblage point. The challenge of a warrior is to fix his attention, and fight to maintain the awareness of his individuality even after his departure.

"When we reach a certain threshold of perception, we see that physical death is a challenge. Just as there are two ways of living, there are two ways of dying; in both we can act as impeccable warriors- or as unconscious idiots. That difference is everything."

"Do you mean that what happens after death depends on how we prepare for it?"

Perceiving the intention of my question, he answered:

"Yes, but not in the way you want to interpret it. The idea that being good or complying with certain commandments will facilitate things is a fallacy which has been transmitted to us by the social order. The only preparation that is worthwhile is to take on the rigors of the way of the warrior, which teaches us how to save energy and be impeccable.

"Since there are two forms of living and dying, there are also two kinds of people: those who feel immortal, and those who are already

dead. The first ones harbor hopes, the last ones do not. A warrior is somebody who knows that his time is already up, but still continues to fight, because that is his nature. If you look into his eyes, you will find emptiness."

"But then what is the sorcerer's alternative really about?"

"There is only one way for a man to be ahead of his own end: through managing his energy. That work consists of dreaming, stalking and recapitulation. These three techniques together give one result: the completion of the energy body.

"In a general sense, the duration of our existence depends in great measure on how we treat our energy. Ordinarily we leave this life filled to the brim with everyday concerns: We are eroded by the things we see and touch, and for that reason we die. But if we call back to ourselves all that vital force through recapitulation, death can no longer be the same because we will have our totality.

"From the seers' point of view, a warrior who has recapitulated his life does not die. His attention is so compact that it is one continuous and coherent line: It is not dispersed. His recapitulation never ends: It continues for eternity because it is the work of retracing his steps; of existing on his own and being complete.

"Just like we need a certain quantity of experience to function as individuals, a sorcerer requires sufficient practice in the second attention to be a true sorcerer; otherwise, he won't be prepared when the time comes, and he will depart into infinity as an incomplete sorcerer. Nevertheless, a warrior who struggled all his life to reach the parameters of impeccability does have a second chance. He can gather the events of his existence, and pick up the scattered energy in order to pass into the world of the nagual."

I asked him what a sorcerer does in that world.

He answered:

"For most people, to die is to speechlessly enter something very unfamiliar, much like what we experience in ordinary dreams. There, nothing has a linear sequence, and the concepts of time, space, and gravity do not apply. Imagine what a warrior with the control of his dreaming double can do on a journey of that nature! No doubt you can see that this is a great feat of awareness.

"A sorcerer is somebody who spends his life tuning himself through arduous discipline. When his time arrives, he faces death like a new stage in his travel along the path. Unlike an ordinary man, he doesn't try to soothe his fear with false hopes.

"The warrior departs for his definitive journey filled with joy, and his death greets him and allows him to keep his individuality like a trophy. His sense of being is so finely tuned that he becomes pure energy, and disappears with the fire from within. In that way, he is able to extend his individuality for thousands of millions of years."

"Thousands of millions?"

"That's it. We are children of the Earth: It is our ultimate source. The option of sorcerers is to unite with the awareness of the Earth for as long as the Earth will live."

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The Final Choice

That afternoon, he was limping when he came to the meeting. We asked him what had happened, and he told us that while he was at the hotel, for one fraction of second a toe on his left foot lit up and was scorched with an internal fire.

"I had to move quickly, because my assemblage point had begun the process of alignment!"

Moved by his strange experience, he talked for a long time about the final exercise of sorcerers, by means of which they catch fire from inside and enter pure awareness in their totality, shoes and all.

One of the people in the room asked him why, if the passing into awareness is the final objective of sorcerers, he had fought to retain his individual self today, instead of taking advantage of the opportunity.

With a roguish smile, Carlos told us that the question made him remember one of his ancestors, a Portuguese, who devoted himself to the business of transporting people to Brazil with the story of the promised land. The man made a small fortune that way, and he did a great job creating propaganda about the advantages of Brazil, but he had never been there.

"And here I am, transporting you!"

After we had laughed at his anecdote, Carlos changed the expression on his face. In a very formal tone, he explained that warriors don't act for reasons of self-importance, and therefore, their decisions are not theirs.

"Don Juan told me how some men of knowledge, after a life of impeccable fighting, decide to remain, while others dissolve like a puff of wind into infinity.

"The thing that makes some warriors fight to retain their self is something unrelated to personal concerns. To belong to a lineage of power implies bonds of such a deep nature that our personality is annulled. It becomes just a minuscule detail in an energy structure that the new seers call 'the Rule'.

"In that situation, individual choice no longer exists for the warrior, properly speaking. All he can do is accept his destiny and fulfill the commands of the Rule: Anything else would just lead to his extinction."

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The Seers of Ancient Mexico

In the beginning, one of my worries had to do with Carlos' historical sources. To what extent were Don Juan's teachings the product of a tradition of men of knowledge which stretched back thousands of years, and to what extent had they been influenced by Western ideas?

On various occasions, I tried to validate what Carlos told us through comparisons with what has been left to us from prehispanic antiquity, but I must admit that I always ended up frustrated. I wanted to question it in terms of the most orthodox anthropology. However, it seemed

inappropriate to approach this delicate matter in front of people, so I postponed my questions.

One afternoon, I mentioned what was on my mind. He was perfectly affable, and told me that this was a doubt that assaulted almost all his listeners, because we have all been presented with the image of the communities of ancient Mexico as primitive towns.

He added that my mistrust regarding his statements was normal, and that the problem I was presenting in such a straightforward way, was actually about finding definitions for experiences which don't fit within the syntax of modern languages.

"I made a similar error with my teacher. For don **Juan**, anything that **didn't** serve the objective of the teachings was a waste of time. Every time I tried to find some relationship between his words and those I read in history books, he simply stopped speaking and turned away.

"Once I asked don **Juan** about his reticence and he answered: 'Behind your professional concern hides a professional doubt. If you don't discard it, you won't understand the core of what I am telling you. I know the sources of the information which I am passing on to you, so I don't need to prove them'.

"Later, don **Juan** spoke about a time in which sorcerers traveled enormous distances across the world in order to share the results of their spiritual search with colleagues on other latitudes. Unlike today, sorcerers moved in dreaming with complete freedom, and nothing was more respected than being a seer.

"The credit for the knowledge those men accumulated cannot be awarded to any one country in particular: The knowledge is universal. But the organization of their principles into the arrangement which today is called '**nagualism**' or 'the path of the warrior' definitely took place in ancient Mexico.

"Starting from their primary observations, the ancient seers arrived at the most profound understanding of universal truths that man has ever achieved. The power of their attention had so much force that it is still active today, generating potentialities which are affecting certain areas of Mexico and the Southern United States; creating favorable conditions for an energy concentration that you would be hard put to find anywhere else in the world.

"Partly, those sorcerers were helped by a peculiar configuration of the luminous field of the Earth, whose epicenter rotates around the Valley of Mexico. They see that peculiarity as a gigantic funnel or pleat of light, where emanations coming in from the universe fit with those of the planet, producing a heightened level of awareness.

"Don **Juan** thought that the formation is natural and was used to maximum advantage by the seers to increase their power. But in my analysis of the matter, I have come to the conclusion that it is the other way around: The seers of antiquity fixed their attention on this area of the world, and the planet in its entirety responded to that intent, creating a gigantic catalyst of cosmic emanations. However we choose to interpret it, the fact remains: This is the center: Anything can happen here!"

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While we were contemplating the ruins of what in the past was the main temple of the **Aztecs**, **Carlos** surprised me by making an extravagant declaration. He told me that in this very place, located in the heart of the capital's main square, resided the protector of Mexico, whom he described as an inorganic being in the shape of a tube of light, the size of a twenty-story building.

I looked at him, trying to figure out if he was joking, but his eyes were totally serious. From there, the conversation shifted to a topic of great interest to me: The enigma [* enigma- something that baffles understanding and cannot be explained] of **prehispanic** cultures.

He affirmed that while we nowadays use books to transmit knowledge, the ancient sorcerers kept it in positions of the assemblage point. And they used their sculptures of stone, wood, and ceramics as catalysts for the movement of that point. So their knowledge took the form of magnificent works of art, because for them knowledge was not only information, but, above all, a sublime vision of life.

"The power of that vision has lasted until the present. All the **naguals** I am aware of were **Toltecs**; that is, accomplished artists. They combined impeccable control of their emotions with a high aesthetic sensibility provided by their experiments with awareness. The result was an unheard-of capacity to make sense of extreme experiences, and communicate sensations that would have entangled other men to the point where they could just babble incoherently.

"Some **naguals** of my lineage were attracted to the plastic arts; [* plastic arts- the arts of shaping or modeling; carving and sculpture] others to theater, music, or dance. There were some whose predilection was tales of power; stories which are able to unleash the same effects on all their listeners, because the tales are not based on the cleverness of reason, but on the marvels of our being aware. Today we call those stories 'myths', and of course, we do not understand them."

Carlos went on to say that, judging from their artistic expression, the obsession of the sorcerers of ancient Mexico with transmitting their knowledge to those who surrounded them has no parallel anywhere else on Earth. The agreement they made with their pupils had different parameters from our Western, 'rational' agreements. The **prehispanic** reality included aspects we would not consider normal, because those aspects had to do with energy fields that are not in use anymore.

As an example of one of those fields, he mentioned the emphasis on dreaming, which was of consuming interest to **prehispanic** people. Remnants of it can still be found today in isolated tribes in the country.

He concluded by saying that, due to the lack of **synchronicity** among the emanations aligned by ancient and modern concerns, it is almost impossible to cross the interpretive barrier that separates us from those cultures. So, as ordinary men, we will never fully understand their artistic creations.

"Fortunately, a sorcerer has special tools, because he has learned how to make his assemblage point flexible. He can connect his attention with the modality of awareness of other times, and he knows how to adjust his concern with that of sorcerers who have departed.

"Don **Juan** was an expert on **prehispanic** cultures. For him, old stones **didn't** hold any secrets. He sometimes brought me on a tour through the buildings of the museum of anthropology in order to make me experience a verification of these special agreements for myself."

Then **Carlos** told me about one of those visits, when he himself witnessed the specialized ways in which sorcerers contemplate the past.

"That morning, we had discussed historical topics: I was trying to convince him of the seriousness of my theories, and he was openly making fun of me. I got into a very heavy mood. Before entering the museum, he manipulated my luminosity and made me enter a different state of awareness. His maneuver had the effect of charging the art works with life. Everything was there: the luminous egg, dreaming, the warrior's way, the movement of the assemblage point... it was tremendous!

"As I verified the authenticity of the teachings, I made a swift and thorough assessment of my position as a researcher. I understood that, in great measure, academic institutions had programmed me, not to impartially gather information, but to corroborate a certain description of the world, and this position prevented me from surrendering entirely to knowledge. So, when I did my fieldwork, I was not so much an impartial seeker of truth as an ambassador for another way of life. This generated an inevitable collision which often translated into distrust and mutual suspicion.

"As I was leaving my experience in the museum and returning to my habitual view, I could no longer understand, or even remember, my previous state of euphoria. But strangely enough, from that moment on, my academic point of view began to change. I learned how to see things as they were, without conceptual veils. Until then I had been an investigator at the service of a system of agreements- the Western culture. Suddenly I began to feel more and more comfortable with the idea that, under the anthropologist's skin, there was an ordinary man involved in the task of finding his destiny."

I asked him to give me some concrete example of how sorcerers interpret old monuments.

In response, he asked me:

"Have you seen the **atlants** of **Tula**?"

I told him I had, and he explained that those impressive figures of the **Toltec** age are a description of the party of the **nagual**. He maintained that the sixteen priests in **bas**-relief, which are in the four columns, behind the statues, represent the complete group of warriors, divided into four teams, one for each of the cardinal points.

"They are cosmic travelers, and their mission is to flow with the energy of infinity. The objects they carry with them symbolized each of their functions. These priests are a party in mid-flight; an image of the final objective of the path which is to reach the third attention."

For a long while, he continued giving his own interpretations of various archaeological objects. His stories were so graphic, that he gave me the sensation of walking with him on the millenary paths of a **prehispanic** city. I could almost distinguish the enormous and impenetrable **Olmecan** heads there, at the end of central square; the human warmth of the smiling **Huastecas** statuettes which looked at us from the niches of the pyramids; the delicate Mayan **stelas**, talking

nearby...

Carlos affirmed that the simple act of contemplating some archaeological pieces in a state of inner silence is enough to project the observer's attention to the position of the ancient artists. Hence, some of those pieces work as veritable traps of attention.

"Many of them were designed like that with deliberate intention. Their purpose was not ornamental or symbolic. Each one of their proportions and designs contain a detonator of psychic states and flows of energy. Those pieces are, you might say, catapults for the assemblage point. No professional investigation will ever be able to figure them out, because their creators were not in the least interested in adjusting themselves to rational criteria. To align with them, we have to have the guts to meet the challenge, and perceive in terms of silent knowledge."

He maintained that, because of their intent, the creations of **prehispanic** antiquity are true deposits of the second attention; an oasis of power in the middle of the dry sterility into which current civilization has thrown man.

"By encouraging me to present the heritage of ancient Mexico to the world at large, Don **Juan** began a kind of journey to the roots in order to validate aspects of the teachings which had remained hidden right up until today; and return to man the true dimensions of his being.

"As seekers of knowledge, we can have the full benefit of the old seers' intent today in order to continue their work with renewed vigor."

Somewhat shyly, I asked **Carlos** if we could meet in some museum or archaeological site, where he could give me a practical demonstration of the keys to sorcery.

But he **didn't** approve of that suggestion. His answer was emphatical:

"All that you want to know about your country, go and find out for yourself! As a Mexican, you are the best qualified to recover the **Toltec** message. That is your task; your commitment to the world. If you are too lazy to take it on, somebody else will."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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One time, while we drank coffee in a restaurant in the center of the city, I told him that I got confused by his enthusiasm when he spoke of ancient Mexico, in contrast with the warning made in one of his books about the dangers of visiting ruins or picking up objects from that time. I was referring to the thrilling stories he wrote about some of his fellow apprentices who got into serious trouble due to their habit of prowling around archaeological sites.

He replied that I had misunderstood.

"What happens is that I don't confuse the abstract knowledge of the new seers with the cultural focus of the seers of antiquity, because they are not the same thing. The old seers lived in the second attention. They were fascinated with its intricate details and they tried to reproduce them in their daily life by means of their sculptures and buildings. In that way, they put big chunks of that dark fascination within reach of the

masses.

"But Don **Juan** said that any form of representing knowledge is a subterfuge: It shuts you off from true, silent knowledge. In spite of the prodigious quantity of information that they were able to extract from the other side, the old seers ended up paying a high price for their propensity: Their freedom.

"Therefore, one of the priorities of a modern **nagual** is to direct his apprentices, at least during the first stages of the path, so that they are not trapped by the external side of knowledge.

"Also, there was another reason why Don **Juan** insisted to some of us that we must not waste our time trying to make sense of something that has none. At that time, most of his apprentices had still not lost their human form, which meant that we felt impelled to classify knowledge; systematizing it as quickly as possible. That is not valid with the artifacts of ancient Mexico because what has come down to us is too fragmented. There is still a lot of work to be done, and it is risky work which can turn against the investigator."

"Why?"

"As I have already told you, these creations are not innocent. The problem with them is the passion they stir up. The old seers were masters of obsession. Their works are full of tricks, and all of it continues operating today with the same vigor as on the very first day, because the fixation of a sorcerer's attention **doesn't** wear away with time."

He added that the Mexican tradition of wisdom was designed by men of power in a supreme act of altruism. The intent was to rescue our essential freedom, but it only worked for a short time. And because they were steeped in rituals and superfluous beliefs, in the end their creations became means of fixating the assemblage point of that society.

"Those works are enormous concentrations of intent, but the teachings they guard are not pure: They are blended with the self-importance of their creators, and to focus on them should only be done through stalking. Pyramids are particularly powerful captors of attention. They can bring us quickly to states of inner silence, but they can also turn against us. There comes a point when it is preferable to abstain from them rather than venture without defenses into the domain of the old seers.

"Keeping in mind my morbid inclinations, Don **Juan** had forbidden me to go to museums or archaeological sites on my own. He said that those places were only to be trusted when in the company of sorcerers. One day, while walking through the ruins of **Tula**, I had a truly unpleasant experience and began to change my opinion."

"What happened to you?" I asked him.

"Something that made me tremble with fear," he answered. "I could see that the pyramids exuded enormous energy fields, undulating like a bottomless sea, completely wrapped around the visitors. A very enjoyable condition for certain sorcerers, but not for us."

I asked him if that phenomenon is only linked to Mexican pyramids, or if it can be seen in other parts of the world, too.

He answered that fixation is not a local phenomenon: It is universal. It appears wherever awareness strives to exist. But on Earth, only the human society invests a considerable part of its energy in creating symbolic objects of no utilitarian value whose exclusive purpose is to

generate states of attention.

"In fact, if they did not have this characteristic quality of being extraordinary energy accumulators, those objects and monuments would not exist. They are in this world, but they are not from here. They are agents from the other side; antennas of the second attention. Their design and construction were personally directed by inorganic beings in every latitude and era.

"Once, while traveling through Italy, I went to see a famous sculpture. I hardly dared to get up close: I was so captivated by its beauty. I observed that people passing by could not help projecting their feelings towards the image. The emotional climate was so powerful that I could easily perceive how those feelings elongated in the shape of fibers towards a shadow which was vibrating behind the sculpture. And I was not the only one who realized the phenomenon. There was a tourist there who, when he was 'attacked', took a stone and threw it against the statue. I applauded! Those things are centers of humanity's fixation. They condition the attention: They bind it."

I commented that it seemed pitiful that the most magnificent creations of humans were in fact vehicles of their fixation.

Carlos replied that I had it backwards. He said that the problem is not in the monuments, or in the intent that gave them existence, or even in the inorganic entities who use them as traps, but in ourselves.

"Those works belong to another modality of attention: They do have the ability to move the assemblage point, and that gives a break to our everyday fixation. But there is nothing more obsessive than the second attention; and to feed it with unrestrained enthusiasm can put us in a state of total energetic submission.

"However, that **doesn't** mean you cannot defend against those places. There are two ways by means of which we can counteract their heavy intent: turning away from them, or cultivating impeccability.

"A warrior is able to emerge intact from any conceivable situation. When we cut our ties with our human form, nothing external can affect us any more. Then the monuments of old Mexico are revealed in all their splendor and, at the same time, they take up position where they really belong: The place of silent understanding."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: Validating the **Nagual**
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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**.
Warriors' Dialogue

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Validating the **Nagual**

In the months following our first encounter, my commitment to **Carlos** stayed on the level of attending his lectures and reading his books. But it **didn't** take long before the magic of his teachings began to attract me with a force of its own.

This situation confronted me with a choice, which I suppose presents itself to every apprentice of **nagualism**: On the one hand, I could analyze the strange ideas of sorcerers in the light of academic knowledge, assimilating only what I could understand and verify. On the other hand, there was always the possibility of accepting **Carlos'** words to the letter, provisionally relegating my prejudices until I could work out a

framework of my own supported by experience.

When I told him about my dilemma, he was happy and told me the two options I had considered had one important thing in common: Practice. So it **didn't** matter which one of them I would adopt, as long as I was inflexible in my conclusions.

I tried to elicit some explanations from him that might serve as a point of support in my mind and enable me to accommodate his postulates, but he interrupted me with a gesture:

"A warrior is not ahead of knowledge," he told me. "He **doesn't** make enquiries out of habit, nor does he succumb to the sense of not understanding. When he wants to know something, he experiences it."

I made him notice that the word 'experience' had a very different meaning according to who pronounced it. For him, it meant a way of facing life; for me, the need to understand a phenomenon on an intellectual level.

I thought I saw **Carlos** repressing an ironic smile. In a very kind tone, he explained that the knowledge and exercises of sorcerers are not by themselves difficult to understand or to practice. What makes them seem crazy is the fact that they were designed by a culture alien to us, and for people with a different understanding of the world. He attributed my initial distrust to my rational configuration, not to any impediment of energy.

He added that modern science has not been able to penetrate the **Toltec** knowledge; because modern science has no appropriate methodology; not because the principles of sorcerers and scientists are intrinsically incompatible.

"In spite of all their good intentions, researchers are unable to move their assemblage points on their own. That being the case, how could they understand what sorcerers say?"

"The lack of energy is a serious barrier between ordinary man and sorcerers, because, without the necessary freed awareness, corroboration of the phenomena of sorcery is impossible. It is as if two people are trying to communicate in different languages.

"In general, sorcerers lose in that kind of exchange. In other times, people were threatened into believing they would lose their soul if they listened to the sorcerer: Today modern man is indoctrinated to believe that this vision is unscientific.

"The truth is something else. Practicing the warriors' principles- far from damaging our mental clarity- gives us valuable tools with which to manage knowledge. That is because these principles, when they are guided towards accumulating energy, zealously follow two scientific postulates: Experience, and verification.

"Contrary to what many think, the need to corroborate is not exclusive to Western culture: It is also an imperative in the **Toltec** tradition. **Nagualism**, as an ideological system, is not based on dogmas, but on the personal experience of generations of practitioners. It would be absurd to think that all those people over thousands of years have placed their trust in simple lies.

"Since its starting point is experimentation, we can say that **nagualism** is not a belief system, but a science."

This statement was too much for me.

Certain topics in **Carlos'** teaching had an undeniable practical value;

for example: his constant advice to control self-importance, to acquire a clear vision of the privilege of living in this instant, and to adopt the strategic principles of the warrior's way.

However, other points of his conversations went beyond my capacity to understand. I simply could not accept that, in a parallel space to this world, a universe of laws that has nothing to do with our daily logic exists, populated by conscious entities that my senses cannot perceive.

From the expression on my face, **Carlos** no doubt realized that I **didn't** entirely agree with what he had said, because he added:

"For you, to corroborate is to explain, while for sorcerers to corroborate is to witness indescribable things without subterfuge or mental tricks. You believe that the reach of your senses is the real limit of the universe, but you don't stop to think that your senses are very poorly trained.

"I am not inviting you to believe, but to see; and I assure you that seeing is sufficient proof of everything I have told you. However, I cannot attest the energetic essence of the world for you: That you have to intend on your own, and to find inside your innate potentialities the way of carrying it out.

"What differentiates a contemporary scientist from a seer is that for the former, what's at stake is his own life, while for the latter, the only thing he stands to lose if something goes wrong in his investigations, is his time. The methods of both are equally rigorous, but different.

"A sorcerer cannot be satisfied if he can't verify for himself the stories he has been told. Just as there are degrees and levels of scientific instruction, the sorcery apprentice soon discovers that there are certain very defined stages in the increase of his perception; and he won't rest until he reaches them, or perishes in the attempt. So, as a method of investigation, **nagualism** is totally reliable.

"My instructor showed me that the mark of the new seers is their capacity to synthesize: They are 'abstract' sorcerers." **Carlos** put great emphasis on the term; accentuating each syllable. "In fact, their focus is more rigorous than the focus of science, because seers are involved in an enterprise of a colossal magnitude, which men of science don't even dare to formulate: The verification of our interpretation concerning the consensual reality in which we live. With that as a starting point, you can see how sorcery is the best ally of formal thought.

"Some day, it will be possible to break the ice, and science will discover that it shares a great vocation with **nagualism**: a passion for truth. Then both modalities of investigation will shake hands and cease being antagonistic points of view. They will fuse into one intent to penetrate the mystery."

While we said goodbye, I remarked to **Carlos** that his statements were on the opposite extreme of the view that most people have on the topic of sorcery.

He shrugged, as if to say: "And what does that matter?"

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Return to the Essence

After practicing for a while, **Carlos**' teachings began to leave an imprint in me. What was mistrust at the beginning, soon became an astonished verification of states of awareness beyond my mental parameters. Suddenly I was possessed by an urgent need to understand, although not with my reason, but with the totality of my body. I came to a point where the foundations of my everyday existence finally crumbled, and it became evident to me that the perception of sorcerers contains universes of experiences which, until then, I **hadn't** had the slightest awareness of.

During this whole process, I went through an intense identity crisis; behaving as a daring and unprejudiced investigator at one moment, while at the next moment turning into the epitome of mental resistance. I realized that these emotional fluctuations had to do with **Carlos**' conversations. After listening to him, weeks passed in feverish activity, attempting dreaming and practicing all the techniques I had heard or read about. But, little by little, my initial enthusiasm cooled down, and I would return to the uncomfortable feeling of not understanding anything.

Faced with the chaos of new sensations which began to saturate me, I discovered that I only had one defense: Reason. More than ever, I tried to convince myself that, ultimately, only the things which can be fully explained can be true. In spite of everything **Carlos** had noted about how deceptive reason can be, I would only be willing to tolerate this point if I myself witnessed some prodigious act that truly challenged natural laws.

That morning, we had an appointment in a restaurant in front of the hotel where he stayed. We were practically alone in the room, apart from a shoe-shiner who nodded in a corner, and the waiter who looked at us with an air of boredom. Judging that this was an appropriate moment, I asked:

"Can you prove your teachings to me with some act of power?"

He looked at me with astonishment, as if he had expected anything but this, and he took some seconds to answer me.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I cannot prove anything to your mind. It's too far gone.

"To validate the **nagual**, you need free energy, and for that, the only source I know of is impeccability. In the world of energy, everything has its price, so it depends on you. I cannot silence your mind, but you can, and thus verify what I'm telling you for yourself."

I asked him what I could do with the doubts which inevitably arose in my mind.

He answered:

"Uncertainty is the natural state of victims; on the other hand, trust and audacity are the characteristics of predators. You decide.

"The main thing is that you realize that there is no such thing as 'the teachings of **Castaneda**'. I just try to be direct and to act from my silence—a course of action which I recommend for you, because it does away with madness. I am not a powerful **nagual** like Don **Juan**, nor am I your benefactor. But I've been a witness to acts that would leave you speechless with surprise, and I don't mind at all telling you about it. It's just that those stories won't tell you anything, unless you lower your guard and allow them to penetrate you.

"If you want to verify the tales of power, you have to open up to experience. Don't shield yourself behind your interpretations, because in spite of all our studies as modern, ordinary men, we know very little about the world.

"You, like any other sorcery apprentice, have an enormous training field. For example, your emotional **ups** and downs; your energy drainages. Plug them, and you will see how things change. Those eight hours you spend every night like a vegetable, without realizing anything. Explore them. Take control and dare to be a witness. If you elucidate the secrets of your dreams, in the end you will see what I see and there won't be any more doubts in your mind."

We remained silent for a moment while our plates were served.

Carlos interrupted the silence.

"Remember, doubts are just mental noise. Nothing very deep."

I replied that according to what little I had learned in my passage through life, doubt is the base of all true knowledge.

But he had a different theory; he argued:

"So much time is spent accumulating stuff that it becomes very difficult to accept anything new. We are willing to waste years of our life filling out forms, or discussing with friends; but if someone tells us the world is unique and full of magic, we feel distrust and we run to take refuge in our catalog of preconceived ideas.

"On the other hand, a predator fights all his life to perfect his hunting techniques; always keeps his sense of opportunity alert, and is never confused by the appearance of things. He is cautious and patient. He knows that his prey may jump out from any bush, and that the smallest hesitation can be the difference between continuing to live, or perishing. He carries no doubts.

"A warrior is a hunter, not a cynical opportunist. Either he fully accepts the challenge of knowledge, with all that it involves, or his own achievements will regress him to a more awful condition than that of an ordinary man."

I felt that his words contained a veiled reproach. I tried to justify myself, but he interrupted me:

"It is obvious that you have been practicing. In those circumstances, your mind is disturbed. But the pain of your worrying will disappear as soon as you recognize that what you worry about is an implanted doubt.

"Like all of us, you have been trained to pass all the information you receive through the filter of reason. You remind me of a dog that lived in a senior citizens' home. When somebody, out of pity, threw him some crumb, he got so excited that he **couldn't** enjoy it calmly anymore. You are just like that. You are so grateful to your science that you think you owe it something; that you cannot be unfaithful to it. You don't dare to dream. You cannot enjoy the magical side of the world.

"You have given yourself a much too deceptive parameter for your verifications: Reason. What I propose is that you substitute that approach with another more reliable and, above all, much wider one: Sanity. I have already explained to you that sorcerers claim there is a radical difference between the two concepts.

"To understand it better, think, for example, about the history of the world. Most of it was made by very sane people who nevertheless dared to challenge commonly held beliefs: They were opposed to what seemed

reasonable at that time.

"If you travel beyond our world, you will see that it is the same there. The universe is not reasonable, but it can be faced with energy and sanity. When you learn how to use it, then you understand it in a basic way- without words. Who needs words when one is a witness?"

"I agree with you in that, from an everyday point of view, concepts of sorcery are completely senseless. But there is a deep dimension to our awareness where the complaints of the mind don't penetrate; and a warrior won't rest until he finds it. Once there, he discovers that his own reason, when it is exercised with inflexible rigor and in its entirety, will automatically lead to sorcery, because the essence of reason is sobriety, indifference, and non-pity.

"Once he is the owner of his reason and no longer manipulated by it, a sorcerer can attempt the feat of speech; putting into words the unfathomable enigma of existence. But that is such a difficult art that you can only approach it by means of a great energy surplus.

"To be a warrior is an endless fight to be impeccable. The trick of sorcerers is that they know that the energy we invest in enslaving ourselves is the same energy that can liberate us. We just have to **rechannel** it, and the tales of power will begin to materialize in front of our eyes.

"Therefore, don't fight against your uncertainty. Go with it. Use it as a stimulus for verification and put your uncertainty to the service of your energy needs. Verify everything. Don't let a tale of power remain in the domain of myths. Commit yourself intimately to knowledge; but commit as a warrior, not as a slave of reason!"

He pointed out an Indian girl who was passing by down the street, with a boy of nine months or so tied to her back. The face of the child radiated an insatiable curiosity, spilling and bubbling out of his black, round eyes which were like small obsidian mirrors; eyes eagerly looking at everything.

Carlos continued:

"The warrior's commitment with the spirit consists of a return to our original nature. It is a pact we all seal, by the simple fact of having been born.

"Man is born with the impulse to witness everything, but that impulse is brutally mutilated during the first years, and so we must rediscover it. You have to clean your concern of all prejudice, and return to that boy's pure curiosity. A warrior is forced to verify all the knowledge that arrives at his door; forced to experience it in full, no matter where it comes from. And then he has to have the necessary discerning ability to select and keep what is useful."

"Should I also apply that discerning ability to the path you preach?"

He seemed bothered by my question; and replied in a firm tone:

"I have already told you that there is no '**Castanedan**' way, just as there is no Buddha's way, nor one of Jesus Christ! Haven't you understood yet that teachers are not necessary? I am not selling you merchandise, I don't care if you agree with me. I am only pointing out the address to you out of sheer impersonal affection: Go and verify it, if that is what you want, and if not, keep your doubts."

When we said goodbye, **Carlos** told me:

"You should not pay too much attention to your worries. They are

symptomatic. Something in your interior is giving in, and it is normal for your human form to defend itself. Very soon, your dealings with the **nagual** will make you shake in your boots, and you will need your sanity like never before. Maybe you will regret ever having asked me for a sign!"

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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It's difficult for me to write about such a personal concept as the 'verification of the postulates of sorcerers'. To enable me to agree with them was not a matter of arriving at coherent explanations, but of being involved in a minimum of practical commitments, and building a new kind of consensus from there. The elements of that new language; of the true dialogues of warriors, are not founded in our reason, but in our energy savings.

As **Carlos** explained to me, the validation of such an irrational topic as 'the movement of the assemblage point' can only be done via premises of power. Since any intent to explain something is a product of the fixation of the assemblage point in a specific position, there is no other way to corroborate its movement than moving it for ourselves, and see what happens.

Faced with the overwhelming logic of his argument, I asked him:

"Does that mean that it's not possible to verify the statements of sorcerers from the outside?"

"On the contrary!" he answered. "The effects of power can only be lived from the outside, because, once our attention flows, we stop being a rigid and isolated 'me', and instead we blend into the world that surrounds us. That's why seers say that the mystery of the world is not inside, but outside. Or in other words, the solution is not mental, it is practical!"

I asked him what was practical about a topic as vague as the movement of the assemblage point.

He replied that the movement was something vague for me, because I **didn't** have any voluntary control over my states of awareness. As an example, he mentioned learning how to read and write; something that may seem vague and completely unimportant to a savage, but ends up becoming a vital necessity for civilized man.

And that example, he said, could only give a bleak idea of how urgent the control of the assemblage point becomes for a sorcerer.

I wanted to know how it was possible that a topic of such importance goes unnoticed in the life of the immense majority of people.

He answered that the movement of the assemblage point is something as natural, and at the same time as sophisticated, as speaking or thinking. If we are not taught how to do it, we never do it.

He assured me that the key to either reaching or losing the extraordinary achievements of sorcery resides in our consensus in the agreements we make.

"To verify facts, one first has to agree on their meaning.

Unfortunately, for most people to agree means to be rigid, and not depart

from the official description. We must have a strong will to learn if we are to dare exploring other areas of consent.

"Sorcerers have found that there are two ways of agreeing. The first one is the collective consensus; it starts from reason and it can take you very far, but it will inevitably throw you into a paradox in the end. The other is the consensus induced by a movement of the assemblage point, and it can only be corroborated by those that share similar circumstances.

"A consensus based on individual experience has an advantage over one based on explanations, because the life of the senses is complete in itself; reason, on the other hand, only works by means of comparisons, positive and negative, certain or false, and so on.

"The first effect of penetrating the consensus of sorcerers is that those dualities we have always accepted as something self-evident stop being operative- which in the beginning is extremely disconcerting for the reason.

"In time, sorcerers learn that in a world where there are no solid objects, but rather beings who flow among various states of awareness, it **doesn't** make sense to try to separate truth from lies.

"Don **Juan** said that the truth is like the cornerstone of a building, a sensible man should not try to remove it. When we surrender to definitions, our energy becomes stagnated, or blocked.

"The tendency to surrender to definitions is an imposition of the foreign mind, and we have to put an end to it. Experience substituted for reason-based consensus was what Don **Juan** called 'to believe without believing'. For sorcerers, this completely redefines the concept of corroboration.

"They don't look for definitions, but for results. If a practice is able to elevate our level of awareness, what does it matter how we explain it to ourselves! The means by which we will start acting to save and increase our energy are not important, because once we are in possession of our totality, we enter a new field of attention where we don't care about concepts anymore, and things demonstrate themselves.

"Perhaps you think these statements just give permission to be irresponsible. But a warrior understands the real message: 'Reality' is a 'doing', and a doing is measured by its fruits.

"Anyone who judges a sorcerer from an everyday point of view, will judge him to be an irremediable liar, because the universes of both don't coincide. And if the sorcerer tries to explain inexplicable things with words borrowed from the everyday point of view, he will inevitably become entangled in contradictions; and be seen as a humbug or a lunatic. That's why I have said that from the point of view of the everyday world, the world of the **nagual** is a fraud.

"In fact, this goes for all '**isms**'; and **nagualism** is not an exception. But, as opposed to the defenders of reason who seek followers for their particular kind of agreement, a sorcerer won't tell you that his vision of the world is the real one; he tells you: 'I believe because I want to, and you can do it, too'. This expression of will is something very powerful, and will provoke, as an avalanche, events of power.

"If you pay close attention, you will notice that children don't just 'innocently' believe in the magic of the world: They believe because they are complete and they see! And the same thing happens with sorcerers.

The fabulous stories I have told you don't belong to the plane of reality in which you and I are having this conversation, but they happened!

"**Nagualism** is like somebody who inherited a story and a treasure map, but **doesn't** believe in it, so he comes to you and gives his secret to you. And you are so clever, or so naive, that you take the story as truth and dedicate yourself to deciphering the map. But the map is coded with various keys, which makes you learn several languages, go to difficult places, dig in the ground, climb mountains, descend into ravines, and dive in deep waters.

"In the end, after years of searching, you arrive at the place where the treasure should be, and- **oh** how disappointing!- you just find a mirror. Was it a lie? Well, you are healthy, strong, well educated, full of adventures, and you've had a great experience. Truly, there was a treasure there!

"Keeping in mind that there are neither truths nor lies in the flow of energy, a warrior chooses to believe by predilection, for the excitement of the adventure; and in this way he learns to focus on the world from another point of view- the focus of silence. It is only then that the immense treasure of the teachings is revealed."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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When the presentation of his new book ended, we left and walked along **Insurgentes** Avenue. It was night, a little cold, and surprisingly clear. The air smelled clean.

While we walked, **Carlos** commented that what he **didn't** like about that kind of activity was meeting so many sycophants, [* sycophant- a person who tries to please someone in order to gain a personal advantage] and the fact that they forced him to toast with champagne. His technique was to keep one full glass during the whole event, without having even one sip: That way, they stopped inviting him.

He added that his literary career began with a challenge. One time, Don **Juan** put forward the proposal that in order to utilize the heaps of notes he had taken during his apprenticeship, he should write a book. "In the beginning I considered it a joke, since I was not a writer. However, Don **Juan** outlined it to me as a sorcery exercise."

Once **Carlos** had started, he began to take pleasure in the work, and ended up understanding that, for him, books were an avenue to his real mission as a **nagual**.

I asked him if he **didn't** fear that divulging the knowledge to all kinds of people would end up corrupting it.

"No!" he answered. "What degenerates knowledge is secrecy. Putting it within reach of people renews it. Nothing is more healthy for energy than fluency, and that concerns the knowledge of sorcerers most of all. We are temporary recipients of power: We are not entitled to retain it. Also, this knowledge only makes sense for those who practice it and achieve the necessary energy to corroborate it. The rest do not matter.

"I entered the world of the **nagual** at the precise moment when a

rupture was necessary. That forced me to face the most dramatic decision of my life: To publish the teachings. It has been very hard for me to be the representative of such a watershed, and for years I lived with the trauma of not understanding what I was doing. There were people who even wrote me threatening letters in the name of tradition: The sorcerers of the old guard did not want to lose their prerogatives."

I told him how extraordinary I thought it was that he should choose to break so drastically with the millennial tradition of secrecy.

"I **didn't** break anything!" he replied. "The command of the spirit was clear. All I did was comply with it.

"In the beginning of my apprenticeship, I was prepared to take the reins of the lineage. One day everything changed. Warriors of the party saw that my energy structure was different than the **nagual Juan Matus'** energy, and they interpreted it as a command with no possibility of appeal. As the Rule dictates, they put in my hands the heavy responsibility of closing the lineage.

"For centuries, parties of warriors had acted as a sponge, absorbing experience to corroborate the sophisticated principles of the way of knowledge. The only exit left for me was to return that knowledge to the people.

"The cycle of my books is a beginning; a humble intent to put within reach of modern man fragments of a knowledge which was hidden for generations. The moment for corroborations will come later, and other cycles will follow; because once the teachings of sorcerers come into the hands of the public, it is inevitable that some begin to question and experiment with perception, and in that way discover the entire potential of which we are capable."

I asked him how Don **Juan** and his cohorts had reacted when they realized that the secrets of the group were being disclosed. He answered:

"I have already described how on one occasion when I brought a copy of one of my books to Don **Juan**, he returned it to me with a scornful comment. That is only half of the truth. The fact is that he was the author of those texts. He **didn't** write them letter by letter, but he was in charge of the whole matter and he supervised every one of my statements. In time, I discovered that Don **Juan's** strategy had been carefully calculated.

"The plan of the **nagual** has supreme audacity and a brilliant simplicity. He introduced the knowledge of seers to the public, not to contribute to the grandeur of academia, but to elevate the level of awareness in the masses; and he presented it through the very institutions that might refute him. He knew that exposing the teachings through a mystic or religious format would not penetrate as deeply as a presentation with the support of a scientific guarantee. For that reason he demanded that I shape my first book as a thesis for my degree.

"The operation of the **nagual Juan Matus** initiates a new stage in the transmission of knowledge; an unprecedented stage. The secrets of the movement of the assemblage point have never been put within reach of the public before."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

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When I told him that I had been visiting certain groups based in the Mexican tradition in search of keys to ancient knowledge, **Carlos** took it as a joke and started to laugh. Seeing my disconcerted reaction, he asked me not to take his laughing personally. It was just that my investigations reminded him of his own actions when he came to Mexico as a student in search of information.

He explained that, according to Don **Juan's** teachings and what he himself had been able to discover, there are two kinds of tradition: The formal, and the energetic. The first one **doesn't** have anything to do with the other.

"The formal tradition depends on secrets and the preservation of routines. It teaches allegories and produces shepherds and flocks.

The energetic tradition deals with concrete achievements, like seeing and moving the assemblage point. Its strength is renewal and experimentation, and it produces impeccable warriors.

"A warrior is devoted to his task. He does not waste his energy on following anybody. He does not care about social customs, whether they may be contemporary or represent millennia of tradition. Also, secrecy is not part of his stalking."

I replied that, in my opinion, believing that an ancestral knowledge exists in various traditions on Earth is justified by the fact that techniques of manipulation of awareness cannot be imparted by means of books, but only from mouth to ear. The interaction with a teacher of wisdom has to be personal.

He commented:

"You read that somewhere, right?"

We both laughed.

He told me that truly useful knowledge is very simple, and can be expressed in very few words.

"It is not necessary to make so much noise about it, and it **doesn't** matter how it is transmitted. If it is orally, well, great- but any other means will serve equally well. The important thing is to convince oneself that there is no time for foolishness, because death is at our heels. Beyond that truth, a warrior needs very little, because his sense of urgency will make him save his energy and his accumulated energy will allow him to discover his totality."

I commented that, according to what I had read, divulging secret knowledge is characteristic of 'black' sorcerers. On the other hand, 'white' sorcerers transmit what they know with restraint, because they are aware that knowledge involves a certain danger to those who are not prepared to receive it.

Carlos shook his head with incredulity.

"But what is going on with you?" he asked. "What destroys us is ignorance, not knowledge! There is nothing in the profundities of knowledge that can put man's authentic interests at risk!

"You started from an erroneous, but very common idea: That there are two kinds of knowledge, an 'outside' one and an 'inside' one. Seers, on the other hand, say that knowledge is one, and what does not bring you to freedom is not worthwhile. For them, the truth is the opposite of what you say: The dark sorcery of the ancients is associated with secrets, while

transparency is the characteristic of the new seers."

"Then, **Carlos**, do you deny the existence of any initiated knowledge inside the Mexican tradition?"

Instead of answering, **Carlos** demanded that I define the term 'initiated'. This got me in trouble, since in fact I **didn't** have a very clear idea about this. Making an effort, I explained to him that initiates are people who, thanks to their merits, become recipients of a particular traditional knowledge the rest of their fellow men do not share.

While I spoke, **Carlos** agreed gravely. When I finished, he commented: "That definition is a portrait of the importance you grant yourself".

He maintained that classifying human beings for what they know is a mere arrangement of the collective inventory; something like making distinctions among a line of ants because some are slightly darker than others.

"The ironic thing is that we human beings do in fact divide ourselves into two groups: Those who dissipate their energy, and those who conserve it. You can call the last ones whatever you want, sorcerers, **Toltecs**, initiated; and it's the same whether they have a teacher or not. Their luminous reality is such that they are a step away from freedom.

"What nobody can teach them, warriors obtain by themselves by listening to the silent commands of the spirit.

"To open up to power is a natural process. No man can tell another: 'You are already open!' - unless he is a charlatan. [* charlatan - a flamboyant deceiver; one who attracts customers with tricks or jokes] Nor are there any shortcuts that will automatically bring us to freedom.

"Secrets of initiation are symbols of the arrogance of the ancients; keys without a door: They will get you nowhere. You can spend your life pursuing them and when you finally obtain them, you **ll** discover you have nothing.

"You believe that what differentiates knowledge is the way it is transmitted, whether by books or by oral tradition. It has not occurred to you that both methods are the same, because both belong to our everyday agreements. What is important about the way you receive information? What matters is that you become convinced to act.

"The method of sorcerers is the systematic saving of energy. They state that what separates men is not what they know, but how much energy they possess. Therefore, the true way to transmit knowledge is in increased states of awareness. The appointment of sorcerers is not with a book or a ceremony, but with dreaming. When a warrior learns how to capture experience through his dreams, it **doesn't** matter under which label the teachings are presented, since his perception is pure and he can corroborate it with his seeing."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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In another of our conversations he told me that, although they were antithetical [* antithetical - sharply contrasted in character or purpose] in

many aspects, there was one thing neither the old nor the new seers had questioned: The need to keep the knowledge hidden. They transformed the **Toltec** language into a forest of metaphors, where almost anything could be said with almost any combination of words. And it was also they who sank **prehispanic** societies under an unbearable load of rituals, procedures, and secret passwords. Instead of strengthening sorcery, this weakened it.

"The heritage of secrecy still burdens some groups of knowledge, although I have tried to shake it."

I asked him why sorcerers try to hide knowledge.

He answered that each cycle of seers had their own reasons for doing it.

"The ancients started with an understanding that we are transitory, but they allowed themselves to become corrupted by seductive ideas of survival. As a result, they were filled with self-importance and lapsed into exclusivity. They were like the pyramids they built: As obvious and attractive as they were secretive and inaccessible. They preferred to keep themselves apart from the average people whom they saw as unworthy and ignorant. But, at the same time, they **couldn't** do without a court of followers. That contradiction caused long wars for control of the flock and destroyed a great deal of real knowledge.

"Self-importance and its unpleasant relatives, secrecy and exclusivity, feed on the fixation of the assemblage point. For that reason, the ancients had a great interest in generating rigid traditions in order to achieve maximum stability at the core of their societies. In reality, their concern for the spirit was very mixed up with their ambitions for temporal power.

"The new seers discontinued all that by giving the fluidity of the assemblage point first priority. They had observed that, as soon as that point moves, the idea of secrecy changes into idiocy, because in the realm of energy there are no rigid limits between conscious beings. In consequence, what became most important for them was to get rid of all speculation, and emphasize the practical side of the path.

"However, they soon came into contact with a bitter reality, and that was that ordinary people **didn't** understand them: On the contrary, they were afraid and tried to destroy them whenever they saw them. The secrecy of the new seers was not motivated by the feelings of superiority that moved their predecessors, but was adopted for strategic reasons. They had to endure extreme persecution and were forced to protect themselves.

"It is an historical irony that, in spite of the legitimacy of their motives, in time the strategy of the new seers has caused the same effects as the arrogance of the old ones. After centuries of secrecy, all their energy had gone into hiding their knowledge, and many ended up forgetting why it was they had hidden.

"At present, the modality of our time is changing quickly. In consequence, something else which seemed immovable is also changing: The way the teachings are transmitted. **Naguals** nowadays are forced to find new channels for the energy, even if it means to eradicate the most entrenched customs."

"Why is this change happening?"

"Because circumstances have moved ahead of tradition. To maintain the knowledge hidden is no longer a vital demand. There are those who

will criticize you for disclosing it, but nobody will kill for that reason today. So to continue the practice of censoring portions of knowledge has become catastrophic for the total objective of sorcery, because those portions ferment inside us and serve as food to the deep-seated sense of importance.

"My first task as a nagual was to put an end to the secrecy of my predecessors. The choice of modern warriors is freedom. Today, we can say whatever we want, giving our listeners the choice to take it or leave it. This has led to an extraordinary consequence which previous naguals could never enjoy: Mass practicing.

"Mass practicing is our security valve. You can deceive people's minds, because after all their minds are not their own. But you cannot confuse the luminous mass of hundreds or thousands of intents focused collectively on the goal of freedom.

"Mass is energy, and energy allows us to break out of the stagnation of attention. Through collective practice of the magical passes, I have witnessed a true energetic manifestation around the world; something that for the first time has allowed me to believe in the feasibility of my task. My cohorts and I are so excited with what is happening that we do not have words to describe it."

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"Encounters With The Nagual" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part [II](#). Warriors' Dialogue

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For some years, Carlos had been teaching some movements that he called 'magical passes' to small groups, because, according to him, the magical passes served to prevent energy from stagnating and forming 'balls'. 'The Play of the Drum' was one of the passes: 'The Arrow to the Right and Left', and 'The Dynamo' were among the others. He said Don Juan would practice them at any time of the day, wherever he happened to be. Mostly, he would do them before or after carrying something, or when he had been in the same position for a long while.

The matter interested me a lot, because I myself practiced some oriental postures, and was generally inclined towards physical exercises. Therefore, at the first opportunity that presented itself, I asked him where he had learned the magical passes.

He answered:

"They are the heritage of the ancient seers."

At that time, he was not much seen in public. But, little by little, his secrecy had become less rigid, and large groups of people began to approach him. As he began to teach the passes in public, Carlos began to change them somewhat; making them more complicated, and dividing them into categories. He ended up giving them a name taken from architecture: Tensegrity, which, he told us, was the combination of two terms, tension and integrity.

From the very first, there were some detractors, resentful people who- without stopping to appreciate the practical side of these exercises- began to spread the word that the nagual had just invented them.

When I mentioned that I was worried about this, he was firm:

"Tensegrity is my intent! A nagual has authority, and this is my gift to the world.

"Don Juan and his warriors taught their apprentices many specific movements which filled us with energy and well-being, and helped free us from the yoke of the foreign mind. My role has been to modify them slightly, taking them out of the sphere of the personal, and adapting them to people in general so that they become useful to other groups of practitioners."

He told me that the method he had chosen in the beginning- of teaching the magical passes in a limited form- was in certain ways a failure, since those who were moved to practice them were too few to accumulate enough 'energetic mass'. So, in this new phase, he had created a system able to impact on the awareness of multitudes.

"My cohorts and I will open a great door in the energy. That fissure is so powerful that it will last for ages, and those who approach it to look inside will be swallowed to another world. With Tensegrity, what I seek is to train those who are interested so that they can support that transition. Those who don't have enough discipline, will perish in the intent.

"The plan of disclosing the teachings is the summary of thirty years of practices and experiments. As a man and as a nagual I have done as much as I have been able to do to make it work because I know that the collective mass of many warriors can cause a commotion in the modality of our time."

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"Encounters With The Nagual" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part [II](#). Warriors' Dialogue

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On various occasions, Carlos affirmed that don Juan Matus' lineage ended with him. But when I wanted to know more about it, he insisted that, for now, he could not give me any more details.

"I can't know exactly what the design of power will be: Who am I to determine something like that? I know the traditional form of the lineage which I belong to ends with me, but whether a new format will continue into the future or not is something that is determined by a superior force."

He told me he had spent years waiting for signs of continuity- concretely, a person that had the luminous characteristics to be the new nagual- but those signs didn't appear. Consequently, he had decided to act in an impeccable way, as if he were the last nagual on earth. From that came his urgency to tell everything.

"Take advantage of me!" he told me. "I am liquidating all that was given to me."

With sadness, I asked if it meant that, after him, there would be no more teaching of the knowledge.

He answered:

"No, that's not what I mean. My destiny is to close a line, nothing more. I am sure the spirit will find the way of continuing ahead, because the current of knowledge cannot stop.

"The extinction of a lineage of sorcerers or the birth of another are constant incidents in the flow of energy. I know several parties of warriors living now, getting ready for the final jump, and I can also foresee the beginning of a new cycle corresponding to the renewal of cultural paradigms for the next millennium."

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Warriors' Dialogue

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The Evolution of the Path

That morning, [Carlos](#) asked me to choose my question carefully, because he [didn't](#) have much time to talk to me before catching his plane.

I said that I had been reading in his books about the cycles of warriors he called old and new seers, but I could not catch the difference between them.

He replied that I had chosen a good topic for conversation, since understanding that difference was a basic requirement to make sure one avoided the errors of the old seers.

He explained that, like everything in this universe, the path of sorcerers is evolutionary. For that reason, a [nagual](#) is always forced to refer to the teachings in new ways. As a consequence of that strategy, [nagualism](#) as a total system of practices is divided into breeds or cycles.

"Ever since man's adventure in search of the spirit began, and up until today, there have been three breeds of sorcerers at least: those of the first period; the ancient seers; and the new ones. The first sorcerers lived a long time ago, and were very different from us. Today we hardly understand their vision of the world, but we know that they survived under very difficult conditions where any one of us would have succumbed.

"The ancient seers were a refinement of that original kind. They adapted to America's soil and knew how to create there real civilizations. They were formidable men, who used intent at a level that is incomprehensible to us. They were intoxicated with power. They could move gigantic stones, fly, or transform themselves at will. They cohabited with inorganic beings and created a culture to fit them; replete with fabulous stories.

"Legends describe them best. Those sorcerers are the heroes of our mythology. What they sought was to live at any price, and they got it.

"The ancient seers began to move their assemblage points through the consumption of power plants. After that, their inorganic teachers told them how to do things. The ancient seers only needed to focus their interest in order to understand what this world is, and that interest made them design the most extraordinary techniques for the exploration of awareness.

"But don't think that the old seers were just men of action. They were, also very profound thinkers who took the art of comprehending to the limits of attention. Compared to them, we are beasts. Nowadays, modern man is not interested in the reason why he is alive which is why he finds no peace and can not find himself. We have a lot we could learn from those precursors who found the answers which can bring us out of the

dead-end we are facing."

"What dead-end are you talking about?"

"Our vision of a world of objects. That vision has been very useful; but at the same time is the worst among our calamities. Modern man's concerns are the same as those of an animal: Use, possess, annihilate. But this animal, man, has been domesticated, and is condemned to live inside a material inventory. Since every one of the objects he uses has a long history, modern man lives his life lost inside his own creation.

"In contrast, what concerned the ancient seers was the relationship between the cosmos and them: the beings that are going to die. They were able to acquire their own vision. They [didn't](#) stop at one of the stations along the way, and forget that they were travelers."

I asked him why, if their vision was correct, there came a moment when the old seers were substituted by the cycle of new seers.

He answered that seeing is no guarantee of impeccability.

"The old seers could not separate a great dose of self-importance from their practices.

"Since they enjoyed having power over their fellow men, they were never able to focus clearly on the proposal of total freedom; and although they were unbeatable seers, it was impossible for them to foresee that their enthusiasm to discover the world should end up involving them in commitments that would trap them.

"Most modern sorcerers are the heirs of the old seers; but many modern sorcerers, by ignoring the warrior's principles, have [devaluated](#) the knowledge. They have become [storytellers](#), [herbalists](#), healers, or dancers: They have lost control of the assemblage point: In many cases, they do not even remember that the point exists.

"The new seers tried to stop the ancient seers ways. The new seers took what they could use from the vision of the ancients, but the new seers were wiser and more moderate. They cultivated an unbending intent, and turned all their attention towards the way of the warrior. In that way they changed the entire intent of the ancient practices. Upon completing their energy, some of them glimpsed a goal higher than the adventure of the second attention: They pondered the possibility of being free.

"Through their seeing, the new seers discovered something horrifying: That the enthusiasm of the old seers served as nutrition to certain conscious entities who were energy parasites. In the beginning, the contract between these beings and humans seemed very beneficial: We gave them part of our energy and they rewarded us with what was then a novelty: Reason. But in time it became obvious that the contract was a swindle. Reason is only good for making inventories of things, not for understanding them. Also, it has an unpleasant by-product which seers see as a membrane covering our luminosity: Self-importance.

"For the new seers, that was intolerable, because they had a goal in mind which had never occurred to the old seers: The possibility of merging with the universe directly, without using the [inorganics](#) as intermediaries.

"The new seers were pragmatic sorcerers; passionate about validation. In their desire to erase from their practices every last vestige of ego, they became distrustful [* distrustful- having the trait of not trusting others] people. Their method was elimination: They suppressed

all that **didn't** point directly to their objective of total freedom. The result was that they became able to fixate their intent on intent itself; becoming one. Unhappily, that method forced them to sacrifice enormous portions of their knowledge.

"So ferocious was their intent that it caused them to close in on themselves. They filled their teaching with secrets. Since social relationships were not important for their objectives, they isolated themselves from society; creating their own, minuscule groups. Almost all of them left to live in the mountains, the forest, or the desert where they remain today acquiring ethnic characteristics. That has certainly not helped them to refine the art of stalking; what's more, in the end it transformed their search for freedom into a purely rhetorical objective."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: The Seers of the New Era
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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**.
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The Seers of the New Era

"The old and the new seers represent two extreme positions facing the same challenge: the result of the adaptation of sorcerers to very concrete historical circumstances. But today, times, have changed.

"By the Eagle's design, at least one of the lineages of new seers has been able to redirect its task. The last twenty-seven **naguals** of my line had tried to recover the fearless spirit of the old seers, while at the same time maintaining the sobriety of purpose of the new. In that way, we were able to gather enough energy to attempt a new and more balanced adaptation of the teachings.

"According to Don **Juan**, massive changes in energy are happening at the present time, which will inevitably cause the emergence of a new cycle of warriors. To differentiate them from their predecessors, I have called them modern seers; or seers of the new era."

Before continuing with his story, **Carlos** clarified for me that his concept of the new era had nothing to do with the New Age contemporary mystic movement, but was rather an extension of the old **prehispanic** belief in a series of **eras**, following on one after the other in the history of the world.

I asked him why he had not mentioned anything about this new breed of warriors in his books.

He answered:

"My books describe a phase of my apprenticeship relative to my benefactor and his cohorts. Although they had conceptualized a new cycle as a strategic need, it was not part of their immediate life. They realized that their own actions departed from the Rule of the new seers when they allowed and even encouraged the popularization of the knowledge. But they left it to me to find the appropriate terms in which to describe what was happening."

I asked, "At what time did these seers begin to appear?"

Carlos said, "They are barely appearing yet.

"Everything began with the conquest of Mexico. The new seers took that change as a sign, and understood that it was necessary to review the tradition. But things would still have stayed the same if it **hadn't** been for

the manifestation in our lineage of a being whom we call 'the death defier'. He returned the sense of adventure and fascination for the unknown to the new seers. Contact with that entity has been decisive for us."

Eagerly, I asked him to tell me more about the death defier, one of the most extraordinary and incomprehensible characters of his books.

He answered:

"The death defier is an entity of supreme awareness. He was born about ten thousand years ago. But he appeared physically in the lineage at the time of the **nagual Sebastian**, in the year of 1723."

"Was the death defier a person?"

"He was a man in other times back when the thirst for knowledge was alive and mankind surrendered himself to his love for the Earth. He is the typical exponent of that mentality. If you spoke with him, you would notice that we share the same yearning for companionship, and an urge for the expansion of awareness. But you would also notice strange things. He lives in another vision. His sense of self is very different from ours, because it embraces a very wide range of sensations. He **doesn't** have gender, age, nationality, or a defined language. He **doesn't** have friends or relatives; and worse, there is nobody in the world like him. He passes through the world like a ghost, and spends most of his time ensconced in some deep niche of dreaming.

"His contribution to our lineage, as much in techniques as in theoretical knowledge, was monumental. That warrior knew all the arts of the ancients, and much more! You can say that it was his appearance on the scene that led to the germination of the cycle of modern seers.

"The second sign which showed that the time of change was near, was the presence of a foreigner in the lineage: The **nagual Luhan**. As you already know, **Luhan** was Chinese. Although he had received a high education in his own country, his adventurous personality made him become a sailor; and he lived an erratic existence all over the planet until one day his luck put him in the way of power.

"The young **Luhan** had disembarked in the port of **Veracruz**, and he was strolling around in search of amusement, when a dangerous incident brought him staggering out from a bar, where he collided head first into the **nagual Santiesteban**, who **didn't** have time to react. This event, unusual in the life of a sorcerer, was taken as a sign.

"You can imagine the bewilderment of the new seers! The spirit had spoken in an obvious way, and ordered that secrets guarded by generations of warriors should be put in the hands of a stranger. In that way, **Luhan** was accepted as the new **nagual** and his knowledge of martial arts became part and parcel of the heritage of the lineage.

"But the confirmation of these signs of change happened two centuries later when I, another **nagual** whose luminous constitution was not of the conventional kind, came into the hands of a certain strange old man named don **Juan Matus**. Neither he nor I knew it then, but the destiny of the knowledge of the new seers had been sealed."

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Encounters With The **Nagual**: Intellectual Preparation
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In one of the last conversations we had, [Carlos](#) characterized the modern seers today as warriors who are distinguished by their frankness. They reject the furtive attitudes that have traditionally distinguished sorcerers; and they have renounced every doctrine that is not crystal clear and based on immediate verification.

"Another peculiarity which identifies them is that, as opposed to their ancestors, they are collectively guided toward freedom. The old seers thought about freedom as a theoretical goal; something that was beyond their concrete possibilities- while the new seers saw freedom exclusively as an individual commitment. For the seers of today, however, to be free is the collective purpose of the group of power; the essence of their actions and their reason for being.

"Modern warriors are inflexibly committed to each other. They have sacrificed their concerns as individuals for the sake of the group. Their bond of power gives them encouragement and provides a continual challenge to prevent them from lowering their guard: And their oath as warriors is based on the purpose of departing together to the third attention. Closer than ever to freedom, these warriors are more independent and more self-sufficient than their predecessors.

"But the most remarkable thing about them is their capacity of revision. At this time, seekers of knowledge are forced to thoroughly examine everything that has been said in the past; adapting traditional knowledge to the modality of the time in order for the warrior's way to be truly and finally understood by people.

"The technique which prevents that revision from drifting towards the capricious [* capricious- changeable; determined by chance or impulse or whim rather than by necessity or reason] is seeing. To see the luminous nature of the world permits us to choose, without any possibility of error, the most appropriate symbols to transmit ideas.

"Part of my task as a [nagual](#) has been to renew the nomenclature. [* nomenclature- a system of words used to name things in a particular discipline] Words wear out. Don [Juan](#) himself used terms which, from my point of view, were already archaic, because they were linked to the Mexico of antiquity, not with today's world. However, due to lack of time, I have not dedicated enough attention to this matter. It is a task that I'm giving to those who want to assume it.

"The stage of knowledge inaugurated by my books breaks the course of [nagualism](#) in two. I have come to put emphasis on: intent, the pursuit of sanity, the sobriety and sense of a group of power; and to abolish the servitude of secrecy and openly reveal the magical passes.

"The goal of modern seers is, more than ever, total freedom; but to achieve it, it is important that the strategies are continually refined. A society that no longer openly persecutes sorcerers does not serve us as a training ground. It is our duty, then, to find new fields where we can exercise and train our potentialities.

"According to Don [Juan](#), the best of those fields is the intellect; and it also functions as a guarantee that strategies of popularization and adaptation will work correctly. Ignorance can no longer be accepted: The time of the wild sorcerers is already past. The sorcerers of the old guard were stagnated in their traditions, and they lost their ticket to eternity:

We don't want the same thing to happen to us now.

Therefore, the Rule for the seers of the new era is preparation: That is their distinctive stamp. They should not only prepare in terms of the arts of sorcery, but also cultivate their minds in order to know and understand everything. The intellect is the comfort of today's [Toltec](#); just as in the past, the comfort was the affection for rituals.

"Don [Juan](#) said that each warrior of this new cycle should have at least a university degree to take advantage of the defenses against [disinformation](#) which modern science has created. That will heighten the chances of survival for the entire party; and in the future this will be even more valuable."

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"Encounters With The [Nagual](#)" - 2004 by [Armando Torres](#) Part II. Warriors' Dialogue

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"Could you tell me what task the [nagual Juan Matus](#) gave to you?" He looked at me with a surprised expression.

Usually, [Carlos](#) would hide his answers in between his words, or give them out little by little throughout his conversations. But this time he changed tactics.

He told me my question was so extraordinary that the only thing he could do was to take it as an omen. But the answer was such a personal thing that he could only tell me about it in an appropriate place. Therefore, he suggested that we meet the next day in the [Tacuba](#) cafe: one of Don [Juan](#)'s favorite restaurants.

After breakfast, he told me in a solemn tone that I should silence my internal dialogue, because we were about to visit a sacred place where a famous warrior of antiquity was buried. He added that the day was perfect for it, because since dawn a dark fog had hung over the city.

"And since everything has become sinister, our omens today will come from the left."

At first, his suggestive efforts made me feel privileged. But as we came closer to the main square, I became more and more apprehensive.

We entered through the small door set in the beautiful side door of the Cathedral of Mexico, and came into the gigantic main part of the church. Immediately, [Carlos](#) walked up to the fount of holy water, wet his fingers, and crossed himself. I was struck by the familiarity of his movements, it seemed like he was used to going to church.

Seeing my curiosity, he explained that a warrior should respect all conventions, particularly those of an institution like the Catholic Church, which has served as a sanctuary for sorcerers for centuries.

We sat down on the pews of the central nave of the church and remained silent for a while. There were very few people there, and the atmosphere was very calm. I noticed that he was sitting up straight and his eyes, neither open nor closed, were lost in the busy mass of decorations of the main altar. The light scent of candles drifted down to our pew, and also the murmur of children's voices that were rehearsing a chorus; or maybe it was a recorded tape.

Little by little I became engrossed in my own thoughts, until I lost

track of where I was. His voice startled me:

"The task which my teacher gave me, and my mission as a **nagual** for the era which is commencing, is to move the assemblage point of the Earth."

I was expecting anything but that. For a few seconds, my mind **didn't** react; I simply **didn't** have a clue what **Carlos** was saying. But suddenly, the monstrosity of his task hit me in the center of my reason, and I found myself thinking that **Carlos** had either gone crazy, or he was talking about something I **didn't** have the faintest idea about.

Disconcerting me even further, he seemed to read my thoughts, because he made a little nod of agreement and murmured:

"That's it. You have to be crazy to let yourself commit to something like that, and even crazier to believe that it is possible to do."

I asked him how a man could possibly even think about a feat like that.

He answered:

"Just like the other world has its mobile unit- the inorganic beings- Earth also has one, and it is us. We are children of the Earth.

The movement of the assemblage point of a sufficient number of warriors can change the modality of the time, and that is what I am working towards."

He explained that the assemblage point of Earth has changed many times in the past, and will do so in the future. In recent times it has been moving steadily towards the area of reason.

"That is magnificent, because, once it is fixated there, humanity will have an opportunity to move to the other side, and many men and women will become aware. The challenge for the seers of the future will be to maintain that focus for the necessary length of time until it becomes fixated there, becoming a permanent position for the planet, a new center, which we will be able to turn to anytime in a perfectly natural way.

"The refocusing of the Earth's attention is the product of the combined action of many generations of **naguals**. The new seers conceived of it as a possibility, and discovered that it was part of the Rule. They incubated it with their intent, and determined that now is the time to begin it."

"What is the effect of that movement?"

"To move the fixation of the planet is the only way out from the dramatic state of slavery to which we have been reduced. The course of our civilization has no exit, because we are isolated in a remote location of the cosmos. If we don't learn how to travel along the avenues of awareness, we will come to such a state of frustration and despair that humanity will end up destroying itself. Our options are the way of the warrior, or extinction.

"However, I cannot know what the total effects of my task will be. The Earth's assemblage point is very big: It has an enormous inertia. My mission is to start the fire, but it will take time to get the blaze going. In fact, that task is not mine only, but belongs to all the seers who must come.

"Knowledge of the assemblage point is an unprecedented gift from the spirit to modern man, and it is the catalyst for changing the modality of this era. It is not a Utopia, but a real possibility that is waiting there;

just around the corner.

"I don't want to speculate on my chances of being successful with this task: I just persist, because it is all that is left for me to do. Personally, I have no doubts. In my view, the future is luminous, because it belongs to awareness, which for sorcerers means that it belongs to **nagualism**."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **II**. Warriors' Dialogue

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After describing his task, **Carlos** rose from the bench and went closer to the rail around the entrance to the crypt below the church. I followed him.

Pointing at the stairway with his chin, he told me:

"You should go down there. Inside, you will see a circle in the floor, which corresponds to the exact center of the main dome of the church. According to tradition, that is the original place where **Cuauhtemoc**, the last Aztec emperor, was buried."

I asked him how historically accurate that information was.

He replied that he **didn't** know, but that the catacomb was an interesting place, regardless.

"All I want you to do is stand for a while in the center of that circle with your eyes closed; to tune yourself in to the energy of the place. It is a place of power from the sorcerers of antiquity, and it will help you in your task."

Briefly holding my hand, he added that he could not accompany me this time because someone was waiting for him somewhere, and he wished me luck. Without giving me time to react, he turned and left.

Carlos' attitude- asking me to go down in the crypt, and then his leaving in a hurry- left me confused. I **didn't** know what to do. With some misgivings, I leaned out over of the narrow stairway and felt a cold, humid breeze. Filled with an irrational apprehension, I went down the stone steps to the entrance door.

The crypt was empty. It had a gloomy air, was poorly lit, and smelled of mold and the dust of centuries; and it was utterly quiet. While I explored the tombs belonging to some privileged families of old Mexico, a chill traveled up and down my back. If it had not been for my desire to fulfill the task **Carlos** had given me, I would have run out of there.

Trying to control my over-excited imagination, I placed myself in the place **Carlos** had indicated; a circular space defined by the intersection of two passageways. I closed my eyes and made an effort to silence my mind. After a moment, I realized that my internal dialogue had quieted by itself.

I do not know how much time passed. Suddenly, I felt I was being observed. I opened my eyes quickly, just in time to see, standing a short distance from where I was, a man wearing a hat; a man with indigenous features and a penetrating gaze. He was tall, strong, and quite old. He had a rural appearance: He was dressed in a loose white shirt and sandals, and was carrying a rucksack. When noticing that I had discovered him, he slipped quickly towards an enclosure at the end of the passageway called

the 'the bishops' crypt'. His steps **didn't** make the smallest noise.

Although I was very afraid, my curiosity was even greater, and while mentally preparing myself to face this strange character, I crossed the short distance which separated us- about seven or eight meters. When I came into the crypt, my surprise was total. There was nobody there. A quick inspection confirmed that the enclosure had no other exit, nor any space for a person to hide.

This time I panicked. I had goose bumps, and got the hell out of there.

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part III. The Rule of the Three-Pronged **Nagual**

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From an early age, the reflective bent of my character made me seek an explanation of who I am, and what my purpose in life might be. Knowing of my search, a fellow student came to me once and told me that **Carlos Castaneda** was giving a private talk in his house, and that I could come if I wanted. I had waited for an opportunity like this for a long time, and was enchanted by the invitation.

Castaneda was a famous anthropologist; the author of several books on the culture of the Mexican sorcerers of the ancient past. In his books, he describes how, while still a student at the University of California, he did some work among the Yaqui Indians in northern Mexico; in order to learn about the medicinal plants they used.

On one of these trips, he met an old herbalist, famed as a sorcerer, who called himself **Juan Matus**. In time, the old man took him on as an apprentice, and introduced him to a completely unknown dimension for modern man: The traditional wisdom of the old **Toltec** seers, commonly known as 'sorcery' or '**nagualism**'.

In a dozen books, **Carlos** describes a teacher/ apprentice relationship that lasted for thirteen years. In the course of that time, he underwent an arduous training that led him to personally corroborate the foundations of that strange culture. The experiences he acquired during his apprenticeship ended up making the young anthropologist succumb to his fascination with the knowledge, and he was absorbed by the system of beliefs he was studying. This outcome shifted him a great distance away from his original goals.

'**Nagualism**' was the name sorcerers from **prehispanic** Mexico gave to their system of belief. According to history, those men were profoundly concerned with their relationship to the universe; to such a degree that they dedicated themselves to the task of investigating the limits of perception through the use of hallucinogenic plants which allowed them to change levels of awareness. After practicing for generations, some of them learned how to see; in other words, to perceive the world, not as an interpretation, but as a constant flow of energy.

Nagualism consists of a group of techniques designed to alter our everyday perception; producing psychic and physical phenomena of extraordinary interest. For example, the Mexican tradition claims that a

nagual is able to transform himself into an animal, because he has learned how to dream himself in a different form than that of a human being. Behind this popular belief is the fact that sorcerers explore their subconscious with the purpose of throwing light on unknown aspects of our being.

Nagualism was a socially accepted practice for thousands of years; comparable to our religion or science. In time, its postulates grew in abstraction and synthesis; becoming a kind of philosophical proposition, the practitioners of which took the name **Toltecs**.

The **Toltecs** were not what we ordinarily think of as 'sorcerers'- that is, individuals who use supernatural forces to damage others- but rather were extremely disciplined men and women interested in complex aspects of consciousness.

In his books, **Carlos** made a talented effort to adapt the knowledge of **naguals** to our time; lifting it out of its rural atmosphere and making it accessible to people with a Western background. Starting from Don **Juan's** teachings, he defined the premises of the path of the warrior, or the path of impeccable behavior; consistent in control, discipline, and sustained effort. Once internalized, these principles carry the practitioner to other more complex techniques whose object is to perceive the world in a new way.

Having achieved this, the student is in a position to move in a voluntary and conscious way in the environment of dreams in just the same way as he moves in his daily life. This technique is supplemented with what Don **Juan** called 'the art of stalking', or the art of knowing oneself; and is supplemented with a daily exercise called 'recapitulation' because it consists of reviewing events of our personal history to find their hidden plot.

Dreaming and recapitulation together make it possible to create what is called 'the energetic double': a practically indestructible entity, able to act on its own accord.

One of the most significant discoveries of the **Toltec** seers was that human beings possess a luminous configuration, or energy field, around the physical body. They also saw that some people were equipped with a special configuration divided into two parts. These were called **naguals**, that is, 'duplicated people'. Because of their particular configuration, a **nagual** has greater resources than most people. The **Toltec** seers also saw that, because of the **naguals'** double and exceptional energy, they are natural leaders.

Starting from these discoveries, it was inevitable that seers would settle down according to the commands of energy; organizing harmonious groups whose participants complemented each other. Warriors of these groups were committed to the search for new levels of awareness. In time, they began to realize that behind their practices and organizational forms, there was an impersonal rule.

In their sense of the word, the rule is the description of the design and the means by which various luminous configurations of the human species can become united: eventually to integrate into a single organism called 'the party of the **nagual**'. The goal of these groups is total freedom: the evolution of awareness to the point of enabling them to travel through the ocean of cosmic energy, perceiving all that is accessible to us.

There is a special section of the rule that describes how generations

of warriors are intertwined, forming lineages; and how these lineages are renewed every once in a while.

The fate of **Carlos** was to live through one of those stages of renewal. However, he did not understand what that meant before he received a message which guided him towards the popularization of the teachings.

When I met him, he still had great reservations about the public domain and tried to keep his distance from people. Our relationship was mainly through talks he gave to small groups, and private conversations.

He demanded that I should pass unnoticed among the others, so that I would keep my personal history under a measure of control. Later, he admitted that this request also had a deeper motive: I had a commitment to the spirit, and should execute my task four years after **Carlos'** departure.

When I asked him why, he told me that he knew that his work would be obstructed by detractors who would try to frustrate the plan designed by Don **Juan** for a revolution of awareness. My function would be to give testimony of the message that I had received.

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The Rule of the Three-Pronged **Nagual**

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One time, after giving a talk in the private dining room of a restaurant where he invited all of us to dine, **Carlos** asked me to come with him to another place. Minutes later, we both left, while the others were still in the middle of a lively conversation.

On the way, we had to cross a large avenue. To get ahead of the cars, I ran towards a triangular traffic island in the middle of the street, believing that **Carlos** was right behind me. But when I got there, I realized that he was still waiting on the other side.

Then something unexpected happened; a great gust of wind came rushing down the avenue, so strong that I had to hold on to the metal post of a traffic sign. Before I had time to protect myself, a cloud of dust got into my eyes and throat, making me cough and leaving me blind for a moment.

When I recovered, **Carlos** was at my side, looking at me with a radiantly happy face. He patted my back and made a very strange comment:

"I know what to do with you!"

I looked questioningly at him, and he explained:

"That was the same wind: It is after you."

His words made me remember the moment we met, when an autumn wind had forced us to hastily close the windows of the room where a group of friends were waiting for him.

"On that occasion, you saw it as a strong wind, but I knew that it was the spirit making whirls over your head. It was a sign, and now I know why it pointed you out."

I asked him to explain this enigmatic statement, but his answer was even more obscure:

"I am heir to certain information. It is an aspect of the teachings that

concerns me so deeply that I can't explain it to the others. It should be said through a messenger. While I was watching how the spirit danced with you on the edge of the avenue, I knew that the messenger is you."

I insisted he must tell me more, but he said this was neither the time nor the appropriate place.

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Some time later, we were walking to the Alameda park. Near the Palace of Fine Arts, he signaled to me that we should sit down on a bench, miraculously empty, on one side of the square. The bench was made of wrought iron. Its location- right in front of the main door of an old church built from blocks of red and black lava- had the virtue of slightly blocking my internal dialogue, which transported me to an oasis of serenity amid the bustle of cars and people passing by.

As it turned out, **Carlos** had foreseen this impact and its didactic function. He commented that it was Don **Juan's** favorite bench; which I found very moving. Rubbing his hands together, he assured me that it was time to get to the point.

"Do you know what the "rule" is?" he asked.

Although I had read something about it in one of his books, I had not understood much, so I shook my head no.

He went on:

"It is the name that seers have given to the guide of a party of sorcerers; a kind of navigational chart, or a sample book of a warrior's assignments and duties within the framework of his practices.

"After exhaustive verifications, the sorcerers of ancient Mexico came to the conclusion that, just as all live beings possess a defined biological pattern which allows reproducing and evolving, we also have an energy pattern responsible for our development as luminous beings.

"The mold of a species extracts its energy from the rule. The rule is a kind of womb: It contains an evolutionary plan for every living being, not only on Earth, but also in any corner of the universe where there is awareness. Nobody can break away from it. The most we can do is ignore that it exists, in which case we will not reach the stage where we can be what we truly are: a live mass in the service of a purpose that we do not understand.

"Said in sorcerers' terms, the rule is the diagram of the Eagle's commands; an equation which correlates the effectiveness of actions with the saving of energy. In the practical sphere, such a combination can not produce anything but a warrior.

"The rule is complete, and covers all facets of the warrior's way. It describes how a **nagual** party is created and nurtured, how generations are connected to form a lineage; and it guides them towards freedom. But in order to use it as a key to power, we have to verify it for ourselves."

"How can you verify it?"

"The Rule is self-evident to the sorcerer who sees. For a beginner like you, the best way of attesting its functionality consists of detecting its

intrusion in the course of your life."

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I asked him how man had come into contact with this matrix.

He replied:

"It has always existed. However, seers are its discoverers and guardians.

"The rule is the origin of the universal order. Its operation and purpose are ignored, not because they are not known, but because they are not understood. Hundreds of generations of sorcerers gave their lives in their zeal to elucidate it, and to develop practical proposals for every one of its conceptual units.

"In the beginning, no man attempted to catch a gleam of this structure, because nobody knew it was there. As the seers of old Mexico came into contact with other aware entities on this Earth, entities much older and more experienced than the seers themselves, the seers began acquiring portions of the rule. One day they saw that all those portions fit into each other like a puzzle. That day, they discovered what they called 'the map', and the lineage of the seers of antiquity began.

"Through their seeing, the ancient seers verified each portion related to dreaming. They tested every combination and determined its effects on awareness. They organized exercises of dreaming on seven levels of increasing depth, and they penetrated the innermost twists and turns of the universe. Little by little, they developed the pattern for the [nagual](#) party: a structure in the shape of an extremely stable pyramid; capable of expressing the designs of power with transparent clarity.

"But there was one thing the ancients didn't verify: The rule for the [stalkers](#). They viewed stalking as a latent possibility which was not worthwhile to explore in practice."

"Why?"

"Because, in an era when being a sorcerer meant being at the top of the social scale, stalking as an art had no purpose. It would have been a poor investment. But when the modality of the time changed, that line of reasoning brought the old seers almost to the edge of extinction.

"It was not until the appearance of the [Toltecs](#) that the other great portion of the rule revealed its extraordinary content. Lineages who were able to apply it were the only ones who survived; the rest were dissolved, and got lost in the vortex which signified the fall of the old seers' regime. The incorporation of stalking determined the birth of the new seers, and with them the rule of the [nagual](#) was completely elucidated."

"When did that happen?"

"The period of the new seers began about five thousand years ago, and reached its peak in the times of [Tula](#). Through stalking, the fundamental contribution of those warriors to sorcery was the notion of impeccability."

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"The objective of the Rule of the [nagual](#) is to generate parties; that is, self-aware organisms capable of flying into the immensity out there. Such organisms are made up by the sum of a group of warriors who have harmonized their individual intents. The purpose of that design is to perpetuate a non-human dimension of awareness."

"Non-human?"

"That's it. A dimension in which personality is no longer the aim.

"Human beings are unable to enter and remain for any extended length of time inside the realm of cosmic awareness- the state which Don [Juan](#) called 'the third attention'. Either we leave it and forget, or we stay and melt into that unfathomable sea. But the power that governs us has found the way to get around this limitation by creating organisms in which individual entities work as members.

"At the core of these organisms a radically new kind of attention is generated: an intent oriented towards exploring the unknown; investigating in teams what we otherwise cannot know. Feelings of individuality are no longer their operative center, because they have been substituted by something much more intense: living as part of the whole; an energy state that no ordinary man can even conceive of. There are no routines, there is no ego, there is no ignorance, and there is no interpretation. That kind of organism is only one stage on the infinite path of awareness, but for us human beings, that stage is final."

I asked him how the awareness of a party operates.

He gave me an analogy of the physical body.

"Although only in a hazy way, each one of our cells is conscious of their unity; and, within certain limits, each one can act independently. However, their individual intent is subordinate to a superior purpose, which is to form the whole, which we call 'me'.

"When we finally arrive at the incredible achievement of realizing the global purpose, we can discern a superior evolutionary line. We perceive the possibility of being integrated with our complementary energetic beings, creating a form of life whose purposes are as far from the concerns of the daily world as the awareness of a single cell is from our totality. New seers call that life-form 'the party of the [nagual](#)'."

"Who are our complementary energetic beings?"

"Human beings who possess luminous characteristics that complement each other.

"Energy is recurrent: It generates patterns that we all share. In general terms, it can be said that there are four basic luminous patterns with twelve variants synthesized by the [nagual](#) man and [nagual](#) woman. As a tonal approaches the ideal luminosity for its type, it manifests a superior degree of awareness.

"When ideal models meet, they combine. The feelings of attraction among human beings can be explained as a result of the fusion of their energy molds. Normally, such a fusion is partial, but sometimes a sudden and inexplicable wave of sympathy occurs: A seer would say that an act of energy reciprocity has taken place.

"The warriors of a party combine in such a way that their relationship produces optimal results in the sense of gaining and accumulating power.

"It is difficult to find characteristic luminous bodies who are available for the task of the **nagual**: The usual is to find **tonals** deformed by the life of the world.

"But when a **nagual** is able to integrate his party, the energy of his warriors will fuse. They sacrifice their individuality for a superior goal, and returning to their previous isolation is no longer possible: It would only mean death for them. You may say that a party is not composed of individuals, but is rather a single, living organism, with capabilities that are not human."

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"What awareness of the objective of the party does each member have?"

"Full awareness. Each one of them knows the tales of power pertinent to their specialty, and they know that their function is part of a purpose that transcends them.

"The relationship between the rule and the party is expressed in their tasks. For example, when the female warriors of a group receive the command of tracking energy in space until they find possible candidates for a new generation of sorcerers, they concentrate on that task as their avenue to freedom. They **re** not interested in anything else. If the discipline of that intent cracks, the result can be chaotic."

He gave me an example of the effect of a personal concern slipped inside a sorcerer's task.

"Soon after I started my apprenticeship, and although nobody asked me to do it, I offered to help Don **Juan** establish the new party. Every time a beautiful girl paid attention to me, I saw in her my complementary energetic being, and tried to 'sell her' to Don **Juan**, eulogizing her qualities.

"At first, the warriors took it as a joke. But little by little they got pissed off, and one day when I brought my new '**nagual** woman' to introduce to them, I **couldn't** find them. They had all moved out of the house. To feel lonely helped me to recover my sobriety.

"The party is a self-conscious being that overcomes us thoroughly. To participate in its intent is something so exceptional that as soon as an apprentice glimpses its totality, his ego position just melts. That does not imply that he automatically becomes impeccable; for years, he will still have to make an effort to temper his character and to extinguish his self-importance, as well as the obsession of power.

"Only the **nagual** man and woman have a total vision of the functioning of the party. Continuing the analogy, they would tell you that they are the nerve cells of the party; the units which direct the process of perpetuation. The other members serve as support, and they carry out the concrete tasks of duplicating the group.

"The work of the **nagual** is exhausting. He has to have perfect control

of the arts of stalking and dreaming, he has to learn to see and to develop his capacity of manipulation to the maximum, and he has to serve as an example of sobriety in order to maintain the cohesion of the group. If they are allowed to be carried away by their emotions, the result is disintegration."

I asked him why.

"Because the party is an organism of critical mass. If any one of its components goes astray from the goal, the resulting dysfunction causes a collapse, and everything would have to be restarted. That is why the **nagual** is obliged to demand from his warriors that they give all of themselves, and he must distribute their tasks so that all of them can participate with optimism and trust. The oil of the party is the impeccability of its members, and its fuel is the yearning for total freedom."

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"How many warriors make up a group?"

"The normal structure of a party is quadripartite, that is, based on the number four, since the Rule has a pyramid form. Its formation and growth are carried out in accordance with that basic structure. As in the pyramids, the architecture of the group consists of a base with four corners, each corner made up of three warriors: One female dreamer, one female stalker, and one male assistant. The corners are connected to each other through messengers, and the **nagual** couple is above them all.

"The Rule manifests itself to a double man or woman by means of a vision, and they have to accept it to be considered **naguals**. Following that acceptance, the **naguals** are joined by their warriors little by little, always following the signs of the spirit. Their capacity to lead is natural and indisputable, because, being double, they reflect each one of the energetic types in their party.

"**Naguals** can be defined as a man and a woman of extraordinary energy, involved in an act of fertilization of an infinitely greater scope than anything within human recognition. As long as they remain together, they are usually presented in society as husband and wife.

"The ability of the **nagual** man is to find and use the most appropriate words to express things with accuracy, intellectual clarity, fluency, and beauty. Among seers of the lineage which Don **Juan**'s group belonged to, the omen to occupy this position was to be dying. All their leaders, except me, were found under such conditions."

"Why was your case different?"

"Because, properly speaking, I am a surplus **nagual**. I **didn't** come to continue the lineage, but to seal it."

"And what is the Rule for the **nagual** woman?"

"The **nagual** woman is the light that guides all effort, the true mother. Normally, she leaves before the rest of the group and stays fluctuating between the first and the second attention; visiting the apprentices in dreams. She functions as a lighthouse, and if necessary she can return

from the second attention to sow a new generation of seers.

"When it comes to warriors, they come in two bands: **stalkers** and dreamers. They have two kinds of functions: portals, and guardians. The portals belong to the direction of the south. They are the strainer or filter through which apprentices must pass. They determine whether a warrior stays or leaves, and they have the main influence on how new members of the team are provided. They are also the organizers of power meetings.

"The guardians are kind of an external version of the portals: There is a white one and a black one. They are in charge of watching over the smooth functioning of the group, which means they are alert to possible external attacks; and they also stand ready to solve any internal problems. Among the new seers, women are in charge of all these functions."

"Why is it that?"

"Because women have greater mobility and more energy than men. Practically the entire universe is feminine by nature, and teams of witches travel through it as if they were at home in their own house. That capacity to circulate without interference from the dark energy makes them the battery of the group.

"On the other hand, we men are detected at once, because our energy is bright, and betrays us. Also, since we were not made to give birth, we do not have a specialized organ for dreaming. Except for the **nagual**, the male elements of a party do not carry much sparkle.

"Nevertheless, the rule dictates that there are four male warriors dedicated to organize, explore, and understand. For this purpose, they fix their assemblage points in very specific energetic locations. Their presence serves to stabilize the group, neutralizing the frequent explosions of power staged by the female warriors. If not for them, the structure would explode as soon as the women achieve some degree of efficiency. So the men function as anchors: They fix the group until a maximum of power is reached.

"Due to its form, Don **Juan** called the party 'the organization of the snake'. It is a concept that he inherited from the old seers, referring to the pattern of squares on the skin of the rattlesnake. He affirmed that the head of the animal, with its fixed and hypnotic eyes, represents the **nagual** couple. The chest corresponds to the warrior dreamers whose function is to inhale visions and distribute them to the whole group. The stomach represents the **stalkers**; able to digest any conceivable situation. The tail is the assistants who are in charge of giving mobility to the group. It is a very fluid disposition."

"Are there any parties which are organized differently?"

"The warriors are largely the result of the implacable manipulation of the **nagual**. I'm sure you can see how, after years under this constant pressure, the form of a group- including the particular hue adopted by the luminosity of each member- becomes very specific. This is why so many lineages of sorcerers exist. But all of them have, basically, the same kind of pyramid-shaped parties which I have described to you, since experience has shown that this is the most stable formula."

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The Purpose of the Rule

"What is the purpose of a party?"

"From the Eagle's point of view: To explore, to verify, and to expand the rule. Each generation of warriors should leave their print on it, because the rule is accumulative. The heritage of the lineage consists of a series of positions of the assemblage point, to which successive parties go; adding their own acquisitions. It is normal that lineages make a 'journal' of incidents where the **naguals** note their discoveries.

"The basic interest of an organism is to reproduce itself. Therefore, one way of defining it would be to say that the rule is the recipe for a reproductive process. What it seeks is the perpetuation of awareness; something which, beyond a certain point, cannot be accomplished through individual channels. The resources that each warrior personally acquires during his training are secondary achievements,

"From the sorcerers' point of view, the object of grouping themselves is to ensure their passage to another level of attention, since without energy mass there is no flight."

"Do you mean that solitary warriors don't have a chance?"

"No. What I'm saying is that a party can go further.

"Imagine that you live in a colony of gregarious [* gregarious- tending to form a group with others of the same species] caterpillars who are in a state of metamorphosis. Suddenly, one of the cocoons breaks open, and its resident leaves in a momentary explosion of light and color. The sensation you're left with is that the caterpillar disappeared. For the caterpillar itself, on the other hand, its true life as a butterfly will have begun. Now then: A solitary caterpillar is more likely to end up in the stomach of a bird.

"In the same way, the ulterior objective of warriors is the definitive jump to the third attention; the liberation from all forms of interpretation. The quantity of energy that is necessary for this can only be achieved by means of a special consensus of critical mass, in order to generate the necessary agreements to compact the energy.

"However, since many parties are not able to reach the completion of their energy, **naguals** have built an inhabitable oasis inside the second attention; an enormous edifice of intent in a remote region of dreaming, where seers go alone or in small groups. I call it 'the dome of intent', because its visible form is dome-shaped, but Don **Juan** preferred to call it 'the cemetery of the **naguals**'."

"Why did he call it that?"

"Because staying in that space to live implies the sorcerer's literal death. In a sense, not at all allegorical, it is a cemetery. Although those who choose that destiny have achieved the expansion of awareness for an enormous period of time, they will have to do without it when the moment arrives.

"So, for many sorcerers, the immediate goal of the party is the dome of the **naguals**; in the hope of being able to use it as a transit port where they can accumulate provisions for a great expedition. To get there, it is not necessary that the whole group leave at the same time. Sometimes, warriors choose to go one by one. In that case, they can partially return

as long as the totality of the group's energetic structure has not been completed.

"As you can see, the challenges warriors are involved in during their human existence are barely the prelude: The really tremendous stuff comes later. Don't ask what they dedicate themselves to while they remain in that world: It would sound like a fairy tale to you. The important thing is: All their activities are governed by the Rule."

I commented that, keeping in mind the goal of the party, the rule could be interpreted as the **prehispanic** equivalent of what other cultures called 'divine laws'; that is, a group of normative regulations designed for man's salvation.

He replied:

"It is not the same, because the rule does not come from a supreme being. The mechanism of the rule is impersonal: It lacks kindness or compassion. It has no other objective than its own continuity.

"The ancient seers, allowing themselves to be seduced by the analogies, made the error of identifying the rule with their particular interpretations; and wound up worshipping it and erecting temples in its honor.

"The new seers rejected all that. When they explored stalking, they dusted off the essence of sorcery and rediscovered the goal of total freedom- which does not resemble religious goals in any way. It erased in them the fascination for the human mold; but it had a secondary effect that I have already explained to you: The wild enthusiasm of the old seers was substituted by furtive and suspicious attitudes.

"In the end, the effect stalking had on the **nagual** parties was to betray their initial motives. In time, the goal of total freedom was reduced to rhetoric. Almost all the sorcerers of Don **Juan's** lineage preferred the flight to the second attention. With the exception of the **nagual** Julian **Osorio**, none of them wanted to be deprived of the adventure and ecstasy of visiting the dome of the **naguals**; constructed of intent, and located on one of the stars of the constellation of Orion."

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"The rule is final, but its design and configuration are in constant evolution. But unlike **evolutionists** who view the adaptations of life as a haphazard accumulation of genetic mutations, seers know there is nothing random about the rule. They see how a command of the Eagle, in the form of a wave of energy, shakes the lineages of power from time to time; producing new stages in sorcery.

"A more exact way of describing it, is to assume that all possible variations of the rule are contained in a womb of potential, and what changes over time is the degree of knowledge the sorcerers have of that totality, and what emphasis they put on particular portions of it. Such periods of change are recurrent, and they are represented by the number three."

"Why three?"

"Because the old **Toltecs** associated the number three with dynamics and renewal. They discovered that ternary formations- formations based on the number three- announce unexpected changes.

"The rule dictates that, from time to time, a special kind of **nagual** will appear in the lineages; a **nagual** whose energy is not divided into four parts, but instead has only three compartments. Seers call them 'three-pronged **naguals**'."

I asked him how they were different from the others. He answered:

"Their energy is volatile: They are always moving, and because of that they find it difficult to accumulate power. From the point of view of the lineage, their composition is faulty: Three-pronged **naguals** will never be true **naguals**. In compensation, they lack the timidity and reservation that characterize the classic **naguals**, and they possess an unusual capacity to improvise and communicate.

"We can say that three-pronged **naguals** are like the cuckoo birds incubated in other birds' nests. They are **opportunists**, but they are necessary. Unlike the **naguals** of four points who have freedom to pass unnoticed, the **naguals** of three points are public personalities. They disclose secrets and cause fragmentation of the teachings; but without the three-pronged **naguals**, the lineages of power would have been extinguished a long time ago.

"Among the new seers, the rule is that a **nagual** leaves a new party as a descendant. Some, due to their enormous energy surpluses, are able to help organizing a second or third generation of seers. For example, the **nagual Elias Ulloa** lived long enough to create his successor's party and to have an influence on the following one. But this does not mean a fork in the lineage; all those groups were part of the same transmission line.

"On the other hand, the three-pronged **nagual** is authorized to transmit his knowledge radially, which does lead to a diversification of lineages. His luminous cocoon has a disintegrating effect on the group, which breaks the lineal structure of transmission; and foments a desire for change and action in warriors, and an active disposition to be involved with their fellow men."

"Was that what happened to you?"

"That's what happened. Due to my luminous disposition, I don't have any qualms about leaving kernels of knowledge behind wherever I go. I know that I need an enormous quantity of energy to fulfill my task, and that I can only obtain it from masses. For that reason I am willing to broadcast the knowledge far and wide, and transform and redefine its paradigms."

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"As you know, my teacher became aware of the rule for the three-pronged **nagual** when he tried to analyze certain anomalies in the new group. Apparently, I could not get in tune with the rest of the apprentices.

Then he paid me sufficient attention to see that I masked my energy configuration."

"Do you mean that Don **Juan**'s seeing had been mistaken?"

"Of course not! What was mistaken was his looking. To see is the final form of perception: There are no appearances, so it is not possible to be deceived. However, due to the pressure that he had exerted on me for years, my energy struggled to mold itself to his. That is common among apprentices. Since he was divided into four compartments, I also began to manifest a similar energetic weight in my actions.

"Once I was able to shake off his influence, which took me almost ten years of arduous work, we discovered something astonishing: My luminosity only had three compartments: It did not correspond to an ordinary, modern person who only has two, nor to a **nagual**. This discovery caused a great commotion in the group of seers since they all saw it as a portent of profound change for the lineage.

"Then Don **Juan** went back to the tradition of his predecessors, and dusted off a forgotten aspect of the rule. He told me that the election of a **nagual** cannot in any way be considered as a personal whim, since it is the spirit who chooses the successor of a lineage at all times. Therefore, my energetic anomaly was part of a command. Faced with my urgent questioning, he assured me that a messenger would appear in due time and explain to me the function of my presence as a three-pronged **nagual**.

"Years later, during a visit to one of the rooms in the National Museum of Anthropology and History, I observed a native dressed in the old-fashioned **Tarahumara** costume, who seemed to have the most absorbing interest in one of the exhibition pieces. He examined it from all sides and demonstrated such a total concentration that it made me curious, and I went closer to look.

"When he saw me, the man spoke to me and began to explain the meaning of a group of excellent, painstaking drawings sculpted into the stone. Later, while I meditated on what he had told me, I remembered Don **Juan**'s promise, and realized that this man had been an envoy from the spirit, who had passed on to me the portion of the Rule concerning the three-pronged **nagual**."

"And what does that portion say?"

"It affirms that, just as the party has an energy matrix of the number seventeen (two **naguals**, four female dreamers, four female **stalkers**, four male warriors, and three scouts), a lineage, which is formed by a succession of parties, also has a structure of power, of the number fifty-two. The Eagle's command is that every fifty-two generations of four-pointed **naguals**, there will appear a three-pronged **nagual** who serves as a cathartic action for the propagation of new four-point lineages.

"The Rule also says that the three-pronged **naguals** are destructive to the established order, because their nature is neither creative nor nurturing, and they have the tendency to enslave all those who surround them. It adds that, to achieve freedom, these **naguals** should do it alone, because their energy is not tuned to guide groups of warriors.

"Like everything in the world of energy, the block of fifty-two generations is divided into two parts; the first twenty-six concerning themselves with expansion and the creation of new lines, the rest oriented towards conservation and isolation. This pattern of behavior

has been repeating itself millennium after millennium, so sorcerers know that it is part of the Rule.

"As a result of the activities of a three-pronged **nagual**, the knowledge becomes widely known, and new cells of four-point **naguals** are formed. From that starting point, lineages recapture the tradition of transmitting the teachings in a lineal form."

"How often do three-point **naguals** appear?"

"Approximately once per millennium. That is the age of my lineage." Previous-**Pg** Page-Top Contents Book-Start Home Links-**Pg** Next-**Pg** Encounters With The **Nagual**: The Task Of The Seers Of Today Version 2007.11.09

"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **III**. The Rule of the Three-Pronged **Nagual**

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"Upon verifying the Rule of the three-pronged **nagual**, Don **Juan** deduced that, inevitably, the time of a new breed of warriors was at hand: I have called them the modern seers."

"Are there any peculiarities in the luminous composition of those warriors?"

"No. In every era, man's energy pattern has been very homogeneous, so the organization of the party was the same. However, the warriors of today are experiencing a slide towards green in their luminosity, which means that they are recovering characteristics of the old seers. This is something unforeseen, although it is for sure covered by the rule.

"The true difference between seers of the past and those of today is in their behavior. At the moment, we are not subjected to the same repressions as in previous **eras**, and therefore sorcerers have fewer restrictions. Clearly, this has a purpose: popularization of the teaching.

"I have lived a moment of renewal. My task is to close the lineage of Don **Juan** with a golden key, and to open up possibilities for those who come later. That is why I have said that I am the last **nagual** of my lineage, not in an absolute sense, but in the sense of radical change."

At this point, **Carlos** took a break in his presentation and reminded me of a conversation we had when we first met.

At that time, I had asked him to tell me tales of power. He replied that he could not refuse what I was asking, but to hand over those stories without any directions would have been to trivialize them.

"I hope what you have seen during these years fulfills your expectations. I did what I could, considering your limitations as well as mine. I know you have already begun to train your dreaming double, and that guarantees that you can continue by yourself: Your double won't leave you alone until you arrive at your totality. The theoretical part is finished, and it is time to give you a last gift."

The tone of **Carlos**' voice as he spoke these words, somewhere between familiar and solemn, made me concentrate all my attention.

"The final teaching says that in connection with intent, every person, whoever it may be, who approaches the **nagual**, has his place inside the total context of the rule. So you are not alone; sorcerers are expecting something from you."

"What?" I asked, a little confused. He explained:

"All warriors have a task. Yours is to fulfill what the spirit told you to

do; that is your path to power."

"And what is that task?"

"Well, your personal mission is something your benefactor will communicate to you some day. However, in accordance with the Rule of the three-pronged **nagual**, I am following a long-term strategy devised by Don **Juan**, which commits you to my teacher's intent.

"What is expected from you is that you say to those who surround you: 'You are free, you can fly by yourselves! You have the necessary information; what are you waiting for? Act impeccably, and see how energy finds a way.'

"Warn everyone that with the culmination of Don **Juan**'s lineage, the knowledge is wide open. Each warrior is responsible for himself, and can provide himself with the minimum opportunity, which is to organize his own party."

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"Encounters With The **Nagual**" - 2004 by **Armando Torres** Part **IV**. The World Of The Old Seers

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With the permission of the one who has no name, I proceed with my testimony to complete this account and present the truth in its entirety.

One day, very early in the morning, a phone call woke me up. It was **Carlos** and, frankly, he sounded bad. He said that he was in the Hotel **Camino** Real in Mexico City, and that he was very sick. He added that he had been unable to sleep that night, and had waited until dawn so that he could call me.

I asked him how I could help him.

He replied that he urgently needed a particular medicine specially prepared for him by an herbalist in a town nearby, and asked if I would go there and get it for him.

I was at his command. He gave me directions and the name of the person who would have the potion.

At that point, he made a comment which seemed odd to me, since it had nothing to do with what we were talking about:

"When **Hernan Cortes** arrived in Mexico, he gave the order to burn his ships. That was the magical act which guaranteed victory. For him, it meant he had to win, or perish; he had no other option. We should bear in mind that any undertaking could be our last."

He went on to say that he had a bad stomachache, and those plants were the only thing in the world that could alleviate his pain.

I **didn't** hesitate. Hanging up the phone, I was already on my way to **Tepoztlan**, a picturesque town clinging to a mountainside an hour's bus ride from Mexico City. My intention was to return with the package as soon as possible to help **Carlos** with his pain.

Today, with the perspective I have gained after all these years, I understand what he meant when he said that any undertaking might be our last.

I got off the bus and went directly to the market. Walking down the street, I could not stop marveling at the beauty of the landscape. High up on the hill above the town I could see the pyramid of **Tepozteco**.

It was a sunny day and it took me just a few minutes to get to the center of town. In the market, I looked for the herbs section and asked for Don **Eladio**. Nobody seemed to know him, or maybe they **didn't** want to answer my questions.

I stood there without knowing what to do, until a middle-aged gentleman with indigenous features, dressed in white with a straw hat and sandals, asked how he could help me.

I replied that I was looking for Don **Eladio**, the herbalist, and that I came on behalf of **Mr. Jose Cortes**. His face lit up; with a great smile, he extended his hand to greet me and told me he was **Eladio Zamora**, and that he was at my service.

I told him that I had come for the medicine **Jose** had ordered.

He seemed not to know what I meant, but when I told him **Mr. Jose Cortes** was suffering from a strong stomachache, he reacted as if he had remembered something. In a dramatic tone, he told me that he knew what it was about, but that unfortunately he had been unable to gather the herb in question, and **didn't** have it available at that moment to prepare the beverage.

I was alarmed, since I knew what happened to those who failed in some task which **Carlos** had given them: They were simply discarded.

I asked Don **Eladio** if I could get the plant somewhere else. He shook his head.

"It is useless to look for it: Nobody sells it here." I insisted that there must be some place where I could find it.

Seeing my despair, he told me that he could not go and get it at this moment, but maybe if I came back on the weekend...

I became very nervous and told him that if he would describe the plant to me and the place where it grew, I was willing to go and look for it on my own, to enable him to prepare the medicine.

Upon seeing my determination, Don **Eladio** consented, but warned me that getting to the place where the plant grew was tiring and dangerous.

"I am willing to do anything!" I exclaimed.

He seemed to appreciate my words, because he brought out an old botany book, and after leafing through the pages, he showed me a drawing of the plant. He said that the only place where it grew was in a narrow canyon among the hills a good distance away, and he explained how to get there.

I calculated that it would take me a couple of hours to reach the place, so I said goodbye immediately and was on my way.

The beauty of those places is overwhelming. I was filled with joy at the thought that warriors of ancient ages once traveled along those barren paths, thousands of years old.

The hill was further away than it had seemed. When I came to the narrow canyon, I entered it as best as I could among the tall grasses which were growing everywhere. The place in question is formed by the junction of two hills: A place where the water from recent rains accumulates in scattered puddles, and flows in a slow, lazy stream.

I looked for the plant for a long time. I finally found it, but as I bent down to pick it, a strong blow hit me on the head, and I lost consciousness.

A penetrating scent woke me up. I was lying on a mat, on top of a pile

of herbs. I looked around and discovered that I was in a rustic cabin. The floor was of stamped earth; and wooden beams darkened by smoke supported the tiled roof.

Near a clay oven where a fire was burning sat an old woman dressed in Indian clothes. I noticed that her skin was white.

Seeing that I was awake, she smiled and said:

"Well I'll be damned! Welcome back to the land of the living! For a while there I thought you were fucked!"

I **didn't** know what to say. I tried to move and felt a searing pain in my head: My whole body ached.

The old lady hurried closer to me and in an urgent voice ordered me not to move, since I was only alive by a miracle.

Judging by the pain I felt, I could well believe my condition was serious, and did as she told me.

I asked her what had happened to me.

She replied that she **didn't** know. She thought that I had been attacked by robbers who had beaten me up and left me for dead in the hills. Pointing at the clothes I was wearing, she said I was naked when she found me. At that moment I realized that I was dressed in a white robe embroidered with hummingbirds, like the ones indigenous women use.

The old lady introduced herself. She told me her name was **Silvia Magdalena**; that she was a devoted herbalist, and that she was healing my injuries.

She remarked that it was a stroke of luck that she had found me, laying as if thrown there in her path, bleeding and almost dead. She added that I had already spent three days unconscious, and that in a couple of days I could get up.

Her words startled me. I wanted to get up again, but I was so weak that I fell back on the mat.

I told her how shocked I was by what she told me, and in a moaning voice explained how I had come there in search of some herbs for a friend; but that I had failed in my task, and because of that I would surely never see him again.

Listening to my complaining, she started to laugh. I **didn't** understand why.

Seeing my confused expression, she said:

"Don't mind me! I'm just given to fits of laughter."

The following days were the strangest of my life. Every day, I had the opportunity to study how Dona **Silvia** cured her patients, who were suffering from all kinds of illnesses. When I began to recover a little from my injuries, she even asked me to help her. In that way, without really realizing it, I began working as a healer.

In time, I learned everything connected to the art. She taught me how to clean people's energy, and to make cures for various kinds of illnesses; and taught me as well a lot of chiropractic techniques- and an immense number of tea recipes.

I soon understood that Dona **Silvia Magdalena** was a witch, and that I had been taken on as her pupil. The simple fact of being near her was a true delight for me. The humor and drama in everything she did were magnificent, and they reminded me of **Carlos'** descriptions of his teachers.

I spent almost three months on that mat. The most difficult part was in the beginning, when I could not move and the healer's assistants had to come and take me to the bathroom. That the bathroom was outside the house **didn't** make the situation any easier.

One day, when I was much better, Dona **Silvia** told me that at the next full moon, there would be an initiation ceremony for me. I had already learned much of her world, and accepted the invitation as a true honor.

She added: "All I can say is that those who participate in these ceremonies are changed forever, and they can never be the same again. There is no return."

As usual, I **didn't** understand what she meant. She always used strange expressions.

It was around nine in the evening when she asked me to come with her. We walked in the darkness for nearly an hour, until we arrived at a place where some people sat around a bonfire. When we came closer, she made a gesture indicating that I should sit down on a particular rock.

The place of the meeting was near a waterfall: I could hear the roar of it, and felt a humid air wafting up to where we were.

The fire gave enough light to see the other participants. It was a group of fifteen people, most of them young, although there were some old ones like Dona **Silvia**. I felt a little uncomfortable and apart, because it seemed that I was the only new one present.

I had never been to a ceremony of this kind, and **didn't** know how to proceed or what was in store: This made me very apprehensive. The participants solemnly chanted something that I could not understand, but it filled me with an indefinable yearning.

We waited for a while, and then a man appeared out of the darkness dressed in the skin of a coyote. He approached the fire, dancing in a weird way. He wore the animal's head as a mask, so I could not see his face. From his manners and movements, I immediately understood that he was a sorcerer.

Without saying a word, the man came up to me. With a very skilled gesture, he grabbed my left hand and pressed it against his side with his arm while turning around. I felt a sharp pain between my fingers and wanted to retract my hand, but he held it in a strong grip. When he released me, I saw that he had made a cut between my middle and ring fingers. Blood was flowing freely from the cut.

I was shocked; I would have run away if I **hadn't** been paralyzed by terror.

Then the sorcerer squeezed my hand to force out more blood, and poured a little on the ground, some on the fire, and the rest in a clay vessel.

Next, he ordered me to get up, take my clothes off, and keep my eyes closed. There was such a force and authority in his words that I obeyed.

For a long time, the sorcerer prayed and sang around me. Then I felt him blowing on me, and rubbing fragrant herbs all over my body. Finally, he cleansed me with the fire of a torch or something like that.

At one point, I felt a hot and viscous substance being spilled on my head. I was intensely curious, but I **didn't** dare to disobey him and look.

Finally, he ordered me to open my eyes. What a shock: My body was covered with blood! On a rock in front of me, I saw the headless body of a small, black, male goat. I wanted to protest, but the solemnity of the

situation stopped me.

Then they told me to go and clean myself; so I did. I walked nude in front of them all and went to the waterfall. The water was cold, but my body was burning hot, and the cold water felt very good while it washed away the red blood covering my body.

When I came out of the water, somebody was waiting for me with a towel so I could dry myself off. They gave me my clothes and I got dressed, still stunned by these unexpected events. Then I returned to take my place by the fire.

Just as I sat down, those gathered in the circle began to pass around some baskets filled with peyote buttons. Each one took a button and passed the basket to the left. I thought about refusing it, but there was no reason to; I had already made my decision, so I said to myself: "So what?", and surrendered joyfully to participate in the ceremony.

We were eating peyote and singing for most of the night.

At one point, when the effect of the plant had begun to fade, the sorcerer came up to me, stopped in front of me, and took off the mask. I almost fainted with fear. I could have sworn he was the same ghost that I had seen in the crypt of the cathedral!

A chill ran down my back and I wanted to scream, but the sorcerer spoke to me in a strange voice: It was very rough or dry somehow. He told me that his name was **Melchor Ramos**, and that I was welcome among them.

I **didn't** know what to answer: I just nodded.

I was in a very special state of awareness, and the clarity I enjoyed at that moment was not customary for me in my daily life.

Near dawn, the assistants made an enormous spiral with embers from the fire. Don **Melchor** came to me and told me I should look at the spiral until **Xolostoc** (the devil) revealed himself to me.

With growing apprehension, I did what he bade me, saying to myself that all this was merely symbolic. But after a moment of staring at the embers, I became dizzy and felt as if I was falling through a tunnel, towards a total blackness, where I could no longer recognize myself as me.

Since that night, I have never returned to the world I came from. I understand now everything that has happened to me, and I am thankful for my fabulous good luck which brought me to these magnificent beings who are my teacher and my benefactor.

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ENCOUNTERS WITH THE **NAGUAL** Conversations with **Carlos**

Castaneda by **ARMANDO TORRES**

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I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have helped me on my path, and especially to **Carlos Castaneda**, for bringing a sense of beauty and purpose to my life.

I dedicate this book to all those who know what I am talking about.

- **Armando Torres**

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