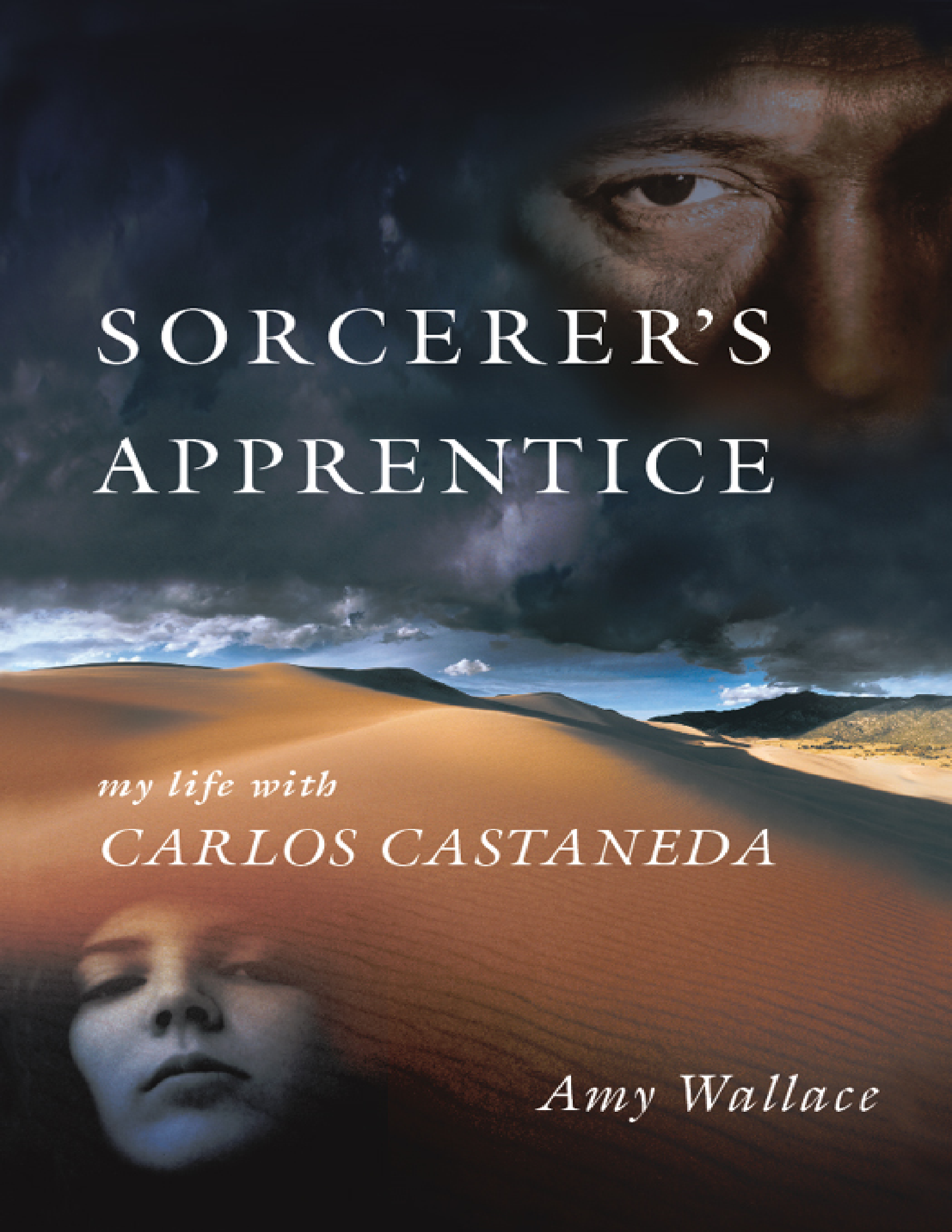




SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

my life with

CARLOS CASTANEDA

Amy Wallace

Amy Wallace has gone through the looking glass of Castaneda's magic and come back out the other side with her wits, and wit, intact. And she's remembered it all with a novelist's eye and ear. The result is a harrowing and vivid look at life inside a charismatic circle—the petty tyrannies, the abusive cruelties, the sometimes unintended silliness. This remarkable book is evidence that what enabled her to survive Castaneda and his cult is her lucid, generous, often funny intelligence that spares no one—least of all herself.

—Joe Kanon, author of *Los Alamos*

Carlos Castaneda told astonishing truths, with an empowering Gnostic brilliance. He also told astonishing lies, spinning out like wild silk from a crazy spider's ass. *Sorcerer's Apprentice* tells the horrifying, heartbreaking tale of the lives entangled in his web. And it hurts like a son of a bitch.

With far greater personal honesty than Castaneda ever managed, Amy Wallace drags us—first happily, then screamingly—deep into the Cult of Carlos: boldly capturing both the staggering beauty and the utter steaming nonsense of his world. It's an ass-kicking, soul-grinding book, beautifully written and breathtakingly acute. I suggest that you read it, and test your faith.

—John Skipp, filmmaker and author of *The Long Last Call*, *Conscience*, and *Stupography*

To learn the art of magic is to court madness and self-destruction. A sorcerer's tricks revealed cannot be unlearned. A mystery is by its nature duplicitous and if love is the most deeply cherished mystery of all, what price its secret? Amy Wallace's valuable memoir is as compulsively fascinating as a celebrity car accident and grips like a bad dream, the kind that keeps recurring whether you like it or not. It's never easy to

learn the truth about your parents, heroes, and role models, to see a magician robbed of his tricks, the wizard dragged from behind his screen, and what I read shook me to the core. Nothing brings tears like magic lost forever and innocence betrayed yet those tears are more useful to us than joy for the salt they enclose is the element of wisdom ...

—Richard Stanley, filmmaker and anthropologist

I read *Sorcerer's Apprentice* with absolute fascination. Like millions of others, I had always wondered what was behind the Castaneda myth. My own life once gave me the choice of going down the guru path, a choice I rejected because, to me, it's morally wrong for one person to claim closer knowledge of deity than any other. It's always a lie. The fearsome consequences of that lie in the life of the unfortunate creature who takes the guru path, as well as his followers, is exposed here with breathtaking candor.

Sorcerer's Apprentice is an extremely powerful book. It is fair warning both to those who would presume to claim special favor in the spirit, as well as followers drawn by their own needs to such people. Amy Wallace warns us with her honesty and her careful attention to crucial emotional details, that guru-worship is a disease.

For those who have wondered whether or not Castaneda's various guides were real in some objective sense, reading this book will clear up the mysteries. Yet her story is also a triumph of heart that Amy has written with a compassion and honesty of the highest order.

—Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion*

Carlos Castaneda was one of the shapers of human consciousness during the period between the Beatles and the end of the twentieth century. After his death he remains a major spiritual and intellectual force. Yet he cast a schizophrenic shadow over our civilization. On the one hand,

he taught us that we are here for a brief time in a beautiful, wondrous manifestation, and we must throw off the shackles of materialism, academic reductionism, and commercial distraction to realize our destiny, to experience the vast, untapped potential of our body-minds; on the other hand, he made the task so daunting and ultimately (if one reads him literally) terrifying and hopeless that he paralyzed many of his devotees and readers into inaction, submission, addictions, and denial. Amy Wallace has finally come along to liberate us from the spell. She says I will show you Carlos as he was. Follow the authentic spirit guide in him, but reject the manipulations of a tragically flawed and jealous guru. You are free to meet the Eagle on your own terms.

—Richard Grossinger, author of *Planet Medicine*

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Other books by Amy Wallace

The Psychic Healing Book, co-authored with Bill Henkin

The Two, co-authored with Irving Wallace

The Book of Lists 1, authored with Irving Wallace and David Wallechinsky

The Book of Lists 2, authored with Irving Wallace, Sylvia Wallace, and David Wallechinsky

The Book of Lists 3, authored with Irving Wallace and David Wallechinsky

The Official Punk Rock Book of Lists, co-authored with “Handsome Dick” Manitoba

Significa, authored with Irving Wallace and David Wallechinsky

The Intimate Sex Lives of Famous People, authored with Irving Wallace, Sylvia Wallace, and David Wallechinsky

The Book of Predictions, with Irving Wallace and David Wallechinsky

The Book of Lists: The '905 Edition, co-authored with David Wallechinsky

The Prodigy: A Biography of William James Sidis, by Amy Wallace

Desire: A Novel, by Amy Wallace

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SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

*My Life With
Carlos Castaneda*



Amy Wallace



North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

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Published by North Atlantic Books
P.O. Box 12327
Berkeley, California 94712

Cover design by Paul Buckley
Cover photographs: (Carlos Castaneda) furnished by TimePix;
(Sand) furnished by MandM, Inc.

Copyright acknowledgments begin on [this page](#).

Sorcerer's Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda is sponsored by the Society for the Study of Native Arts and Sciences, a nonprofit educational corporation whose goals are to develop an educational and cross-cultural perspective linking various scientific, social, and artistic fields; to nurture a holistic view of arts, sciences, humanities, and healing; and to publish and distribute literature on the relationship of mind, body, and nature.

North Atlantic Books' publications are available through most bookstores. For further information, visit our website at www.northatlanticbooks.com or call 800-733-3000.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Wallace, Amy.

Sorcerer's apprentice : my life with Carlos Castaneda / By Amy Wallace.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-1-58394-809-5

1. Castaneda, Carlos, 1925–1998 2. Wallace, Amy. 3. Anthropologists—United States—Biography. 4. Cults—United States. I. Title.

F1221.Y3C3776 2003

306'.092—dc21

2003004679

v3.1

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To my mother who believed I could truly be a writer;
to the memory of my father who,
like his dear friend Carlos, believed that dreams come true;
and to Scott Bradley, who gave this book life.

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All man's honors to man are small beside the greatest prize to which he may and must aspire—the finding of his soul, his spirit, his divine strength and worth—the knowledge that he can and must live in freedom and dignity—the final realization that life is not a daily dying, not a pointless end, not an ashes-to-ashes and dust-to-dust, but a soaring and blinding gift snatched from eternity.

—*The Prize*, Irving Wallace, 1964

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sorcerer's Apprentice is a factual account of my own experiences with Carlos Castaneda. However, I have chosen to use pseudonyms for all but six of the people who are mentioned in the book, and I have changed the details of their appearance and background.

Readers should bear in mind that only six individuals are identified by their first names and other particulars. All of these individuals are public figures who published their own books, granted interviews to the media, delivered public lectures, and/or made other public appearances. Five of the individuals who are identified by their real names and descriptions are listed in “A Guide to the Cast of Major Characters,” which appears on [this page](#) of this book.

Carlos Castaneda and the men and women who joined him in writing and speaking about his teachings sought to attract followers from among the many millions of readers of Carlos' best-selling books. By doing so, they actively sought—and achieved—widespread public attention across the United States and elsewhere around the world, and their beliefs and practices became a matter of public controversy and debate.

This is my contribution to that debate.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For all the readers who want to know—I can only offer you my story and my dream. May you live wonderful stories and dream beautiful dreams, and trust always in yourselves.

To Scott Bradley—an entire elephantful of thanks for heart, for love, for brilliance, literary and otherwise, for the poem by Leo Marks; and for profound studies into the mating habits of moles and porcupines. I love you.

To Richard Jennings, a.k.a. Corey Donovan, without whom I would never have found my strength.

For Oe Warner, with such great love—we two have lived by words, but now words can't come close to what I feel for you.

For Don Cushman (and the beanie) and to JoAnn Ugolini: with love, and this certainty—we never drink enough.

For Richard Brandenburg, for such great love and patience, thank you, dear friend.

For Bob Bassing, God (or whoever's up or down there) for being in my life. I love you.

For David and Flora: special thanks for the night you called after reading of Carlos' death; for David, who touched my hand as we said goodbye to our father. And to the whole family including my very cool nephews for the fantastic fun compiling the glossary: Flora, you pulled out all the stops!

For Dr. David Crausman, who made the old saying a reality: "Without you, this book would never be." Yes, even tears dry.

For Dr. Donald Bender, who waited up all night by the phone the night Irving died.

To Dr. Stalberg, for quiet support and much-needed humor.

To Devo Rubenstein, who started the ball rolling.

Thank you Ron Betten, Souren and to Nara, and to the wonderful Jonathan Kirsch.

To Tony Karam, for being real, and being true to his heart: the rarest things in the world.

To Greg Shukov; grace under pressure, elegant and superb. AT LAST! We did it!

For Janet Oliver, for all our words and all our sweet silences.

And for all the folks at Clementines, Annie Miler, thank you—and Ron Gilbert, with love—you all stood by me and fed me during dark hours, and gave me the refuge where the first draft was written. With gratitude forever.

For the inimitable Swan Parsons Storyteller who fed me and loved me, and the wise Alicia L. Dennis, who saved the day at the eleventh hour.

For Lisa Palac for the loving birthday peaches, for Andrew and his passionate response and fightin' words after reading the first draft.

For Allison Berry, for just about everything, most of all her faith in this book. Avec gratitude et grands bisoux. Merci avec tout mon coeur.

En parlant de bisoux, merci Gerard Barbier, pour tout et pour toujours.

For John Skipp, who let his great heart open.

For Jon Winokur, fellow quote aficionado, one of my first and most inspiring readers.

For Norman Corwin, I aspire to your triumphs, and heart o' gold.

To the marvelous Richard Grossinger, Kathy Glass, and all the fine people at North Atlantic/Frog Ltd.—for their commitment, humor, and bravery. Special thanks to the ever-helpful and encouraging Paula Morrison, and to Emily Boyd.

To my agent, Wendy Schmalz, a true warrior, freedom fighter, and wit, with gratitude.

To Joe Kanon, who set me on my way, with admiration and profound thanks.

For Melissa Ward, an elegant fighter who fought for me and beside me.

To Cass Coty, my first editor and one of my great inspirations.

To Mavis Dalke, for all the years of deep, shared love.

To Jeanie Soloner for her help.

To Annette Brown, definition of impeccability and friendship.

For Vera Savannah—one of the finest persons I've had the privilege to know; and for Carolyn—miracle worker, miracle woman.

For Wayne D. Walker a.k.a. Pablo Milberg, for writing me beautiful poems, and for daring to step outside the rules of the group.

For Liz Vaughan, who taught me what a blank check of affection truly is.

For Bernie Greenburg and Bert Levitch, who always believed in what I could do, when I felt the most overwhelmed.

To Erik and Ted of London's Fantasy Centre, for encouragement and for sending me the books of my favorite author, Robert Aickman.

Special thanks to Ned Claflin, who would take a page to thank for making this book exist.

To Jeremy and Sue Beadle, for the night in London that gave me hope.

To Kathleen Seligman, beautiful, dauntless, and brave; and to her exquisite, sublime family. With love forever.

To Janet Durovchic and her darling Jim—to believe in magic, I only have to remember how we met.

To Joel Lane, for his poetic support.

To my beloved Sophie Duriez, for truth, loyalty, and courage.

To Robert Marshall, for fighting the good fight with a sense of humor.

To Dr. Michelle Ware, a brave and truthful friend and inspiration.

To the many, many readers who have shared their support, their stories, and their hearts over these last five years.

To the many readers of Sustained Reaction and sustainedreaction.org, whose patience and support gave me the courage and the reasons never to give up.

And finally, to the memory of the disappeared: Florinda Donner, Annie Abelar, and my dear Kylie Lundhal.

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There's going to come a time to put your cards on the table—secrets kill us. Remember that. If you have secrets I promise you, carajo! You'll die. I hope you'll understand, if that time ever comes. If you die holding on to your precious secrets, you'll never be able to find me.

—Carlos Castaneda

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

—Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

*There is nothing to say
To those who have lost their true love
But welcome back.*

—Ned Clay, *Love & Love Reclaimed*

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Photo by Larry Robidoux



The author at age nineteen, two years after meeting Carlos Castaneda.

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I Meet the World's Most Elusive Man

So there I was, like some depressing teenage science fiction cliché: scavenging for chunks of busted totems in the moral wasteland, sifting through the muck, trying to paste the good parts together into something that resembled a guiding light. And suddenly, in the depths of my despair ...

—John Skipp and Marc Levinthal,
The Emerald Burrito of Oz

I was seventeen in the summer of 1973, visiting my parents in Los Angeles during a break from boarding school in Vermont.

I was lounging in my childhood bedroom, cultivating my coolness while nibbling something made of carob; composing a letter to my first love. Items of literary interest were spread out around me—*Ada*, *Zap Comix*, the *I Ching*, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and *The L.A. Free Press*. My boyfriend had given me the essays of Wilhelm Reich, but I didn't understand them.

Every weekend night my parents, Irving and Sylvia Wallace, went to a party. They attended and hosted a variety of Hollywood affairs, often political, often Hollywood, often literary. There were fundraisers for Ralph Nader and Eugene McCarthy; dinners with Shirley MacLaine and Gregory Peck, Lauren Bacall and Art Buchwald; and parties with Henry Miller, Ray Bradbury, Alex Haley, Irving Stone, and Sidney Sheldon. Acclaimed screenwriter Ernest Lehman was one of my father's best friends and a long-standing member of "the Thursday night poker game." My father told me that he smoked marijuana for the first time with our next-door

neighbors, Norman and Francis Lear—he said it was delivered in a film can via Henry Mancini and Quincy Jones. I was a child, and back then these were merely family friends to me, not celebrities.



The Wallace Family (left to right—David, Irving, Sylvia, and Amy)

On this spring night, my parents returned from a dinner party hosted by their old friends Ned and Myra Brown. Ned was a veteran Hollywood agent, and the families had known each other for

decades, from a time when they were poor and struggling together. Now my father was one of the five bestselling novelists in the world, and Ned was hosting the gathering at his elegant Malibu beachfront home.

My father was exuberant, greeting me at the front door.

“We just met Carlos Castaneda!”

I was stunned. You couldn’t just *meet* Carlos Castaneda. Everybody knew that.

Castaneda was the most famous “guru” of his generation, and wrote two #1 bestsellers in succession. His publisher was Simon and Schuster, and he and my father had worked with the same editor, Michael Korda, for over twenty years. Korda had discovered Castaneda’s genius and chosen his doctoral thesis for publication. Castaneda was now world famous, refused to be photographed or interviewed, and remained a complete and utter mystery.

According to researchers, Carlos Cesar Salvador Aranha Castaneda was born on December 25, 1925, in the small town of Cajamarca, Peru, the son of a middle-class jeweler.

In order to “erase his personal history”, Castaneda claimed to be Brazilian (or Argentinean or Mexican) and refused to state his age. His oldest friends said that when he was twenty-five his mother died. He locked himself in his room for three days without eating, then announced that he was leaving home forever. Along with his family, he left behind a pregnant fiancée.

After a year in a Peruvian art school he sailed for San Francisco on September 23, 1951. He soon “erased” his family completely, telling friends that his mother died when he was a child, and that he had been raised by his Jewish, anarchist, bomb-throwing grandmother and his sexually obsessed grandfather, who advised him, “You can’t fuck *all* the women in the world, but you can try!” He trained the young Carlos to be a sexual predator, perfecting flattery and seduction, and demanding that the young man make his first conquest during puberty. Too terrified to disobey this authoritarian command, Castaneda claimed his sexual initiation occurred “behind a door” and was so traumatic that it made him “nervous” for the rest of his life. All the same he idealized his brutal

grandparent, and Carlos described his own father, by contrast, as “weak and effete, someone to be ashamed of.”

Because the grandfather told Carlos he was not “beautiful” like one of his cousins, he gave him this advice: “You’re short and homely. Your handsome cousin is welcome everywhere; doors will always be open to him. *You* on the other hand, must enter by the back door. Here are your instructions: When you approach a woman tell her, ‘Gosh, you’re the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen!’ Then walk away. Wait a day, and repeat. Do this three times, then stay away—she’ll be in your power forever.”

This seduction technique proved effective. However, Carlos’ anxiety about being “short, brown, and homely”—a lifelong statement of self-loathing—fed his anxiety about rejection. He entered upon a never-ending crusade of seductions followed by desertions, acting in the tradition of the insecure misogynist whose every conquest is another notch on his belt.

Taking a variety of odd jobs Carlos made his way to California’s Los Angeles Community College in 1955, where he met his wife-to-be, Margaret Runyon. Like Castaneda, Margaret was fascinated by spiritual and paranormal studies. They married in 1960. Carlos revealed that he’d had a vasectomy and invited a friend of his and Margaret’s to father their child. A son named C.J. was born of this union, and legally adopted by the Castanedas. Carlos alternately showered the little boy with affection and abandoned him for long periods, leaving him with both warm and agonizing memories.

During this period Carlos made an attempt to enhance his physique in order to conquer his “ugly” complex. He claimed to have joined a Hollywood gym where Jack LaLanne trained, and he later regaled friends with stories of massaging LaLanne by walking on his back. He also watched in awe while the bodybuilder demonstrated a favorite trick:

Photo: L.A.C.C.

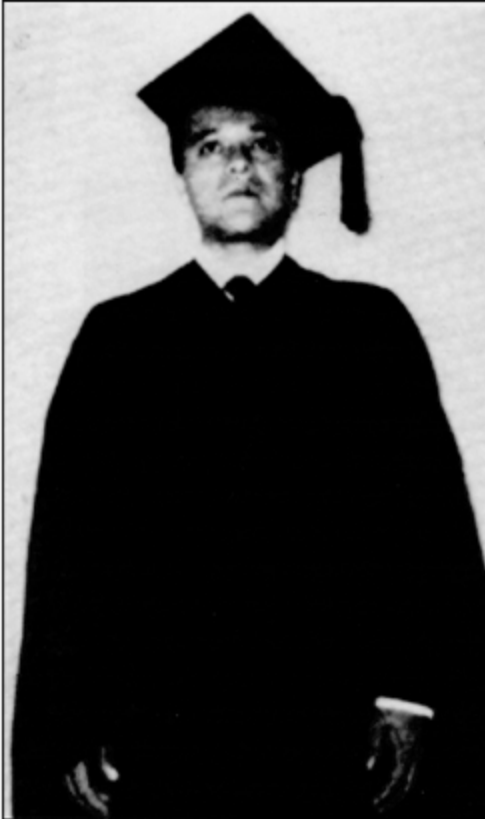


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Left: Carlos Castaneda at thirty-four, graduating from Los Angeles Community College in 1959. Right: Carlos in Los Angeles with his adopted son Jeremy "C.J." Carleton, at the home of his wife, Margaret Runyon.

"He would eat a banana, a handful of crackers, and drink a glass of milk, in that order. Immediately, he vomited them up in reverse, each item separately. It was *marvelous*—I never got over it!"

In 1959, Castaneda entered UCLA to pursue his dream of becoming an anthropologist. He began a series of solo trips to Mexico to study the medicinal value of plants, which led to an apprenticeship with an elder Native American shaman, or *brujo*, "a man of knowledge" whom he claimed to have met at a bus stop. He chose the pseudonym "don Juan Matus" for his Yaqui Indian mentor. Margaret was never invited on these forays, and she speculated that Carlos chose the pseudonym because they drank Matus wine with their dinners.



Carlos Castaneda at age thirty-six, attending a wedding with a friend in 1962.

In April 1968, the University of California Press published Carlos' dissertation—*The Teachings of don Juan, A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, an account of Castaneda's training as a sorcerer's apprentice. When Simon and Schuster purchased the book for mass release it became a phenomenal success, reaching the top of the bestseller lists. Later, it brought considerable scandal to the UCLA Anthropology Department, whose members were accused of showing a lack of academic rigor for accepting this unconventional work without seeing field notes: notes which Castaneda claimed to have lost. He also claimed to have lost a second manuscript account of his training by leaving the solo copy in a movie theatre.

The Teachings is the Candide-like tale of Carlos' trips to Mexico, where his mentor led him through a mind-shattering training. In his early years as a disciple Carlos was given peyote, datura, and psychedelic mushrooms—all hallucinogenic plants—which earned him a reputation as an advocate of drug use, and inspired widespread experimentation. His name is still associated with drugs, and countless 1960s and '70s spiritual seekers consequently dabbled with psychedelic plants. Rumors spread that readers periodically died of overdose, or were institutionalized after experimenting with “power plants” in an attempt to reach higher planes.

Carlos despised this association with drug use. He explained in books and lectures that don Juan had given him psychedelics in the beginning of the apprenticeship because his thinking was so rigid that “he needed to be blasted with dynamite.”

While critics and pundits debated whether his writings were truth or hoax, others bought his books by the millions worldwide, making pilgrimages to the Sonoran desert seeking Carlos, don Juan, and other Yaqui Indian teachers. Success was never reported.

Castaneda's second account, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations With don Juan*, was published in 1971. It chronicled his further instruction, during which Carlos supposedly jumped off a cliff and survived, turned into a crow, and met beings from other worlds, which he called *inorganics*. So skilled was his writing that he made the outlandish believable—he was Everyman, endlessly astonished, cynical, frightened, and above all, bumbling. He was forever failing the wise don Juan with his attempts to rationalize the inexplicable, by extolling “European logic.”

Perhaps his greatest charm as a writer was to make his readers feel that they would have made superior sorcerer's apprentices. William S. Burroughs, Beat icon and author of the groundbreaking novel *Naked Lunch*, remarked to journalist Adam Block, “Why didn't don Juan pick me, instead of that idiot Carlos?”

Another literary legend who was reading Castaneda was Hunter Thompson. In his collected letters, *Fear and Loathing In America*, he wrote to Oscar Acosta, the model for the Samoan lawyer in his most popular book: “... spending most of the day in the bathtub reading

that heinous don Juan book—A *Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. Very weird; that old man really fucked the kid around, eh? But maybe he *had* something with that Four Enemies bit. You should give that one some thought.... When it's all over you'll be sitting there fasting, waiting for the TV cameras ... a Yaqui way of bullshit.”

For better or worse, “don Juan” became a household word to a generation. Castaneda transformed a name already made famous by Freud (by way of the sexually obsessed Lord Byron) to describe pathological philandering: now it meant guruship, not promiscuity. When John Lennon said of his wife, “Yoko is my don Juan,” it required no explanation.

Readers were captivated by the thrilling possibility that if only they too could become don Juan's disciple, they would “dart past the Eagle to be free”—the *brujo's* metaphor for retaining one's body and full awareness after death. Carlos painted a fantastic picture of “navigating in Infinity,” his term for endless travel in supernatural worlds. This was achieved after “burning from within,” a sorcerer's final act on Earth. Carlos claimed that his teacher had the power to choose his moment of leave-taking, along with his apprentices, reconstituting bodily on a higher plane—“The Second Attention.” Sometimes Castaneda wrote of a tantalizing Third Attention, the realm of “absolute freedom.”

Carlos claimed to have spent years bouncing between his normal life as an academic in Los Angeles and his surreal training in Mexico. The stress of living a double life—one magical, inexplicable, irrational; the other quotidian, mundane—led him to a partial collapse, and ultimately, a nervous breakdown. Finally, don Juan appointed Carlos the last *nagual* of a lineage that had lasted for hundreds of years. *Nagual*, said don Juan, was the Yaqui word for “the unknown.”

Carlos told his readers that he was no longer a normal man. Now he possessed increasingly magical powers, such as the ability to read minds, to “shapeshift” into animal forms, to travel at will through other dimensions and interact with the alien inorganics who inhabited a parallel universe.

These gifts—or “siddhis,” as they are called in Eastern traditions—were achieved at great personal cost. In his books Carlos depicted his suffering and all-pervasive sense of dread. Each time he attempted to return to his familiar routines, don Juan’s teachings pulled him back. Daily life now seemed paltry.

In Carlos’ later books he described watching don Juan burst into flame, along with select members of his party. He was left behind, instructed to fill his mentor’s shoes by guiding the remaining group of unruly apprentices. Magical struggles ensued.

The disciples whom Carlos inherited were, to his dismay, smitten with power-lust and love of ritual magic. Carlos shared their belief in non-corporeal predators, yet dreamt of leading them to freedom without don Juan’s arcane methods and trickery. Carlos’ “energy body,” he claimed, was structured very differently from that of his mentor; to accept Castaneda’s guidance was to embrace new, more abstract premises. Carlos labeled himself “the *nagual* of freedom,” an egoless being who could not be seduced by the accumulation of magical powers. That, he believed, was kid stuff, unworthy of “a man of knowledge.”

The ensuing struggle resulted in Castaneda breaking ties with his wards. He wanted them to move to Los Angeles and attend UCLA; they preferred the deserts of Mexico. In time most of the disciples supposedly accumulated enough power to leave the earth *en masse* in a second burst of flame, joining don Juan on his otherworldly ramblings.

Don Juan left Carlos with a troubling prediction. Three new female apprentices would one day be sent to him by “the Spirit”—the force that orders the universe. Carlos’ task was to guide the women, dubbed “the three winds.” Carlos sought them in vain. Ominously, don Juan had warned, they would present the greatest challenge of his life.

At the height of his fame Castaneda’s life was veiled in secrecy. It was part of his mystique that he never gave interviews, though sometimes he consented to rare, impromptu lectures to small groups.

Carlos would not permit his picture to be taken because “a Yaqui man of knowledge *must* remain inaccessible at all costs, and photographs pin us down to the social order.” It added enormously to Castaneda’s fame and mystique that no one knew what he looked like.

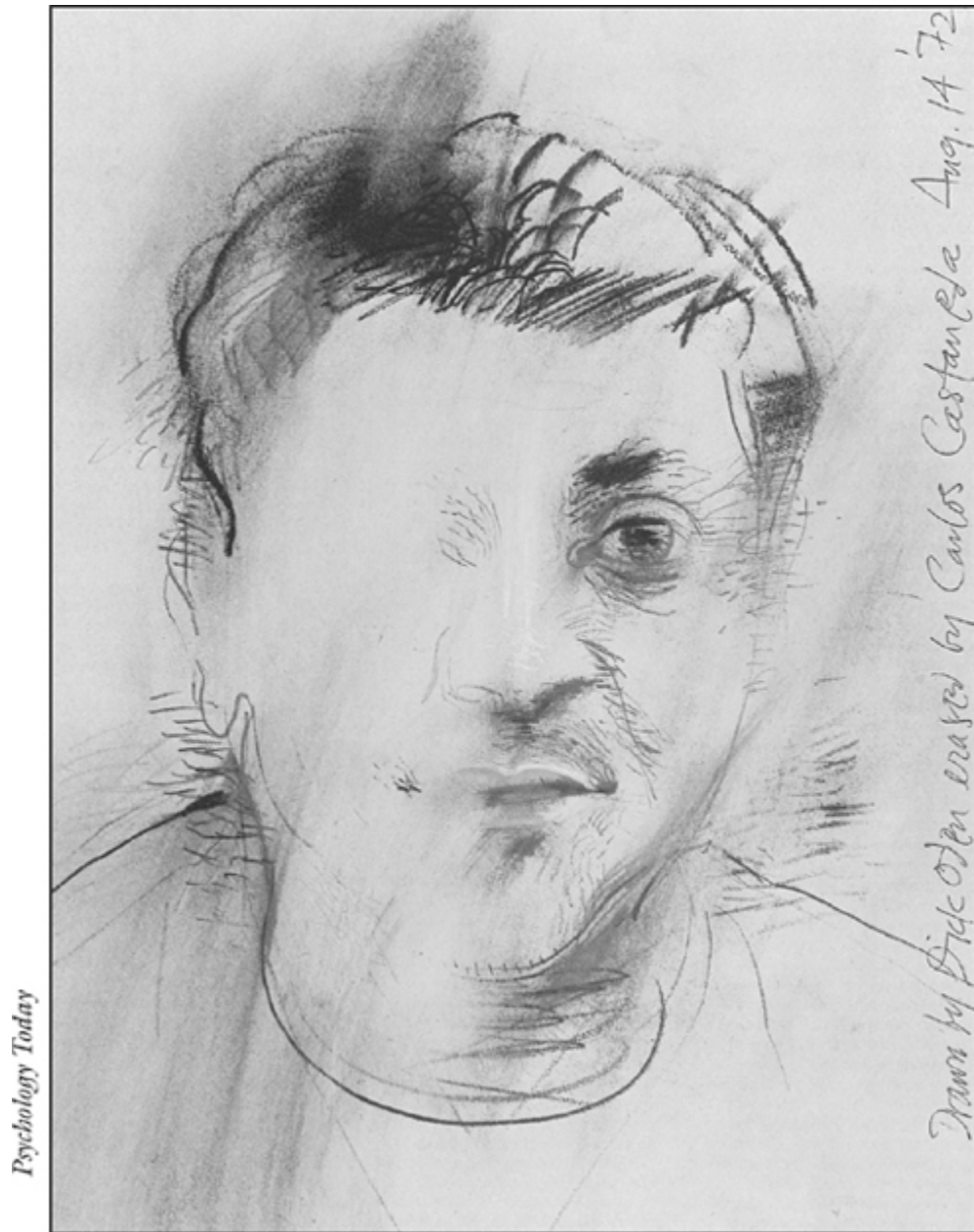
When *Time* magazine requested an interview in March 1973, Carlos consulted don Juan, who allegedly gave his permission for a cover story, illustrated with a fanciful psychedelic painting. In the few photos inside, save one, Carlos covered half his face with his hands, a book, or a hat. These pictures, taken by photographer Eddie Adams (who won the Pulitzer Prize for the infamous photo of the Saigon policeman’s execution of a suspected Vietcong), Carlos claimed were actually of a double he had hired to fool *Time*, per don Juan’s instructions. Recently Adams revealed that he believed he had met the authentic Castaneda, who told him, “I’m covering my face because I look too normal—I won’t be what people expect, they’ll be disappointed.” I wondered why a “man of knowledge” would care what people thought of him.

In 1977, *Psychology Today* featured a piece about Castaneda. Their art director, Tom Gould, initially went along with Carlos’ wish not to be portrayed and agreed to print a blank sheet of paper on which a portrait of Castaneda had been erased. (U.S. painter Rauschenberg once did the same with a drawing of Willem de Kooning’s.)

In the end, artist Richard Oden was commissioned to illustrate the text with a portrait, which Carlos himself agreed to erase.

Carlos stopped midway, saying he didn’t feel he was “at the point at which I can eradicate myself entirely.”

Decades later, Carlos made this disparaging remark: “Recording is a way of fixing you in time. The stagnant world, the stagnant picture, those are the antithesis of the sorcerer.... Maybe you’ve seen a drawing of Carlos Castaneda by Richard Oden for *Psychology Today* in 1977. There was no photograph, so he drew it. No good. He decided to draw it again. It was a flop.”



Carlos told artist Richard Oden that he wished to erase only half of his drawing because "I am not at the point at which I can eradicate myself entirely."

Carlos' agent received his client's enormous packages of mail, which were thrown away unopened each week. Carlos claimed to converse daily with a disembodied being he called "the Dream Emissary," a creature described in his most science fiction-like work, *The Art of Dreaming*. The Emissary instructed him to annually select a box at

random, and with eyes closed, extract one letter. The Dream Emissary sounded a lot like the Monty Hall of the Other Side.

Carlos was bound by this omen to seek out the letter's author. On one such occasion he plucked a request for an interview from a Brazilian journalist, Graciela Corvelan, who wrote for a spiritualist magazine. It took him two years to find her. The interview appeared in two parts and was an important New Age event.

In 1973, Carlos granted another rare interview to one Gwyneth Cravens, which appeared in *Harper's*. A single paragraph in which Carlos described his childhood contained at least ten audacious lies. However, in don Juan's world, there was no such thing as lying—it was a sorcerer's magical task to “erase his or her personal history.” Without the life-story that each one of us adheres to, Carlos wrote, we are free to reinvent ourselves, to walk “the path with heart.” If we cannot brag, seek pity, or get attention with our life's story, then we are able to use our minds for exploration, adventure, “piracy,” liberated from our relentless focus on the self. Keeping up one's social facade, don Juan explained, saps us dangerously—thus, self-importance is our worst enemy.

For many readers “erasing personal history” provided a field day—cheating spouses shed their guilt; disgruntled children of square parents righteously denounced their families for a higher cause. Castaneda's prescription was in sync with a generation experimenting with “free love,” meditation, and communal living. It removed the stigma of right and wrong. “Lying” was no longer lying—it was now “stalking,” or “controlled folly.”

The appeal of “erasing personal history” meant something else to me—a chance to forget, to replace painful past incidents caused by growing up in a family troubled with infidelity, chronic prescription drug use, and nervous breakdowns. With the sorcerer's philosophy, I could endlessly recreate what Carlos called my “personal history,” as if I were writing an ever-changing novel. There was no nagging immorality to feel guilty about. Gaslighting loved ones was an act of bravery, worthy of a warrior who had renounced the repugnant

social order. Stories should be forever changing, proof positive of a disciple's "fluidity." Another advantage to this practice was to make one's self mysterious, "inaccessible" to everyone, especially the opposite sex, something which Carlos advised in his books. Practitioners would become alluring, irresistible. Seemingly crazy actions were the pathway to freedom. Carlos was the Pope of "crazy wisdom," a popular '70s concept probably derived from Tibetan Buddhism. Castaneda told interviewer Corvelan how he had thrown an ardent disciple over a park bench, adding, "The only way to deal with a psychotic is to be one yourself." William Burroughs, Carlos' contemporary, had a related view: "A psychotic is a guy who's just found out what's going on."

Though Castaneda's mother died when he was twenty-five, he told Ms. Corvelan that she had died when he was six, and that he had carried "the horrendous burden of her love" until a psychedelic-inspired confrontation with her spirit freed him. In later years he frequently told me it was a good thing she had died when he was a youngster, or he "would have had to push her down the stairs—I would have been a *hopeless* mama's boy!"

Concepts Castaneda introduced in his first three books included 1) the importance of reaching inner silence, a.k.a. "stopping the inner monologue," and 2) a form of lucid dreaming that entailed first finding one's hands in one's sleep, then controlling one's dream. These were potent ways to increase one's energy. Don Juan called these practices "*seeing*" and "*dreaming*."

With increased energy came the possibility of losing self-importance, a theme that dominated the teachings. Interior growth moved something don Juan called "the *assemblage point*." This was a point in space an arm's length behind, and directly between, the shoulder blades. Here was the seat of awareness; and from here humanity collectively agreed to view the world in a limited fashion. The focus of this unconscious pact, don Juan opined, was self-pity. We lived like caged animals, blind to the wonders around us, dying uselessly, without ever having truly come alive.

All of don Juan's exercises were geared toward moving this assemblage point away from self-absorption. A firm slap on the back from don Juan sent Carlos into prolonged states of "heightened awareness," jolting him out of what don Juan considered puerile concerns, such as "Do my friends like me? Does my girlfriend really love me? Am I popular and respected?"

A favorite teaching from the early books was the usefulness of "petty tyrants"—those ubiquitous persons at our jobs, our schools, in our families—who irritate, enrage, and bore us.

To polish ourselves against them, to be patient and cunning, was to become "an impeccable warrior," no longer a pitiful human being. When we cannot be roused to anger or jealousy, to competition or superiority, we have achieved a warrior's state of mind. Don Juan stressed that we must never lose sight of the one essential fact: that the true enemy *always* lies within—it is our own egoism we must ultimately hone against, should we choose to follow "the path with heart." The struggle was lifelong, but the battle itself was glorious, Carlos wrote, and to care about succeeding was to have already lost. I often thought of Castaneda as Ayn Rand on acid, an Objectivist turned inside out.

Don Juan did not believe in God, and he shocked Castaneda out of his entrenched Catholic beliefs. Finally Carlos agreed that "the pace of Heaven—wearing a toga, and carrying a harp"—was positively geriatric. Rather, he wrote, we live in an awesome, dangerous universe, populated by unfathomable creatures and forces—and only rigorous discipline and relentless struggle would lift us beyond "the sea of gargoyles"—don Juan's name for humankind.

"Fear is what keeps me going," Castaneda often said, "fear that I will lose the path to freedom through my stupidity. The higher one rises, the greater the height from which one can fall. The more energy we have, the greater risk we have of misusing it, of succumbing to egomania."

Perhaps Carlos Castaneda shifted the *assemblage point* of an entire generation—if only for a moment in time—so that millions of readers around the world briefly turned away from programmed

striving for accolades, fame, power. True riches, Carlos wrote, came from behaving with “unbending intent.” The Spirit, like Santa Claus, was always watching, and could not fail to respond to one’s fight. It sent us ever-greater challenges and the means to meet them. Richard Grossinger, in *Planet Medicine*, observed, “Despite the general impression that he discovered a whole range of practices previously unknown in the West ... there is no technique in his books that was not already documented....” It was Castaneda’s poetic insider’s account that was unique.

Don Juan told Carlos to “take Death as your advisor, knowing that it is always over your left shoulder,” and to realize at every moment “that you are a being who is going to die.” Full to the brim with this awareness, life ceases to be a dreary routine.

While Carlos eschewed recreational use of all psychedelics, he wrote in detail about how “power plants” had moved his assemblage point away from “me-me-me.” The great difficulty, he explained, was to maintain this shift when the drugs had worn off.

To reserve energy, Carlos recommended a variety of practices, particularly the breaking of old ties. He advised leaving one’s family and friends forever, with the goal of never needing another human being. Between the lines of his haunting “tales of power,” I thought that Carlos showed a disturbing fear of people. At the same time, I thought, how marvelous it would be to have no emotional dependencies, with their ever-present risk of disappointment and hurt. Was this what had motivated Carlos in his quest? After the loss of his mother, Carlos was always the abandoner, never the abandoned. His need to be in the seat of power in his relationships with friends, lovers, and colleagues was tremendous, and appeared to dictate all his actions.

This theme was a powerful pull for his huge readership. The ideal teacher, don Juan—the perfect father—claimed to offer blanket affection to his pupil, while teaching freedom from attachment. Don Juan was a model of invulnerability, and all in the context of adventure and excitement, whether running from panthers in the desert or watching his son die in a construction accident (he moved his assemblage point away from feeling). Don Juan promised a

painless eternal life after decades of earthly struggle. It beat hundreds of dry hours spent reciting mantras, as some Buddhist sects advised, in order to reach a similar goal. On the other hand, it sounded suspiciously like conventional Christianity.

Though Carlos revealed some of his teacher's techniques, he also distressed his readers by insisting that one absolutely needed a *nagual*, an intimate teacher, for this training. And thus the race was on to find Castaneda, or better yet—to find don Juan.

So great was Castaneda's impact on the culture that Joyce Carol Oates wrote a lengthy, admiring essay, stating that be they fiction or not, the books were works of such genius that it didn't actually matter. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote, "One can't exaggerate the significance of what Carlos Castaneda has done." To his immense annoyance, reviewers dubbed him "the Godfather of the New Age."

This self-loathing academic, who considered himself "short, brown, and homely," had become a worldwide hero to a generation of seekers. Now he had access to the most famous people in the world—to meet Castaneda was the event of a lifetime for jaded celebrities. Some believed his secrecy was a brilliant publicity stunt; while rumors steadily circulated that he was overwhelmed, stunned by fame and success, subject to bouts of depression and self-doubt.

I remembered when my father sold his first bestselling novel, *The Chapman Report*, to the movies, which featured Jane Fonda in her first starring role. After a lifetime of struggle and scrimping, he had just been paid more money than he had ever dreamed of earning. Decades of rejection had paid off—he had become wealthy and famous, controversial and sought after. He began to have dizzy spells. My father resisted visits to doctors, but the spells grew worse, and he finally sought out a diagnosis. Brain surgery was advised.

My father was appalled. No one was taking a knife to his brain! On a friend's suggestion he consulted a psychiatrist, who suggested that my father was literally "dizzy with success." After hearing these words, he never suffered another attack.

Although Carlos met innumerable celebrities, from Janis Joplin to Sean Connery, he apparently did not have friends in any conventional sense of the word. Few of his acquaintances possessed his ever-changing telephone number, and Carlos prided himself on his anonymity.

He later explained, “Photographs freeze us—*lock us* in time. Just as our so-called ‘friends’ trap us by knowing our day-to-day routines, controlling us with their thoughts; photographs insidiously box us in.”

Carlos spoke of how George Plimpton’s wife once surreptitiously took his picture for *The Paris Review*. Afterwards, he said, “It didn’t hurt *me*, it’s what it did to *her*. *She’s* the one who will pay the price.” It was one of my first encounters with Carlos’ legion of contradictory philosophies.

According to Castaneda’s books and rare public statements, “There are no volunteers in the sorcerers’ world.” If you were lucky, *really* lucky, Carlos found *you*. He followed the pointing finger of the Spirit, and listened to the all-knowing voice of the Dream Emissary.

This dictum didn’t stop people from trying to join his sacrosanct group of disciples. Nor did it inhibit the steady stream of producers and directors who courted Carlos for the film rights to his books. Told by don Juan that such movies would never be produced in his lifetime, he turned down offers from Dino de Laurentiis, Jim Morrison, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Alejandro Jodorowsky. Oliver Stone named his production company Ixtlan Films after the title of Castaneda’s third book, *Journey to Ixtlan*. Carlos loved to joke, “My books will never be made into movies. After all, who’s going to play don Juan, Anthony Quinn?”

Carlos, at five feet two, was forever laughing about his height —“When they ask me at a diner if I want a *short* stack of pancakes, I’m already punching the waiter!” And he was certain that Hollywood producers would insist upon a tall, statuesque leading man to play him.

One of Carlos' favorite stories was of being approached by Federico Fellini, who wanted to film his *oeuvre*. He approached Carlos, who explored this invitation with interest, and the two became friends. Rather, the three, due to the tremendous crush Fellini developed on Carlos' pixie sidekick, Regine Thal. She was one of the "three winds" who had finally entered Castaneda's life. Born to German parents in Venezuela, Regine was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed dynamo, fluent in German, Spanish, and English, studying anthropology at UCLA when she met Castaneda. He found the tiny, elfin Gina to be so energetic that he nicknamed her "the little hummingbird." She also had a magical sorceric totem animal, the frog. She was proud to be a frog, because they were denizens of both land and water.

According to Carlos, Fellini flew them to Rome for a meeting. Carlos grew fond of the legendary director, in spite of what Carlos called "his monstrous ego." It was thrilling to hear tales of these great icons meeting. This was beyond mere gossip to me; these were rare *tableaux* from the lives of geniuses.

Fellini allegedly pursued Gina upon her return to Los Angeles, sending her dozens of roses every day, calling constantly for months. Gina described Fellini as "tremendously sweet, asexual, almost feminine—very endearing."

"Once," she said, "Federico rented a car so he could show us the Italian countryside. He was a *terrible* driver—in fact, he hadn't driven in ten years, but he insisted on being our chauffeur! In the front seat was his current mistress—a fat, garish prostitute with enormous breasts falling out of her blouse, and her girdle showing through her tight skirt. She wore bright red lipstick, which smeared on her teeth, and she and Federico always had their hands in each other's laps while he veered down country roads.

"He was too vain to wear his glasses, so he nearly killed us. I was scared to death! They were always stopping to drink—I don't think he was ever sober. Mastroianni joined us, and he drank twice as much as Federico."

Carlos chimed in, "He was *in loove* with Gina. 'My darling,' he would say, 'you are tiny but you cut like a deadly knife.' He

nicknamed her ‘my little knife.’ ”

“I loved to sit on his lap,” said Gina, “and feel his cheek. In spite of all the alcohol, his skin was smooth and soft, like a child’s, a woman’s.”

Carlos laughed. “He used to tell her, ‘I will wait for you! I will wait for you forever, my darling, *mi tesoro*.’ Well, when we returned to our hotel in Rome we went straight to bed, exhausted by our outing. In the morning, *carajo! Coño! Such a spectacle! Chicken’s blood* outside our hotel door—they had *ruined* the carpets—and *the feathers!* Feathers in the hallways leading to our rooms! *Qué pendejo!* It was Federico’s idea of a publicity stunt—‘the *brujería* of Castaneda.’ *Pucha!* We left immediately.”

“He sent me roses every day for *six months*,” Gina sighed.

Fellini recounted his adventure by creating a comic strip about his quest for the “Andean Shaman,” with guest cartoon appearances by Jodorowsky, Mastroianni, and a multitude of cacti.

Hollywood amused Carlos greatly. He loved to recount an evening with Sean Connery, Steve McQueen, and Clint Eastwood. “They were *giants!*” he said, waving his arms to indicate their astonishing height. “They towered over me, I was *lost*. And they drank like *this*”—he indicated the size of a quart bottle. “Unbelievable, and that was just to get going! They didn’t even get drunk, that was just to get started every night! And what did they talk about, *for hours?* Their prostates! They all had prostate!” (Carlos never mastered the proper usage of certain nouns in English, which added a piquant hysteria to some of his exclamations. He was forever saying, “She had migraine! He had colon!”)

Speaking of his party of ailing movie stars, Carlos went on, “And their livers were in *shreds*. Ah, but my liver is also in pieces, from the plants don Juan gave me because I was too stubborn to *perceive*, I *had* to defend the view of a rational European man ... but that was only temporary. Those actors, those huge *mooses*—they’re all going to get cancer, idiot *pendejos!* I’ll NEVER, NEVER die of the Big C! I’ll blow my head off first! I *promise* you that!”

To return to an evening in 1973. Like most of my friends, I had read Castaneda's first books and found in his philosophy and tales of wonder the magic that I felt was missing from my life. One can be painfully jaded at seventeen. I was reading Huysmans and Wilde, and I felt I was ready for a portrait in the attic.

My literary family was unusual, but all the same I was a typical, educated California hippie, and an eager spiritual seeker. I studied *chi gung* and other martial arts as a spiritual practice; I co-wrote a seminal book about psychic healing and telepathy. I was at the rebellious stage with my parents, but I never stopped sharing their rich curiosity about unusual things. I had never met anyone as inquisitive as my father, though at seventeen I had concluded that he and my mother were pretty square. It would be some years before I understood that my father's novels—*The Prize*, about the ugly behind-the-scenes politics that controlled the Nobel Prizes, and *The Man*, about the first black president of the United States—had braved convention by writing about forbidden subjects; they had reaped such extreme censure from the religious right that his books were burned for their radical, pro-African American content. He had been threatened by racist, anti-Semitic assassins, yet he continued to write about what he believed in.

And now my parents had met Castaneda, one of my greatest heroes, and a hero to my generation. I listened with a rare, respectful silence while they explained that Castaneda was a client of Ned's and a sheer delight—erudite, buoyant, *marvelous*. My father hadn't been this enthusiastic about meeting a legend since he'd been to the Oval Office and shaken hands with President Kennedy.

Oddly, my father had no interest whatsoever in reading or discussing Carlos' books, and he knew nothing of his philosophy. The pressing social question of whether Castaneda was a true wizard or the twentieth century's greatest literary fraud left my father indifferent. He acted as though he'd met a long-lost brother, and that was all that mattered.

I saw the spark in my father's eyes that reflected his deepest admiration. His pleasure in swapping tales with a fellow master was palpable. Here was someone who had created and peopled magical

worlds, just as my father loved to do in his 800-page novels of political intrigue.

My mother and father had also met Castaneda's charming companion, an elegant woman named Anna-Marie Carter—it was unclear to them whether or not she was Carlos' date. "Something mysterious is going on," my father mused. Anna-Marie was in graduate studies in UCLA's anthropology department.

Ned confided in my father that he was sure his client's books were nonsense, and he never bothered to read them, though his wife did. Carlos had a seemingly more intellectual rapport with his editor, Michael Korda, but complained that Korda was forever trying to wheedle a confession out of him, begging, "Come on, Carlos—just tell me! You made this up, didn't you?" Carlos reportedly laughed away Michael's interrogations, reveling in hilarious imitations of what he considered Korda's snobbery.

"He's desperate to be English. Have you seen his sideburns lately? He's trying to be a *Beatle*. *Carajo!* And so stiff! He has the sensuality of a piece of wood! Korda is a perfect example of what *they* have done to us! At least my agent doesn't brag—I like that. When I tell Korda he has power, he eats it up! *Such* egomania! Now Ned, he just wants to make a good deal. *That* I can understand. Once American Express approached Ned, and the president asked him, 'How about Carlos holds up the card and says, 'Come fly with me!' How repulsive! When I said 'no,' you should have seen Ned's face—there went his \$150,000 commission down the drain! 'Come fly with me!' *Carajo!* But at least he wanted to make money—that's okay. Mikey wants to be *loved*."

Hilarious as his stories were, they boded poorly for what it meant to be Carlos' "friend."

My father concluded his story of the dinner party with a cheerful command: "You have to meet Carlos. Ned will arrange it right away."

I, who was seventeen and scared of no one (or so I imagined), blurted, "No! He's too ... *famous*. What would I say?"

I had never been intimidated at the prospect of meeting a famous person before. Due to my father's success when I was only five, I

was accustomed to meeting celebrities. The redoubtable Harold Robbins had taught me to swim on the French Riviera, the wonderful Ray Bradbury had kindly written an article for my junior high school paper, and Charles “Sparky” Shultz, as generous a man as I’ve ever known, drew me my very own Snoopy comics. These people were just so many adults to me, albeit more fun and eccentric than most grown-ups, but certainly not scary. So why was the prospect of meeting Carlos Castaneda so frightening?

I had not been so impressed with my father since the time he returned from a party having just met John and Yoko Lennon. Yoko had spotted Irving and said, “John, my God, it’s Irving Wallace!” and grabbed her husband’s sleeve. John pumped my father’s hand in awe, sputtering his admiration for *The Man*, a book Lennon claimed had changed his life.

And now this. I was frozen.

My father would have none of it, saying, “I insist.”

There was no argument to be made. And if the rumors about Carlos were true, there would probably never be a second chance. Within a week I was on my way with my brother David, his wife Flora, and my parents to Ned and Myra’s home. As we approached the entrance, I tried to hide my nervousness with a warm smile. Walking in the door, I saw Carlos immediately. He was my height exactly (five feet two inches), pleasantly chubby, immaculately dressed in a dark, conservative suit and tie—nothing like the “shaman’s garb” I had vaguely imagined (a turban? a feathered headdress?) and far more formally attired than what constituted the popular dress of the 1970s. He had a rich head of curly black hair, a brilliant smile, and comforting brown eyes. He looked extraordinarily inviting. I felt instantly at ease. He extended his hand and gave me the kind of warm handshake you’d give a long-awaited friend.

Castaneda’s captivating smile showed front teeth capped in the old-fashioned Mexican style, a U-shaped frame of gold. I was quickly struck by the rapport between he and my father, which gave the dinner the feeling of a happy family reunion. There were no tense

pauses, no awkward silences, no dreary small talk. I felt free to speak and eager for the evening to last.

I don't remember anything Carlos said that night; only that he had a heavy accent and held court exquisitely, regaling us with hilarious stories. I recall that he deferred often to his lovely companion Anna-Marie. They both asked me lots of questions about my boarding school, exclaiming graciously at my replies, as if teenage tales of New England and my studies were revelations. Carlos seemed very concerned that I acquire a good education. Anna-Marie was fair, diminutive, and fine-featured, her long brown hair falling to her waist. I found her as charming as Carlos.

Whatever hopes I'd had of a conversation about the supernatural vanished in the presence of these amusing, articulate people. Carlos' exuberance prevailed over all my anxieties. We parted with warm hugs. The last thing I remember was Carlos holding my hand in both of his, looking me directly in the eye, and assuring me that we would meet again. A few days later a book arrived for me—his bestseller, *A Separate Reality*. The inscription read:

A Separate Reality

FURTHER CONVERSATIONS
WITH DON JUAN

BY
CARLOS CASTANEDA

To Amy Wallace

with the best wishes.

*"The way to freedom is sometimes
a whisper in the ear," don Juan said that.*

Carlos Castaneda

SIMON AND SCHUSTER
New York

To Amy Wallace
with best wishes.

"The way to freedom is sometimes a whisper in the ear,"
don Juan said that.

Carlos Castaneda

Remarkable as the inscription was, I couldn't help but notice his awkward construction. Was it possible that despite his fierce insistence that no editor touched his work, Carlos Castaneda's

bestsellers had been heavily edited? Years later, a mole at Simon and Schuster would tell me precisely that. It was a subject so delicate that Carlos bristled at the slightest hint that he had been helped. After all, Carlos' greatest point of pride was that a warrior had no needs; and he, alone on this Earth, was the last, consummate warrior.

A week later I had the most vivid dream of my life: A short man was seated at a table. Three women, faces shrouded in fog, stood behind him. I knew they were witches and, although the man's face was cloudy, I knew him to be Carlos. He spoke at length about the importance of starting a revolution. I assumed he referred to political uprisings, but he said this was something infinitely more profound, a revolution of the individual spirit. He told me I would meet them again. He was deadly serious, even chilling, not at all the cheerful man of the dinner party.

I awoke feeling more peculiar than I had ever felt after a dream. I knew, beyond doubt, that I would remember it as long as I lived.

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The Interim Years

Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things.

—Robert Browning, *Bishop Blougram's Apology*

Nineteen years passed after my first meeting with Carlos and before my initiation as his sorceric disciple.

Between 1973 and 1991 we met in a casual, irregular way, dictated by his mysterious habits and my random letters. I never had Carlos' phone number—no one in my family did. The only way to contact him was to send a letter via Ned, or to Carlos' accountant, Jerry Ward. Sometimes Carlos called Irving in search of me and left Ward's number or a number with no name attached. Half the time when I attempted to return the call, the phone only rang.

Carlos also dropped by unannounced at my parents' Brentwood home, or my brother David's house in nearby Santa Monica. He always said he "was looking for Amy." I was flattered, and no one in the family was offended; we all found his eccentricities charming. David remembers going out with his wife, along with Carlos and Anna-Marie, in 1981 to see *Pixote*, a film directed by Carlos' friend Hector Babenco. This heartbreaking story of an impoverished Brazilian boyhood, told in Portuguese (in which Carlos was fluent), moved him to the point of tears; it was so reminiscent, he said, of his past. Other favorite films were *Bladerunner*, *The Barefoot Contessa*, *The Seventh Seal*, and *Tora, Tora, Tora*.

David said that Carlos broke the heavy post-film mood that night with gleeful imitations of the Grade D martial arts movies he and

Annie delighted in. They bantered the ridiculous drubbing back and forth: “Callous half-wit dog!” “Vile son of a rodent!” “Evil uterus!” He and Annie giggled and traded ludicrous curses, and the whole party was in stitches.

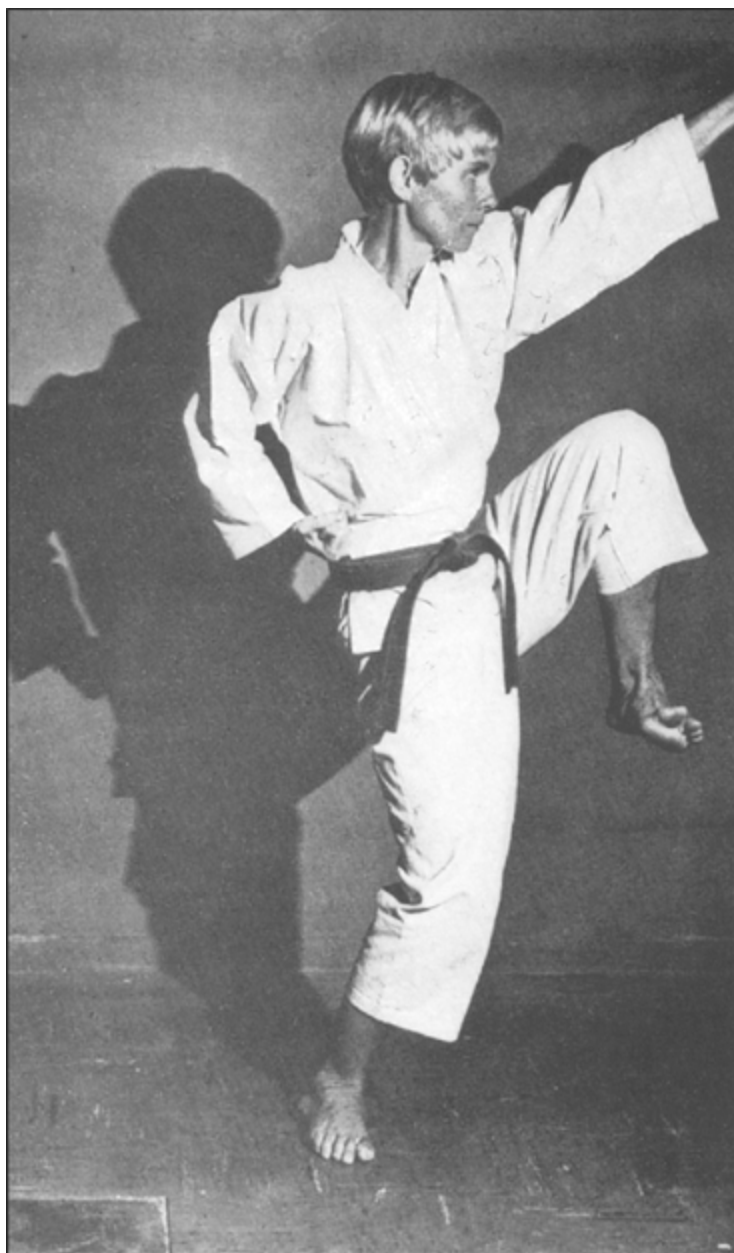
When I did see Carlos, he was usually with Annie. However, I soon met a second woman, the “witch” Carlos had described as “Federico Fellini’s sweetheart!” She was no longer known as Gina; she was now Florinda Donner. And she was a dynamo. She had so much energy she always seemed about to explode. If anyone looked capable of human spontaneous combustion *à la* don Juan, it was she. And Florinda was fiercely talkative—the opposite of the demure Anna-Marie—and, unlike Annie, she talked back to Carlos. They bantered with florid, exhibitionistic pleasure. They used the worst possible gutter language, mixing Spanish and English. She reminded me of a wild bird, alert and untamed. Her nickname, “the hummingbird,” suited her to perfection, for she was a diminutive, beautiful creature in perpetual motion. While Annie’s conversation was immensely engaging, her story-telling powers equal to Carlos, she dwelt on “ordinary” topics. Florinda, like Carlos, spoke of escape from the mundane world of mortals, which they called “the sea of gargoyles.”

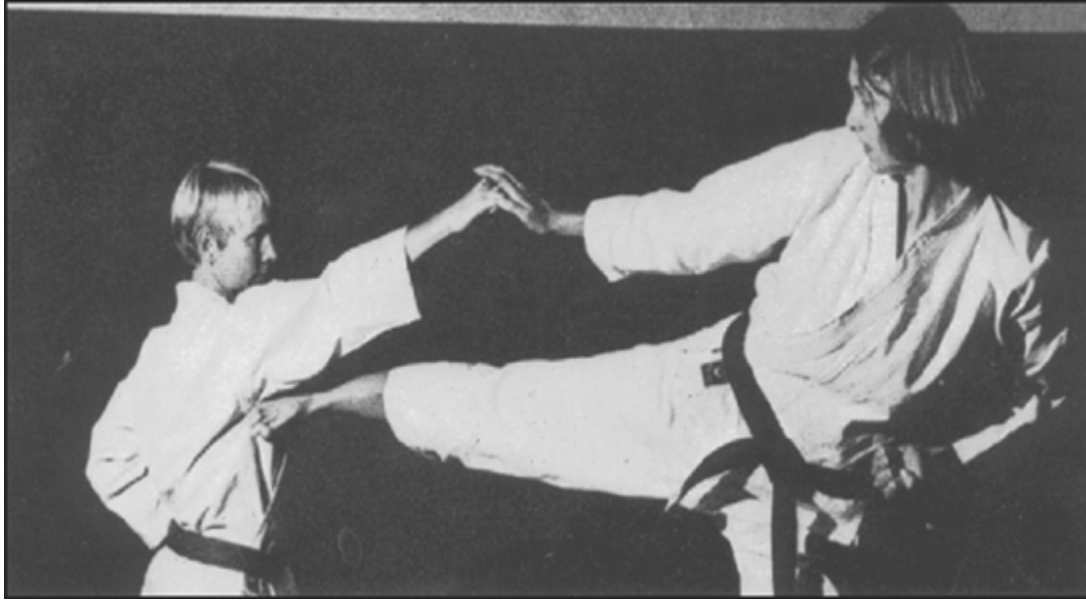
Oddly, I don’t recall my first meeting with Florinda, though she was to have the most powerful influence on my life of all the sorcerers, including Carlos. She was frequently Carlos’ companion during his surprise visits, and very quickly became a role model for me—feisty, brilliant, daring, and seemingly fearless.

My parents hosted a gala literary party during the ABA (American Booksellers Association), the world’s largest publishing convention, rivaled only by the one in Frankfurt, Germany. Carlos arrived with Florinda, again “looking for Amy.”

“It’s odd,” my father mused for the second time, after the guests had departed. “There’s something peculiar about Carlos and his women—something more than meets the eye. I can’t tell whether

Annie is Carlos' girlfriend, or Florinda, or both—or neither one.... I can't figure them out. What do you think?"





Left: Gina—a.k.a. Florinda Donner—performing a karate Kata movement. Above: Gina sparring with Anna-Marie—a.k.a. Taisha Abelar. Samurai magazine, 1974.

I knew what he meant, but I couldn't hazard a guess. They could as easily have been friends as lovers; we couldn't put a name to it. I couldn't imagine Carlos with a girlfriend, or either of these women desiring him, so ambiguous did I find his sexuality. Perhaps he was homosexual, I mused; most likely he wasn't interested in sex at all.

My brother received a memorable visit in 1976, when Castaneda appeared at his door at 11:00 A.M. waking him up, for David kept our family's writers' hours. David, groggy and in pajamas, listened for an hour while an animated Carlos lectured about relations between the sexes.

"David, we think we're *machos*, so important, with our pee-pees, but we're nothing! My penis is nothing! Women control us, they *rule the world* with the hole between their legs, and we think *we* rule it! We don't even know what's going on.... And you know what, Davey—*my pincho is not working!* Can you believe it? I don't know what's wrong with it!

"We're *slaves* to women. They treat us like little babies—we *are* babies, so proud of our *pincho!* So where is a real *macho*, eh? No, no, no. We're poor babies, every one of us.... And when the pee-pee

doesn't work—*ay ay ay! Dios!* Say, how's your wife? And where is your sister? Still living in Berkeley? Another boyfriend? *Coño*, it's a conspiracy—the females letting us believe *we're* running the show! They know how to handle us!"

Around the same time, in 1976, my brother and his wife encountered Carlos at a fund-raiser for the Los Angeles Library. Carlos had arrived early, as was his custom, and found a table to share with David and Flora. A rumor raced through the small crowd of early arrivals—*Carlos Castaneda was on the premises*. Some of the guests surmised correctly that he was the short, dapper Latin man in the three-piece suit. A few bold hippies drew up chairs at Carlos' table.

Carlos spoke intensely to David and Flora. He described a period of despair when he had been consumed by doubt. Don Juan, who he believed was the only true, ego-less teacher in the world, was preparing "to burn, to leave the world" and had become less accessible to his pupil. Carlos felt desperate at his imminent abandonment. Searching for another authentic master, he was crushed to discover that they were all frauds. He regaled the table with tales of his urgent quest.

"Davey," he explained, "because I was *Carlos Castaneda* I got to meet *everybody*. We nicknamed Baba Ram Dass [a.k.a. Professor Richard Alpert, Timothy Leary's associate in LSD experiments until the two were exiled from the academic community] 'Baba Rammed-Ass,' he was such a *fag*."

It was rumored that Carlos took LSD with Leary, but he never spoke of it, preferring to say that Leary was "senile."

Carlos was markedly homophobic, and followed his remarks about Ram Dass' proclivities with a story of a shattered dream. For years he had longed to meet his hero Alan Watts, whose books brought Zen philosophy to a generation of Westerners. The unsuspecting Carlos described "a crushing experience—Watts asked me to go upstairs and he made a pass at my *culo!* Then he got stinking drunk. He was crude, cynical about spirituality, even

sneering at his own books, books I had practically memorized! But worst of all was hearing Watts, my *hero*, declare, ‘*Of course* we can never live up to the behavior we admire—that’s the beauty of it!’ ” Carlos was crushed. It was his strongest conviction that no true spiritual leader should be a hypocrite, should fail to “walk his talk.”

Carlos said, “I have *no* respect—none!—for these babas and shamans who are fallible! To be fallible while claiming knowledge is to be the lowest kind of egomaniac! I piss on these fakes! *Carajo!* It’s *meaningless* if you don’t live what you preach! *Ay!* I never got over the words of Alan Watts. They haunt me. It’s better to be a bum in the gutter—go, BE a bum! At least that has dignity!”

Carlos then told of going to Oakland, paying \$800 for a master’s “secret breath,” which consisted of nothing more than a loud exhalation. In the same city he next watched a clumsy Tai Chi master trip down the stairs and break his neck. Carlos spoke of how he and his companion tip-toed over the man’s dead body, not wanting to get involved with the police, and leaving the *sifu*’s macabre remains to be discovered by his disciples.

The nadir of Castaneda’s search came at last, when a Hindu master aggressively sprinkled him with a pungent liquid shaken from an ornate flask. Carlos demanded to know the flask’s contents, but hovering disciples replied, “Everything that comes from the Baba is sacred!” The precious contents were finally revealed to be the Baba’s “power urine” which ruined Carlos’ best suit. To his eternal chagrin, no dry-cleaner could restore it to its pre-sanctified freshness.

Castaneda’s conclusion was that he should stop trying to run from the path fate had set before him, arduous as it was. He would never find another teacher.

The hippies at the lunch table were enraptured by such revelations from the elusive *nagual*—they were hearing unpublished stories, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“David, Flora, *look ...*” Carlos said with sudden intensity. “There, hidden in the band, playing the trombone in the back—that man is *not what he seems*. He’s in disguise—he is ... *a brujo! Carajo!*”

My brother followed Carlos' gaze to an unassuming-looking, middle-aged Latino, oblivious to the stares he was drawing. David looked from the trombonist to Carlos, chortled quietly, then looked back at the awestruck hippies. Carlos gave David a delighted wink, saying *sotto voce*, "Ah, Davey, I really got them that time!"

On one occasion, Carlos turned up in my parents' Brentwood home in search of me, and found my mother alone. As he regaled her with stories, my father arrived. They had a deep, unspoken understanding, expressed in hearty chuckles and warm handshakes. To his final years, Carlos reminisced with delight about his meetings with his dear friend Irving. With his gift for mimicry, Carlos replicated my father's baritone to perfection:

" 'Carlos, you look *younger* every year—ha, ha, ha!'

" 'Irving! You look like a kid—it's amazing! Ha, ha, ha!' "

"I loved it when Irving said that, because I really looked like shit," Carlos said, telling the story often. "We both looked like *hell*, and we knew it, but he stuck to his story like a true sorcerer—'Carlos, you look *terrific*—ten years younger—ha, ha, ha!' "

Sometimes, arriving in Los Angeles, having flown down from Berkeley, I would find a note in my father's hand tucked under my bedroom door, which read simply, "Carlos," followed by yet another new number.

I vividly remember an upsetting call in 1983, when I was twenty-eight. My brother and I were chatting at our parents' home when the phone rang. He answered, spoke briefly, then handed the receiver to me. For the first time, Carlos spoke to me in a tone of deep despair.

"Amy, one of our party is gone. La Gorda, the *bruja*." (She featured prominently in Castaneda's most popular books.) "She was the most powerful of the witches, we needed her power, she guided us ... and now she's gone, *dissolved* in front of my eyes! She *died* of egomania! *She* decided she was the *nagual*, our leader! She thought I was *nothing*, a pipsqueak!

"With that much energy, with such power, to give in to the ego is *death*. The higher a sorcerer rises, the greater the height from which he falls, until a fall is fatal. Amy, she aged *in front of our very eyes*.

She was vigorous, young—and we *saw her wither*, and *die like a human being*. Do you understand? I am alone, and *I have promised don Juan* to lead his disciples to freedom—this was the task he left me. I gave him my word. And it is deadly to break one’s word. Ay, watch out when you make a promise! People have no *conception* of the power of their vows. *Never* go back on your word, or something *will* exact its payment....”

This time Carlos didn’t make jokes, or tell funny stories. I wondered if I’d ever see him again.

And I wondered something else. My confusion haunted me. If Carlos was the last *nagual*, the last true *brujo*, the most enlightened being on Earth, why was he stuck in black despair?

I was steeped in works of Eastern philosophy and religion—the *I Ching*, the *Tao de Ching*, Zen *koans*, Buddhist sutras, Sufi stories. In none of them was the enlightened master a nervous wreck. This cognitive dissonance made my head spin.

I knew from reading Carlos’ books that his was never a calm world, to put it mildly. His books read like page-turning novels laced with luminous poetic wisdom. Castaneda’s stories were of hexes and magical dramas, plots and spells, revenges and betrayals.

And having read them, I firmly believed that Carlos Castaneda should stand above lesser beings, should rise above grief like the Buddhas in my books—like his own mentor don Juan had. When don Juan’s son, Carlos wrote, died before his father’s eyes in an accident, don Juan “shifted his awareness, moved his assemblage point” so as not to feel the pain, which would have destroyed him. I longed for that ability—a way to separate myself from the strong emotions I had felt all my life—to find tranquility, to no longer fear loss and disappointment. I wanted not to want. Now, Carlos’ self-described life of anxiety seemed undignified, and something far more upsetting. It caused me to doubt, where I wanted to believe. And yet—Carlos’ world *did* seem exciting. Exciting the way a pirate was exciting, or a trapeze artist without a net.

Much as I cherished my Buddhas, they were boring by contrast—monks who lived on air or a daily bowl of rice and seaweed, sitting

cross-legged on austere mountains, content with all the splendid nothing that was happening all around them.

Carlos did not disappear as I had feared, and the tragedy was never mentioned again. I saw him a few months later, and he had returned to his former good humor as if nothing at all had happened. I was far from knowing that Carlos Castaneda was the model for Chicken Little. How the sky remained intact during his lifetime I will never know.

On several occasions in the following years Carlos appeared at my parents' large literary parties. One colorful do was thrown for Simon and Schuster during the ABA—at that time S & S published both Irving and Carlos. As was his habit, Carlos was the first to arrive and quick to depart when guests poured in, lest they surround him. These parties left happy memories—I recall affectionate hugs and kisses, and his luminous brown eyes.

I'd never been on a blind date and, when I was accepted one in 1978, it turned out my date had an agenda, and not the usual one. He had heard I knew Carlos, and he wanted to collaborate on a book debunking him. I declined, curious as to why this stranger was so intent on this mission.

It started when he met Carlos' only known blood daughter, then a young woman whose Peruvian mother had been abandoned while pregnant. Mother and daughter now lived in Switzerland, and the women were friends of Denny, my date. Denny had been privy to a sad confession from the girl, which so angered him that he was moved to uncover more of the story. Carlos had flown his daughter Charo to California—their first meeting—and promised to send her to a good university, paying her expenses presumably as recompense for abandoning her mother and turning his back on his child.

She was terrifically excited to meet her famous father, who greeted her warmly, took her on a whirlwind trip to Las Vegas, and

just as suddenly put her on a plane back home. All plans for her education were dropped. I never heard Carlos speak of his first fiancée and only once heard him refer to their child, saying, “I did all I could to help her, but it was impossible.” How, I wondered, did this fit with Carlos’ sorceric ethic to above all keep his word? I didn’t want to think about it.

The most significant meeting Carlos and I had during this period was in 1980, when I was twenty-five. I was married and living in Berkeley, commuting to Los Angeles to write the second *Book of Lists* with my family. One evening Carlos and Florinda came to call.

They took me to a seafood restaurant in Santa Monica. We sat in a booth, the two of them side by side. Though I hadn’t seen him in a long while, Carlos was much as I remembered him—vital and expansive, well dressed in a suit, and still sweetly pudgy. I continued to find him curiously asexual, and there seemed no more indication that Florinda was his lover than that Anna-Marie had been. Florinda, however, exuded a fiery, brazen sexuality. I was struck again by her complete contrast to Anna-Marie’s ladylike restraint. They revealed to me during dinner that the two women had spent over a decade in one another’s nearly constant company. According to the *naguals’* philosophy, people of opposite temperaments made rapid spiritual progress by sharing each other’s lives and learning tolerance. This was called “using petty tyrants” in Carlos’ books. Florinda told me that she and Anna-Marie drove each other nearly berserk, and they used their irritation to “hone” themselves. Even a small thing, like who got to use the washing machine, was grounds for training—*deconstructing*—the ego.

At the restaurant, Carlos talked about *The Book of Lists*. In it I had compiled a list of People Who Have Spontaneously Combusted, a paranormal phenomenon that had long fascinated me, and obviously it obsessed Carlos too, who planned to burn in his best suit—“I always wear it since I want to look good on the other side.”

Carlos approached his grilled salmon and buttery baked potato with his customary appetite. “Do you know anything about how this

human burning is achieved?” he earnestly inquired.

I laughed. “Of course not; I just compiled research. As you know, documentary evidence—”

“Ah!” interrupted Carlos. He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “Last week I was in the bathtub and *my left foot began to burn*. The big toe. It started with a blue flame and—”

Florinda kicked him under the table. I wasn’t supposed to have noticed.

“Well,” he continued, “*The Book of Lists* is wonderful! What are you working on now? And how is your husband?”

Before I could reply, he launched into another of his improbable stories. “By the way, did I ever tell you about Julio Iglesias? It’s my favorite story! Once I was invited to his mansion. I was shown out to an enormous swimming pool; he was lying in the sun surrounded by beautiful, naked blondes. He jumped up when he saw me.

“ ‘How do you do, Mr. Castaneda?’ He pumped my hand up and down. He was very friendly.

“ ‘I fuck every day!’ he told me. ‘I don’t fuck well, but I fuck as often as I can! Three times a day!’ *Carajo!* That’s my *favorite* story.”

I understood instantly, because of the sudden absurd turn of the conversation, that they had been interviewing me for inclusion in a group that I suspected existed, and that I had failed the test. I was mildly disappointed.

Fifteen years later, as I lay in Carlos’ arms, I asked him about that night. It was true. I had failed. But why? What had I done wrong?

“Ah,” he replied, “you were too busy paying taxes to the world!”

“*Huh?*”

“You had your husband, that jazz musician,” he hissed, “and your mansion in Berkeley, your friends ... you were immovable. Besides, Irving was alive, and there was no way he would have let you go. It was impossible *to free you, to break your chains.*”

By 1989 I was divorced and undergoing an intensive phase of devotion to Chinese meditation and martial arts. I studied for four years with a radiant eighty-three-year-old woman, one of the greatest living *chi kung* masters. Her classes were known only by word-of-mouth; she taught in her musty San Francisco basement.

I had a notion she and Carlos should meet, so I wrote to tell him she taught a secret form of meditation learned in her Shanghai girlhood from astounding masters. Carlos and I very nearly connected over this letter—he called Los Angeles immediately and spoke to Irving for what would be the last time. They had their usual cheerful conversation, and Carlos left a number for me. He was gone when I called.

It was a hard period in my life. I was looking for a partner after the end of my marriage but hadn't met anyone I truly cared for. And I was worried, as were my mother and brother, because my father seemed seriously ill and refused to see a doctor. I had developed hormonal difficulties, and took Prozac two weeks out of the month—a new, experimental treatment. It would not be long—little more than a year—before my father would die of cancer and my world turn topsy-turvy. The real sorcery saga was about to begin.

Reunion with Florinda

Walk calmly in the shadows, fearing both the evil and the good;

All too often, they are the same.

—Douglas E. Winter, *Run*

One chilly evening in 1991 I opened the paper and noticed that Florinda Donner was giving a speech that night at Gaia Books. This was a New Age, feminist bookstore a few blocks from my Berkeley home.

I had a headache and wanted to stay in. At the same time it had been ten years since I'd last seen my beloved spitfire, Florinda. I took an aspirin and walked the four downhill blocks to the lecture. That act changed the entire course of my life. Carlos had a favorite saying, popularized in his bestsellers—"All of us are given a single cubic centimeter of chance at least once in our lives. It is a gift offered by the Spirit." The adventurous reached for the brass ring—sometimes by accident, as I did when I reached for the bottle of aspirin—while most ignored it as it passed by, and the direction of their lives never deviated from the dull norms of societal routine. Magic, Carlos always said, is *everywhere*, but we wear blinders which we cling to, afraid of the unknown. If only, he urged, we could live like pirates, grabbing life's treasures and sailing forward on the high seas, we would honor the gift that is our life.

"I live in the *front* of the train, so everything I see is new," he often told me, "while the rest of the world lives life in the caboose."

A lecture hall across from the store had been rented for Florinda's talk, but the doors weren't open yet. I wandered over to the bookstore. I immediately saw the tiny, sparkling Florinda; beside her was a taller woman, a curvaceous, almond-eyed creature with salt-and-pepper hair. They were laughing and playing with New Age toys—banging shamanic drums and peering through crystals. They didn't see me. I was too shy to introduce myself.

When the doors to the lecture hall opened, I bolstered my courage and approached Florinda. She was as I remembered her, extraordinarily *alive*. At five feet two, she probably weighed 100 pounds. She was as striking as ever—tiny-boned and muscular, with brilliant blue eyes and spiked, inch-high blonde hair. She looked like a punk pixie.

"Hi, Florinda, it's Amy Wallace, do you remem—"

"Amy!" She threw her arms around me and gave me a fierce, fleeting embrace.

"You look wonderful! Carlos will be so happy *I found you*."

"Why's your hair so short now, Flo?"

She grinned, flashing a movie-star smile. "I just returned from living with the Yanamomo tribe in the Amazon, and I got lice. I had to shave my head. Now, let me present you to my cohort. This is Carol Tiggs. She's the *nagual* woman."

She hastily explained to me what this meant—the *nagual* woman was the female equivalent of Carlos, his twin sister, so to speak, and a leader of their group. Carol burst into a ridiculous pseudo-rock song: "*nagual* wooomaan..." she warbled in a Joni Mitchell meets Robert Plant shriek.

Aside from this outburst, Carol was remote and mysterious, with a moody cast to her dark blue eyes. She spoke little, and she and Florinda seemed to be opposites, the sun and the moon. I took an immediate dislike to Carol, finding her cold and humorless apart from her pop song outburst. She appeared to lack the social graces that Carlos, Anna-Marie, and Florinda excelled in. She turned to me abruptly.

"Are you Irving Wallace's daughter?"

"Yes."

“I’ve heard about you.”

We sat together during the lecture. Florinda was audacious and saucy, offending many of her listeners by telling irreverent stories to promote her latest book, *Being-In-Dreaming*. Her first book, *Shabono*, was an account of her time among the Yanamomo Indians. It was accused of being plagiaristic: allegedly she had lifted her story directly from an Italian author’s published account, had “lost” her field notes (like Carlos), and had been denied her degree by UCLA. Her second book, *A Witch’s Dream*, was a poetic series of anecdotes about her apprenticeship to a traditional *curandera* in her native Venezuela. She was the child of two German émigrés, raised in Caracas. Like the other witches, she was not where she claimed to have been during her Castaneda years, though at the time I knew none of this.

Her speech tackled New-Agers and feminists alike as she explained the basic principles of sorcery. Her talk had an X-rated overtone; she was ironic, fanciful, and immensely charismatic. She spoke a mile a minute, like I did, but she was quicker and more daring. I felt intensely drawn to her.

She confided to the audience that her editor at Harper & Row had cut out “the real language of don Juan,” warning her, “You just can’t say that.” What she had wanted to say, she told us, was that don Juan explained the different routes to knowledge taken by the two sexes. “Men have this *pincho* that gets hard and points skyward, so they *cone* upwards toward the heavens—that’s how they receive their knowledge—by *coning* with their genitals. Women have a hole that is always open, pointing downwards toward the earth—we receive our awareness from the earth itself. Sexual organs *perceive*.”

“We women are always learning without noticing, it’s so natural for us. But men have to travel upwards, step by step, as if ascending a ladder. They are meticulous, and more sober-minded—which we are not. This is because they have to struggle in a way that we don’t. This is why the leader of our group, the *nagual*, is always a male. Men have sobriety, and women need that. I wanted don Juan to give me psychedelic drugs—I *begged him!*—but he refused, saying, ‘You women don’t need the power plants, you’re already *there*.’ ” She

snapped her fingers. “It’s *nothing* for us to *dream*, to travel in other worlds—we’re simply too lazy to do it. And the social order entraps women, robbing them of time for exploration by tying them to bearing and raising children and babying a husband.

“We are slaves to men because of our indifference. And we take creativity for granted—we *make human beings*! Each time a woman gives birth, it leaves a hole in her energy body, which depletes her so that she falls behind in her race to freedom. I don’t recommend giving birth. Women fail to understand what the sorcerers know—that our wombs are *a second brain*, the womb has a double function! The more often we allow men entrance to our wombs, the more we damage this second brain.”

This information appeared to frazzle the audience. Questions were asked about menstruation and hysterectomies.

“The three days before a woman’s period is the prime moment for her *dreaming*—we can enter different worlds in our sleep like *nothing*! We can explore different layers of the onion, so to speak, and without any effort! We can even do this while awake. And we are so enslaved we label this PMS! The female sorcerers of our party do not suffer from menopause, as humans do. The sorcerer’s practices of movement and meditation prevent it. We control our menstrual periods with our *intent*. *Intent* is what sorcerers believe moves the universe. We don’t pray—that’s for beggars—instead we command *intent*. One of the witches in our group [I later learned this was Anna-Marie] didn’t enjoy her cycles, so she stopped them by choosing to. I like the feeling of release, so I prolong mine with the power of my *intent*.

“As for a woman without a womb, well, she must fight for freedom and knowledge just like a male, climbing the ladder step by step. It’s difficult, but it can be done. And if you have energetic holes from giving birth, you just have to run after freedom twice as hard.”

Someone asked if don Juan had sex. Florinda flushed and replied, “I can tell you *for a fact* that he did! *Believe me*. And he was ninety years old!”

Florinda then introduced Carol to the group as “the *nagual* woman” who had disappeared into Infinity—also referred to as “the Second Attention”—for ten years, body and all. It felt to Carol like a second, Florinda told us; she lost all sense of time.

“When Carol miraculously reappeared, jogging in her sweatsuit,” Florinda continued incongruously, “she opened the magical door that allowed me to be here tonight, the door that has allowed Carlos to begin giving public appearances.” I pictured the tabloid headline: “Woman Returns From Infinity Still Jogging, Sweatsuit Intact.” If absurdity could kill, I would be dead today.

After the lecture I watched a friend of mine, an avid Castaneda worshipper, corral Carol and ask her what ten years in another dimension had been like. I found her reaction shocking. She backed into a corner, stuttering and perspiring heavily. A crowd gathered around her.

“I ... uh ... I don’t remember.... I can’t, um ...”

She continued backing up until she hit a wall, then lowered her head like a trapped mule, pushed frantically through the crowd, stumbling as she went, until she reached safety at Florinda’s side. The crowd was puzzled by her anxiety to run from this question, and so was I.

Florinda, too, was surrounded by a crowd. But unlike Carol, she basked in the admiring attention, answering questions with charming flippancy, until Carol tugged on her shirtsleeve. A limo was waiting outside to take them to the airport. For some inexplicable, magical reason, they were in danger if they spent the night at the San Francisco hotel they had checked into that morning.

We hugged goodbye outside the lecture hall and exchanged telephone numbers. Florinda gave me a P.O. Box number, asking me to write and to send my books. Her manner indicated that our meeting was *very* significant and that we would most certainly speak soon. Carol, evidently still rattled by her questioners, waved a half-hearted goodbye.

I was thrilled by our reunion. I had always adored Florinda, but I’d forgotten her verve, her overwhelming energy. I found it seductive and wanted to renew our connection. There had been a

void since my father's death, and nothing seemed to assuage my sorrow, even my hours of *chi kung* meditation and the gratifying reception of my first novel, *Desire*.

Something was pulling me, something more than my loneliness. I believed it was a mysterious energy. I promptly read Florinda's new book, a lyrical, poignant account of her training by don Juan, Castaneda, and their "party of female sorcerers, led by my teacher, Big Florinda." I wrote to tell her I loved her book, and sent her my recently published first novel and my previous book, *The Prodigy*, the biography of a child genius.

She responded quickly with a phone call, saying that the books, especially the novel, had impressed her. Florinda was a true fiction reader, often devouring a book in a day. We planned to meet the next time I was in Los Angeles. She offhandedly remarked that as she and Carol were leaving San Francisco, they stopped by their hotel to collect a forgotten piece of luggage, and saw don Juan sitting in the lobby. They walked by without greeting him. I was shocked. Was this a ghost? What could it possibly mean? She shrugged off my questions and changed the subject, rambling on about the current fiction bestsellers.

I recovered myself enough to ask, "Do you still see Anna-Marie?"

She laughed. I assumed that meant yes. "Well, then please send her my regards. And who is this other woman I see advertised at Gaia Books next month, with a blurb on the back jacket from Carlos ... Taisha Abelar?"

Florinda howled with laughter. "Anna-Marie is Taisha!"

"Oh! Well. I'll go see her. Can I still call her Annie?"

"Well, Amy, *you* can." Florinda had a delicious way of making everything sound like a secret. Then she shared another secret with me: my meeting and being liked by the *nagual* woman had been an event of great importance. Florinda expanded on Carol's bodily disappearance into an alternate reality.

"Carlos, Taisha, and I almost *died* when Carol left—we teetered on the edge of evaporation! *She*, the *nagual* woman, is Carlos' energetic sister. She was supposed to be a glowing beacon, shining her light to lead us to the other side. But we couldn't find her, not even in our

dreams. We were devastated, struggling to survive. When Carlos saw her jogging he tried to chase her, but she got away. A few weeks later, boom!—Carlos saw her face in the audience while giving a lecture at the Phoenix Bookstore in Santa Monica. Oh, *he'll* tell you all about it! His heart pounded like crazy! He could barely speak.

“Amy, she had *total amnesia* about her experience! *Gone from the world for ten years! Disappeared!* All she remembers is waking up in Arizona, wandering around, and noticing the buildings were taller. She said she dug up buried stashes of money don Juan had told her to hide.... Well, this was the omen! It meant we could go public, after twenty years of hiding! Castaneda could speak to his readers, and could tell the world about *the three of us*—we have been his biggest secret for twenty years! That’s why I wrote my book about don Juan’s training—a woman’s way is a different path, and then, Taisha’s training was completely different from mine.

“And now we’ve found *you*, Amy—the omen is—well, *he'll* be the one to tell you. I can’t say too much. We don’t *cross-reference* in our world—it’s just an excuse to be human, to gossip, to lose energy, to be typical human beings. *He'll* tell you what it all means. And your beautiful novel ... you are *exactly* like me, a *dreamer*—good novelists are always dreamers.”

I searched my mind for the meaning of *dreaming* in Carlos’ books, but I hadn’t read them in years. “What does it mean, Flo, to be a *dreamer*?”

“There are two kinds of sorcerers, Amy—*stalkers* and *dreamers*. That’s in all Carlos’ books. We *dreamers* enter other worlds like *nothing*—we enter through a hatchway in our dreams, and finally, when the ego is dead, we are so fluid there is no difference between *dreaming* and our waking state. That’s what my book is about—*dreaming awake*. It’s not the same as ‘lucid dreaming.’ That’s nothing, not the real thing. We found hatchways, *gates*, to other worlds.”

“And *stalkers*?”

“Taisha is the consummate *stalker*. When a true *stalker* becomes free of ego, he or she assumes different personalities; none are more

real than another. A *stalker* lives them in ‘the Theatre of the Real,’ with total abandon. It’s no game—it’s life or death to assume these roles. Taisha will talk about it during her lecture.

“*Stalking* is one way to grasp that there is no ‘me.’ *I* don’t exist. Carlos tells us, ‘We’re all nothing but bags of stories.’ Stories which are critical to tell, it’s *essential* that we put our cards on the table—not stories to elicit pity or embellish the ego. *Stalkers* use the world of daily life as a battleground, because the battle against the ego is never-ending. I remember what don Juan said to me, and I’ll tell it to you, Amy. Please *listen, carajo!*—it’s the truth, but none of us want to hear it! Don Juan said, ‘Florindita, think of your ego as a big, furry, lazy dog. Tell it to go lie out on the back porch. Step around it, because you can never kill it. The ego is a hydra with a thousand heads. Step around the tired, old dog on the porch.’ Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes, I think so....”

“*Ciao, mi amor.* We’ll talk again soon! Call me!”

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Bats

I am half inclined to think we are all ghosts, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers that exists again in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs.... They are not actually alive in us; but they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. There must be ghosts all over the world. They must be as countless as grains of the sands, it seems to me. And we are so miserably afraid of the light, all of us....

—Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*

A week later I had an annoyance in my house. Bats lived in the rafters of my woodsy palace, and now and then got inside. My cats chased them feverishly, occasionally devouring them. It is very difficult to remove a bat, and I no longer had a handy husband to do bat catching. I called the city Health Department, and they dispatched their bat man.

In the midst of this commotion the phone rang. It was Florinda.

In hushed, urgent tones she said, “Carlos wants to speak to you.”

“Oh, great! Yes.”

Carlos was on the phone.

“*Hola*, Amy, I’m so sorry about your daddy! Flo just told me that he died a year ago—I didn’t know, I was in Timbuktu. Ay! How are you?”

“Fine. Um ... excuse me, at the moment there’s a bat in the house and—”

“Do you want me to call you back?”

Alarm bells went off in my head. I knew if I got off the phone now he would never call back.

“No, no.” The doorbell rang. It was the bat-catcher, a man with a net and a jar. I waved him in.

“*Guide the bat out, Amy,*” said Carlos, as if imparting a military secret. “*Guide it out.*”

I laughed. “You’re Carlos Castaneda,” I said, “you guide it out!”

While the bat was being dispatched, Carlos grew even more intense.

“Amy, it’s incredible that Flo found you when she did. I’ve been trying to reach you! What I have to tell you will sound ridiculous, but try to suspend your normal judgment, and please hear me out. Please listen. This is of the utmost importance. *You, only you,* have the intelligence to grasp the metaphor. The rest of them....” He made a contemptuous noise, apparently to encompass his small group of disciples. I had learned from Florinda that he had about a dozen apprentices in Los Angeles, and possibly others in Mexico, for she was unclear about this.

“*They* are not capable. They don’t understand that we are like chickens, trapped in a coop, and something alien is *eating* us ... yes, we’re FOOD! Why not? Suspend your judgment. This is a predatorial universe, and we are being eaten. Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“Sorcerers have two sayings. One concerns an academic who went into the Amazon to ‘observe the natives’—when they tried to *eat* him, he wrote, ‘For a moment, anthropology was forgotten!’

“Amy, something is eating *us*, so I’m telling you—forget anthropology!

“The other saying I took from a headline in *Esquire*, a story about Lee Marvin. You remember Lee Marvin, don’t you? *The Caine Mutiny? The Dirty Dozen?* Anyway, the title was ‘Lee Marvin is Scared!’ Whenever I enter other worlds, *bona fide other worlds*, believe me, *chica, Lee Marvin is scared!* Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“A month ago I was in *dreaming* when I *encountered Irving*. He was *trapped*—in some kind of crawling ivy, in brambles, like a prison. I

approached him, trying to free him. He pushed me away. ‘No! No! Don’t come any closer. *Just take care of my daughter. Promise me. Take care of my Amy. She’s in trouble!*’ ”

“Carlos, what does that mean? What kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Well, what about my brother? Is he in trouble? Did my dad mention him?”

“No, no, just you. And now his ghost is haunting their house, where your mother lives.”

“His *ghost*?”

The bat-catcher was at the door of my study. He triumphantly displayed a flailing bat in a jar. I smiled and waved my thanks.

“Well, Carlos, what should we do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we should go to the house and try to get rid of the ghost.”

At first I was skeptical, but my fear that my father was suffering overcame my doubts.

“Okay, okay,” I said. “When my mother’s not home. I’ll be in L.A. in two weeks.”

“Ah! Wonderful! We’ll meet then. Call Flo when you arrive. Excellent. *Adiós*. And Amy—*one more thing*. LISTEN. Listen carefully. I said it once, I will repeat it. You, Amy Wallace, *only you, have the intelligence to understand the metaphor*. You are the *only one*. Never forget what I just told you. Everything depends on it. Goodbye.”

Irving Wallace was talking to Carlos Castaneda from beyond the grave. And I was in some kind of awful trouble. I tried to stay skeptical, but it didn’t work—Lee Marvin was scared.

The Next Reunion

Faith may be defined briefly as an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.

—H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices*

I would see Carlos in two weeks, and we would resolve the mystery of my father's ghost. In the interim, Anna-Marie—a.k.a. Taisha Abelar—came to Gaia Books to promote her first publication, *The Sorcerers' Crossing—A Woman's Journey*, an account of her training with don Juan, and then with Castaneda.

I found her in the bookstore, accompanied by Carol Tiggs. She was by nature less effusive than Florinda, but her gentle embrace was welcoming. She had cut off her waist-length hair and now wore it boyishly short—otherwise she looked much the same, with her delicate features and conservative, elegant clothes.

Taisha spoke in the small bookstore to a crowd that overflowed out the door. She opened her lecture by saying, "Good evening, my name is Taisha Abelar. I must always state it for sorceric purposes. I have many names, just as Carlos Castaneda has many names. Each of his three disciples—Florinda Donner, Carol Tiggs, and myself—knew don Juan by a different name, because he was a many-sided being. We were each taught according to our proclivities, trained individually by a large group of witches and *brujos*, or shamans. Since we have little time left in this world, we can no longer teach in that way. Carlos Castaneda is the last of his line, and he has no apprentices, there is no group. And as some of you know from his books, there are no volunteers in the sorcerer's world. Omens point

out an apprentice [hadn't she just said there were no apprentices?] to a *nagual*, and then he must trick them into joining him. Or, because Carlos Castaneda is 'the *nagual* of freedom,' any being who is brought to him must give their word of agreement, which the Spirit will heed. But that guarantees nothing—it is a terrible fight every step of the way not to fall—'falling' is the word sorcerers use for a slip backwards into human behavior.

"By appearing here before you tonight I am paying my debt to the Spirit by sharing don Juan's knowledge in the only way possible. This is my first speech. I was very nervous about it and prepared extensive notes, which I showed to Carlos Castaneda, whom we address as the *nagual*—a Nahuatl word that represents 'the unknown.' The *nagual* took my typewritten pages—a whole sheaf of pages!—and tore them to shreds, telling me to speak whatever words came to me. He said I didn't need notes."

She went on to tell us her stories of *stalking*, which she called "the Theatre of the Real"—tales in which she disguised herself and lived under an assumed identity for years at a time, in order to lose what the sorcerers told her was her worst trait: self-pity.

Taisha claimed to have variously disguised herself as a male in a Buddhist monastery and a *gringo* in Mexico named Ricky, a foul-mouthed, petty thief. In the latter role, she said she inserted an artificial penis under her clothes and learned to swear "like a man" and seduce women.

Next Taisha lived in a tree house, only climbing down to go to the bathroom. Her food was hoisted up on a pulley, and she had no human communication. During this two-year phase she was known to her teachers as "Ape-Girl."

Directly after, to promote cognitive dissonance, she became a pampered, beautiful debutante with long golden hair and satin gowns, paraded around the square of a small Mexican town by her *duenas*—her "aunties"—who were in fact don Juan's Mexican students. In this role she fell in love with a deranged poet, knocked him out, tied him up, and hoisted him into a tree house in order to cure him of his "tragic humanity." It had worked for her, she reasoned, and now she could save the man she loved. The sorcerers

worried that she had gone too deeply into this role, so they threw a bucket of water over her head and quickly transferred her to yet another “personality.”

Now she was the beggar Alphonsina, dressed in rags, covered in grime and filth, bitten by fleas. She lived in a shack in a small town with a motherly woman who didn’t know her true identity. Alphonsina held out her hand for alms in front of the local church, and Taisha told us that until she had “truly conquered self-pity,” there would be no rescue for her. The sorcerers would leave her to die, if that was her fate.

Taisha stressed that don Juan and his group “had no pity” for themselves or others. If she didn’t have a warrior’s “guts of steel” and wound up starving in the street from hunger and exposure—then “so be it.” Itching from lice, she brought her few pennies home each day to the woman who fed her. This woman was so loving that Taisha began to feel “true affection for the first time in my life—I would have died for her.” The depth of her feeling guided her out of her chronic self-concern, and produced the omen necessary to free her from her daily misery.

One day Alphonsina was taken home by a wealthy socialite who took pity on her, bathed and fed her, and prepared to dress her in clean clothes—a skirt and a cashmere sweater. When the woman saw that the beggar-girl was white beneath the grime, she was flabbergasted. Her kindness broke the last vestige of Taisha’s “humanity,” and again showed her what true affection was. She returned to don Juan.

Taisha was a storyteller on par with Carlos; her specialty was making her listeners cry. I remembered the night we had met, and how she had held me spellbound with her tales.

Now she took questions. A visibly tormented man, filthy and wild-eyed, pushed his way through the crowd to ask, “What if you’re not *trying* to have visions? Me, I can’t *stop* having them. I see things, beings, shadows ... what can I do? I’m not normal.”

“Get a job as an accountant,” Taisha suggested. This was not mockery, but sincere advice. “Or a bank teller.”

Taisha then lightened the mood by laughing and saying, “Whenever Florinda lectures, at least one woman in the audience wants a divorce!” This led to questions about love and sex.

Taisha told us that “a passionate kiss or holding hands with great feeling, great longing, can have more energy in it than intercourse” and advised us not to listen to love songs. These, she explained, were propaganda for “the social order,” leading one to desire courtship, ending in the prison sentence of marriage. Even fantasizing about an actor or a rock star could stall one’s movement toward freedom, she warned, wasting the valuable energy sorcerers must conserve for *dreaming* and *stalking*.

She closed her lecture by speaking of “The Selector.” She compared The Selector to the Spirit, which Carlos had described to me as “the force that ordered the universe.” Taisha’s description of The Selector frightened me. It reminded me of my childhood image of God—an angry man with a beard in the sky who looked down and judged my actions, a malevolent Santa Claus. Taisha described The Selector as “a needle that points down at us and controls the focus of our awareness.”

“We don’t know why or how The Selector moves—all we can do is acquiesce and act under its terrible, implacable pressure. I had tasks chosen for me by The Selector. Let me show you one last persona.” Taisha put on a wig and eye-glasses. “Now I am Sheila Waters, a businesswoman. I made and lost fortunes. Sheila Waters was pointed out to me by The Selector.” Taisha, as Sheila Waters, played the stock market and invested an enormous sum of money in real estate next to Mount St. Helens. When the volcano blew, a fortune was lost. Her next task, ordained by The Selector, was to become a real estate agent. A severe punishment, I imagined.

After the lecture I accompanied Taisha and Carol to a local restaurant. At dinner I was adjusting to the unusual nomenclature—witches—and I noticed that unlike Florinda, the others referred to Carlos as *the nagual*. I couldn’t join them—he was still Carlos to me, and it sounded like they were addressing the Pope. Part of me felt as though I were being drawn into a trap, but another part of me was

intrigued. And ultimately I felt as though Carlos would always protect me from any harm.

The conversation turned to astrology, which Carol believed in. I brought up a system of personality typing, the Enneagram, which originated in Sufi tradition and was expanded by the philosopher and mystic G.I. Gurdjieff, whose notoriously tough teaching methods were similar to don Juan's. Carlos, I knew, was acquainted with pupils from Gurdjieff's lineage, Claudio Naranjo and Oscar Ichaza. Kathleen Speeth, a therapist who had popularized Enneagram studies in America, knew Carlos and cited him on the first page of her book, *The Gurdjieff Work*. When I introduced the subject, Carol blew up.

"Didn't you understand anything tonight?! It's all a big mystery, a *question mark*—that was the WHOLE point! And now you're making categories!"

The conversation floundered after this outburst. Years later Carol told me that Carlos forbade her to take a class or otherwise pursue her deep interest in the Enneagram.

I invited the witches to my house, a ten-minute walk from the restaurant. They accepted, again declining my offer to spend the night. The tour was awkward. They treated my cats with disgust, although Taisha complimented the fish tank. Carol said little until she noticed a row of autographed letters framed with photographs, lining the wall of the master staircase. These were gifts from my parents: letters by Marcel Proust, Oscar Wilde, and Charles Baudelaire, all favorite authors of mine.

Carol sneered. "How disgusting—look who you admire—*men*." Proust particularly irritated her. "You have to get rid of them," she commanded.

I felt simultaneously rebellious and intimidated. Intimidation won. I began making mental plans to sell the autographs. After all, this was the *nagual* woman talking—the female Castaneda.

Soon thereafter both Florinda and Taisha returned to Gaia Books, so great was the demand for their lectures. Larger halls were rented.

Florinda was again accompanied by Carol, and by two disciples. I was introduced to Dorothy, a tense brunette, and her sneering companion, Tarina.

Florinda was as warm as ever, but there was a note of discord when I introduced her and Carol to one of my closest girlfriends, who loved Castaneda's and the women's books. They took me aside and whispered that she was overweight and badly dressed, exclaiming, "*That's* your friend? Are you kidding?"

I was hurt and angry with myself. They had dissed a close friend of mine on superficial grounds, and I had given a meek defense.

Taking me aside, Florinda grimaced and pointed to Dorothy. "See that one? She thinks she's Carlos' fiancée! Can you imagine such a delusion?"

The two girls cut me viciously. Tarina went so far as to get up in the middle of a sentence, as I addressed her, and head for the bathroom. Ingenuous, I joined her, and she locked herself in a stall ignoring a question I asked. I waited a long time at the sink for her to emerge (she must have been hoping I'd leave), then attempted to pick up our conversation. She walked ahead of me to get away.

Reentering the hall, I observed Dorothy threatening a man with a camera. "If you don't get rid of that *right now*, we'll just have to take it away!"

He stared at her, bewildered, then turned to me and asked, "I didn't know you couldn't take pictures. Why couldn't she just tell me politely? Do you have any idea what's wrong with these people? They're so full of themselves!" He turned back to Dorothy. "Why are you so rude? I would have been happy to—"

Dorothy turned and walked away.

Florinda made audacious remarks during her lecture, this time hinting that not only don Juan, but Carlos was sexually active, although in his books he claimed to be practicing celibacy at don Juan's insistence. This was puzzling. After Florinda's previous lecture an audience member had asked if Carlos had sex. Florinda had flushed and replied, "I certainly *hope* not!"

Once again she announced to the audience that “Carol Tiggs, the *nagual* woman, is here with us. She contains a mysterious being, the Death Defier, a creature who has lived for thousands of years in the bodies of sorcerers.” It was *très Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

Florinda caused further unrest by saying, “We believe that don Juan is lost in Infinity, in the Second Attention.” Startled exclamations rippled through the audience as she continued, “... trapped in what we call ‘a layer of the onion.’ We are trying to gain enough energy, enough *mass*, to boost him to freedom; and we search for him in *dreaming*. We’re hoping that the collective intent in this room will help us.”

This was breathtaking news for Castaneda’s readers, who believed that don Juan had achieved the ultimate liberation described in the books.

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My Reunion with Carlos

Innocence has nothing to dread.

—Jean Racine, *Phedre*

Events unfolded in rapid succession as Florinda and I spoke frequently. She continued to praise my writing, bursting with encouragement.

She revealed that Carlos no longer read in the conventional way, instead “storing great quantities of knowledge by sleeping on books, or under them.” His abdomen was for “heavy texts,” and he read the newspaper through his feet. She claimed that she and Carol had snuck into his room at night and “put a *Playboy* on his *pincho*, but he didn’t even get an erection!”

We talked about politics, literature in general, and “spirituality.” Florinda had little use for any beliefs but those of the sorcerers, yet was fascinated by philosophy, phenomenology in particular. She spoke admiringly of Husserl but said, “He didn’t live his theories. Only we do that.”

Only rarely did Florinda share her secret rituals. She mocked ritual in general, saying, “Amy, I could tell you to twirl around your house three times backwards, but that’s crap. Change is *abstract*. One day, *boom!*—when *you’re not watching for it*, not asking, ‘Have I changed yet? Am I better?’—the scales will tip and you’ll no longer be human.”

Sometimes she changed her tune. For example, she taught me an exercise that she called “a magical pass,” taught to her by don Juan.

“I do it when I want to strengthen my will,” she explained. “Go outside during a full moon, reach behind your back, and rub your kidneys with your knuckles, saying ‘intento’ loudly, three times. Let your tongue tap the palate on the ‘t’ sounds. Sorcerers *command* intent,” she reminded me. “We never pray. That’s for beggars, and it doesn’t work.”

Carlos and Florinda often quoted don Juan as saying, “Why do I repeat myself so often? Because one of us is senile, and it isn’t me!”

During one such conversation, she casually remarked, “You really should sleep with Carlos, Amy. You’d love it—he’s great! He can go on forever.”

I was shocked and embarrassed.

“Florinda, he’s a little too old for me. I think of him more as a daddy figure, you know?”

“Okay, forget it. But imagine how *I* felt—I was nineteen when I met don Juan, a ninety-year-old man! I thought, ‘Who am I, young and beautiful, giving myself to this old leech?’ But I was insane with self-importance, I didn’t understand—I thought *I* was doing *him* the favor! And then there was Juan Tuma—”

“I don’t remember him from the books.”

“He was part of don Juan’s party. He was a *gorgeous* Indian, six feet tall, *beautiful*! I propositioned him, because hey, I needed a little something more, right? I’m young and healthy ... And he took out his huge erection, right on the spot, and said, ‘Girlie, I use this for *dreaming*, for navigating the sea of awareness. Not for fucking.’ I was offended like you wouldn’t believe!... But consider having sex with the *nagual*, sometime, Amy. Consider it—you’d be surprised!”

I pondered her bizarre suggestion. Carlos was at least sixty-five, possibly closer to seventy. My love affairs and my marriage had all been with men close to my age. And Carlos! Sweet, pudgy Carlos—impossible. What’s more, her sales pitch, “He can go on forever,” was awful. I didn’t like men to go on forever. The whole suggestion, its casualness included, seemed weirdly calculated. She was appealing to what she thought would hook me—sexual adventuring,

the lure of what she considered great sex. This was the first hint of what was later to appear as a huge difference between us—my romantic nature, the vein that ran through all my experiences, as opposed to her lusty, uninvolved attitude. I wasn't looking for marathon sex, even in the form of one of the most fascinating and mysterious men in the world. I was searching for a lifelong partner.

Increasing the cognitive dissonance of our conversation was what I had just read in her new book—that she and Carlos continued to practice celibacy! He had been telling his readers this for years, maintaining that abstinence was the way to gather energy for *dreaming*, and to destroy our programming to mate. And now she was endorsing casual sex ... curiouser and curiouser.

On my next trip to Los Angeles, the witches picked me up one evening since I didn't drive, escorting me to Carlos' class. It had been three months since my reunion with Florinda.

My reunion with Carlos occurred outside a dance studio in Santa Monica where he taught a thrice-weekly martial arts class *cum* lecture to the dozen or so members of his inner circle, the "group" that supposedly didn't exist. On the way Florinda extolled the virtues of one of the apprentices, Andy Horowitz, an up-and-coming theatre producer, and a popular wag-about-town. The women's insistence that we meet made me nervous. I supposed it was because we were both in the entertainment business; yet they were preoccupied with his physical appearance.

"He only wears white," said Taisha. "And, *he lets his eyebrow hairs grow—THIS LONG!*" They giggled like schoolgirls, as if Andy had a deformity—their laughter embarrassed me.

A few people stood on the sidewalk, waiting for a fetid aerobics class to clear out. And there was Andy, dressed in expensive white sweats—with a greying crewcut and moustache. A three-day beard highlighted a strong jaw. And yes, indeed—it was difficult not to stare at his eyebrows. Stray hairs grew a full inch, drooping onto his glasses. What did it mean? Did people ever ask him? What was he trying to say by drawing attention to himself in this way? It was

unsettling, unlike the *de rigueur* abstract tattoo that ran up his wrist to his forearm. That was pure L.A. The eyebrows were something else—a parading of bad grooming. Overall, his look bespoke Hollywood—hardly my notion of a student of the magical arts.

I was cheerful, but I seemed to scare him. Everyone, in fact, seemed nervous and remote. The female students, arriving in pairs or threesomes, were cold and unfriendly. The two I had met at Florinda’s lecture did not greet me. I caught Dorothy sneaking looks at me, and openly frowning.

Only two male students were present: Andy and his quiet friend Rick Fosterman, who rarely left his side. I thought perhaps they were a couple, not yet knowing that while Carlos was pro-lesbian he was ravingly homophobic, and that *no* couples were allowed into the inner circle. Rick served as a business manager for Carlos, and had become his agent after Ned Brown.

The dozen women all had chic, very short hair, cut exclusively by Carlos. They dressed asexually and had a forbidding, humorless look, quite unlike that of Carlos and the witches. Only two students were affable—a middle-aged, heavy-set Mexican woman named Alice; and Zuna, a timid, mild-mannered girl with the air of a librarian.

Carlos appeared on the street, and for the first time, our greeting was awkward. I felt a sense of pressure to act “correctly,” though I hadn’t a notion what “correct” was—and pressure was something I’d never associated with Carlos before.

He was much changed—a good forty pounds thinner, his black hair now gray. And for the first time, I found him handsome, though I didn’t know exactly why. Perhaps, so soon after my father’s death, I was unconsciously looking for a man to replace him in my life. The brown eyes were as luminous as ever, highlighted by now visible cheekbones. Florinda eyed us, bemused. She poked Carlos, chuckling, “At last! Someone your own size!” The other women looked away.

Class commenced. It was terrifying. After ten minutes of simple, kung-fu warm-up exercises, Carlos spoke. He announced that Carol had lost her set of a group-member’s house-keys, keys to the

apartment of a woman they referred to as Claude, their daughter. I was startled to learn that Carlos and Carol had a thirty-year-old child!

Carlos was carrying on: “This is *intolerable*, to have lost the keys! Unthinkable. For a sorceress? For *Carol*, the *nagual* woman?” She stood frozen while Carlos railed.

“We could all die because of this! If she lost our daughter’s house key, Claude might have *flown away into the unknown*, destroying us all! We’d all be *finished*! Kaput!! But *Amy Wallace* is here. We’re only here tonight because of *Amy Wallace*. Because of her, we may still have a chance.” I was impossibly flummoxed—I felt like Alice fallen down the rabbit hole.

We proceeded to do martial arts-style movements in silence. Carol had explained to me that these magical passes were not mere martial arts. They were handed down from *nagual* to *nagual* in magical *dreaming*. Carlos also called them “Tensegrity passes.” The term “Tensegrity” was in fact coined by Buckminster Fuller, and related to structural tension in architecture. After class Carol brought up Fuller’s claim, refuting it insistently. “Fuller has nothing to do with it. It’s a real word, it’s in the *dictionary*.” I later heard that Fuller, just prior to his death, had legally disputed Castaneda’s appropriation of the term. The matter was never settled.

Some weeks later, I was reintroduced to Zuna and her cousin Poona, a quiet, severe-faced brunette. Poona maintained a soldier’s bearing, standing perfectly erect, her expression martial but not unfriendly. It was my strong and immediate impression that “the little cousins,” as they were called, loathed one another. Carlos explained that they were not blood cousins; rather, their link was “energetic,” part of what Carlos liked to call his “incestuous Freud Family.”

Carlos’ current agent, Rick, ran a small office employing members of the group chosen by Carlos; the company was named Toltec Artists. The “cousins” were paired as roommates and officemates, to

practice being one another's "petty tyrants," a technique that was said to improve patience and tolerance.

Carlos lectured to us that worldly love was "mercantile" and "needy," and sorcerers were different because they gave their love "for free." "In *the world*," he said with contempt, "we cut off one head and replace it with another, saying, 'Oh, this time I'm *really* in love! I was wrong before—that wasn't *the real thing*!' We sorcerers love forever, never replacing someone with a better version." I was quite taken with this philosophy, which reminded me of the spirit of my favorite play, Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing*.

The "cousins" were given a special magical pass to master, a long piece of elegant teamwork called "The Pass of Affection," to help them learn how to love. They performed it in our classes, they performed it on stage in front of a thousand people, they performed it nude at a sorcery party for the *cogniscenti*; but I never saw their relations improve. Perhaps it was succeeding at a level beyond my awareness.

On the way home from the first class with the witches I spoke up immediately.

"What the hell was that all about, Carol, that business with the keys? Wasn't that a little *harsh*?"

Florinda's pixie face sharpened. She spoke for Carol.

"No! No, Amy, no. That was not human, that was a *very powerful* sorcery technique. If you view this kind of talk from the world's point of view, it's abuse. As sorcerers, we use it as a magical method for destroying our self-importance. You have to make a choice." I turned back to Carol.

"Well, what *would* you have done if I hadn't been there?"

"Turned my face to the wall. Turned and walked away, until I died."

I couldn't stop my revolving thoughts: would they die because someone could break into the house? Was the sorcery technique

verbal abuse? Would Carol really commit suicide? How would she die? Would she disappear again? I was profoundly disturbed. This was not exactly Up With People. They probably used *A Course In Miracles* as toilet paper. Indeed, as Carlos wrote, upon giving his first book to don Juan, the shaman replied, “You know what we do with paper in Mexico.”

Also, so strong was the impact of Castaneda’s don Juan legend that I seemed unconsciously to accept Carlos’ role as the fool in need of obliteration and transformation. I made Carlos into my own don Juan and bonded with him by becoming his pupil, as Carlos purportedly had with his mentor. This was my unstated training. Surprisingly, Carlos seemed to have forgotten his insistence that we exorcise my father’s ghost from the family home.

At the next class the witches presented me with my first two magical objects. They handed me the first colorful bag, and I happily exclaimed, “Thank you! I love presents!” Carol frowned and said, “It’s not a present.” Looking inside I found an aluminum-based antiperspirant rock, the latest New Age fad, since revealed to be toxic. (Carlos later handed out the more benign Tom’s Deodorant.) It evolved that Carlos had an obsession with body odor, and everyone was expected to use identical products. Carlos had decided that I, in particular, sweated heavily, yet was forbidden to bathe. I pretended to be pleased with The Rock.

The second bag contained a fresh heap of rosemary cuttings. The witches explained that Carlos had cut it just for me from a gigantic plant outside his door, imbued with magic because it had grown from a cutting given to him by don Juan. I was told to boil it down to a strong decoction and let it cool to body temperature. Then I was to pour it into a small plastic tub and bathe my genitals in it for five minutes, three times a week. I was not to immerse my whole body, which was considered draining.

These five-minute baths were to remove from my womb the “energetic worms” that had been implanted in me by every lover I’d ever had. These “worms,” described in distressing detail in Taisha’s book, remained in a woman’s body indefinitely, allowing her ex-lovers to vampirically sap her energy, leaving her in a depleted fog.

The witches assured me that seven years of celibacy, with rosemary, would restore my vitality.

Looking up rosemary in several herbals I discovered that it was a supremely cleansing plant for the female organs, and when used in the way Carlos and his Castanettes (as I had privately named them) recommended, fought infection and maintained a healthy environment for the womb.

During the next few weeks I attended more classes and met the core group of apprentices. One evening Carlos took me out for pizza before class, and we spoke of casual matters. He made me laugh as he had done in the past. Fascinated by the witches' sighting of don Juan in a San Francisco hotel, I brought the subject up. Carlos' brow furrowed.

"Ah, we are afraid that don Juan did not arrive at freedom! That he is *stuck* in one of the countless layers of the onion." His expressive face became the picture of despondency. He shook his head. "I saw *don Juan, nena*, I saw him in *dreaming*."

"What did you say? Did you talk to don Juan?"

Carlos cast me a withering look. "What do you think this is, Amy?! A *package tour*?" He snorted. "*Talk* to him?!" It was the first time in twenty years that Carlos had been sarcastic with me. I drew back, stung. Then he took my hand and twined his fingers between mine. He gave an indulgent smile.

"You're new to this. It's better that you don't read my books—*pucha!* The bible-readers who memorize chapter and verse! No, no, no. *Feel* sorcery with your body. Besides, you're from another time, Amy—a time when the sorcerers relied on elaborate tricks to seduce those disciples delivered by Spirit. Give up your expectations."

Entering the studio five minutes late, arm-in-arm, I was alarmed at the ferocity with which most of the women, the witches excepted, regarded me. It was an uncivil, ill-mannered group—markedly different from Carlos, Florinda, and Taisha.

As I prepared to return home—I commuted between cities as my brother and I worked on a new *Book of Lists*—Florinda called with a surprise, an invitation to stay in their Westwood house with her, Taisha, and Carlos.

The invitation to live at the witches' house posed difficulties. Since Carlos and the witches' phone numbers were kept secret, how would anyone from my office reach me? These were the days before cell phones, and I was managing an in-house office, overseeing a staff of a dozen researchers and editors. I was on call, and I didn't drive. It seemed impractical to move, so I declined. I looked forward to seeing the magic house at another time.

Little did I know that my decision was viewed by the sorcerers as a serious mistake. Due to a slight chill in their manners, I soon suspected the truth. I changed my mind, asking Florinda if the invitation still held. It did not. Invitations in their magical world were only good for a split second, for "the cubic centimeter of chance" that Carlos had made famous in his books; and one had to jump to meet them. I had failed to cross the threshold of the magical door that had opened to me, and would offer entrance into the inner circle.

It was not long before I observed that highly ranked members of the group—which I increasingly saw was run on a traditional, authoritarian model—were exempt from punishment and had special privileges, while the "bad" apprentices, even when following rules to the letter, could be sent to the back of the class for chewing gum. Carlos and the "chosen" chewed gum along with him in the front. Members were expelled if they displeased a higher-up, as in any highly structured group. But though the veil would soon be lifted, I was still happy in my ignorance, and so I returned to Berkeley for a week, ignorant of my error.

I Meet an Alien

*Always fall in with what you're asked to accept.
Take what is given, and make it over your way.
My aim in life has always been to hold my own
with whatever's going. Not against: with.*

—Robert Frost

On my next visit to Los Angeles Carlos was anxious for me to meet his “daughter.” *The Art of Dreaming*, Carlos’ soon-to-be-published manuscript, explained her alien origins. Carlos described Claude as “an inorganic being,” expounding at length on her freedom from lowly human traits. He gave me a photocopy of the text, saying, “Be careful! This is the only one *in existence!* I dug it up, it was *buried* in the Second Attention—the witches and I had to hunt for it in *dreaming!* It’s *steeped* in another world, Amy. Read it overnight—I need your editorial suggestions *now.*”

The Art of Dreaming moved me the least of Carlos’ books and was in desperate need of copyediting. It read like heavy-handed science fiction, with Carlos moving through spongy tunnels into other worlds in *dreaming*, ever in peril of not finding his way back to his sleeping body. In spite of this Buck Rogers action, the book was rather dry, lacking the wonderful dialogue with don Juan that had made the early books so enchanting. Don Juan made some appearances but now spoke as if he were a tiresome academic.

I slogged on, finally arriving at Carol Tiggs’ introduction to the story—Carlos had instructed me to take especial note of this.

Though the writing remained labored, at last the subject matter intrigued me. Carlos did expand on what I'd learned about Carol and the Death Defier, revealing that this creature had lived for twenty-seven generations as man and woman, trading mystic favors for a body. But Castaneda refused favors from this most magical of all beings—a point he emphasized to me.

He said, "If you—or *anyone*—ever offers me *pity*, I'll spit in your eye! I'm the *nagual* of freedom, I live only to break your chains!"

On his dreaming tours Carlos claimed to have encountered a waif-like, blue-hued child, skinny and etheric, who called out to be freed from an astral dungeon where she had been a prisoner for time beyond measure. Carlos found her pleas irresistible and, in defiance of don Juan—for the task was dangerous—he resolved to save her.

The Death Defier mysteriously entered Carol Tiggs, supposedly merging forces, and together they saved the child. Back on the physical plane, a little girl was said to be born of Carlos and Carol's union. (Carlos referred to Carol as his "sister," further complicating matters.) The "Blue Scout" reportedly emerged from Carol's womb, a baby with adult characteristics such as freakishly long fingers. (This baby was now thirty years old.) The adventure nearly destroyed Castaneda, and "his cohorts" hovered over him as he hung between life and death.

The girl, though she had several names, was most commonly called Claude by her intimates. Carol, too, had a "power name," which was revealed to me with cloak-and-dagger excitement: she was Muni Alexander. In the ever-shifting stories, Claude was brought up by don Juan and companions (or, largely by little Florinda). Alternately, she was raised in orphanages and reclaimed by Carlos as a teenager.

Carol/Muni nursed Carlos back to health, still retaining the Death Defier. This "possession" raised a quandary for the sorcerers. Carlos was the last of the line, so what would become of the Death Defier? And what would happen to Claude, the alien spawn of two *naguals'* god-like loins?

From then on, when Carlos spoke to me of these matters, he no longer referred to “metaphors.” He now insisted on the literal truth of these tales—a dramatic change of tune. I was coming to believe that Claude (a.k.a. the Blue Scout) was indeed a superior creature. The power of Carlos’ repetition and my own spiritual seeking conspired to conquer my inclination to see his teachings as a metaphor.

Carlos spoke of Claude obsessively. “You should see my daughter *naked!* Wowie Zimbowie!” His incestuous ramblings made me uncomfortable. At all events, he was anxious for her and me to meet at the first opportunity. It was “*most important*,” he insisted, “you have no conception *how* important!”

We met at a Hamburger Hamlet. The party was made up of Florinda, Muni, Carlos, and Claude, who was tall, angular, and tense. Her face was pointy, her thin lips pouty; her graying hair jelled into spikey turrets. She bordered on anorexic thinness. She struck me as spoiled, yet her blue eyes twinkled and I optimistically hoped for lively conversation.

Carlos was fidgeting nervously. He rearranged the seating like a *maître d’* about to lose his job, until Claude was placed beside me. I began, “I’m glad we’re finally meeting—your reputation precedes you!”

Claude laughed modestly, and we began an avid conversation about travel in France. She loved Paris (Carlos *hated* it), and she was enchanted that I spoke French. She complimented my legs and raved about my career, though she hadn’t read my work. Public accolade appeared to impress her, and she considered me “famous,” alluding sadly to her own life as empty of achievement. She was clumsily flattering, as if she had a schoolgirl crush, or perhaps it was a test to see if I would puff up.

Carlos regaled us with a favorite yarn concerning Rod Steiger’s ego. A flood had devastated Malibu a few years previous, and according to Carlos, Steiger was found by television crews to be conspicuously lurking. Carlos said the actor made grandiose statements about “nature’s cycles,” proclaiming himself “Mr. Malibu” which Carlos found hilarious. When Muni added, “And

you're 'Mr. Westwood'!" Carlos' face darkened. She looked down at her hamburger, ashamed. In later years I saw this exchange a dozen times, always with the same result. They seemed the epitome of the long-married couple, trapped in sadomasochistic repetitions. Awkwardly, I returned to trivial chatter with Claude.

Then Carlos mentioned Dorothy, who apparently was Claude's sidekick. When Carlos, Florinda, and I had dined a few nights prior, Dorothy was a favorite object of ridicule, the butt of many of Carlos' cruelest jokes. When a pretty girl joined the group, Carlos often said, "Dorothy is in looove." And now, "she wants to eat my daughter's pussy!" He added contemptuously, "Dorothy thinks she's Castaneda's *novia*!" (He often spoke of himself in the third person.) I had not yet joined the group, so all these names and stories were both confusing and intriguing.

Now at the Hamburger Hamlet Carlos once again announced, "Dorothy wants to eat Muni's pussy!"

"Kinky!" I blurted. I was trying to imitate Carlos, to fit in, though I didn't consider lesbianism kinky.

Claude bristled. "It is *NOT* kinky!" she snarled.

"No, of course it's not," I recanted.

Returning to trivialities, we concluded our luncheon. Claude handed me a business card as we were parting. It read:

"Nury 'Claude' Alexander—
Finder
of Things Material
and Immaterial"

No explanation was offered.

Later, on the phone, Carlos exulted. I had passed a Big Test. I was puzzled—if Claude *was* supernatural, the proverbial divining rod, she was awfully unprepossessing.

"Does she have a boyfriend?" I queried.

"*Mierda! A boyfriend! No jodas! She despises men!*"

A Poisonous Lunch

The talk swept past Archer like some senseless river running and running because it did not know enough to stop ... and a deathly sense of the superiority of implication and analogy over direct action, and of silence over rash word, closed in on him like the doors of the family vault.

—Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

Returning to Berkeley I was reassured of my success with Claude. She sent letters and cutesy cards written in a sixth-grader's stilted hand, begging for my return, saying she couldn't live without me. I sent her a translation of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and a Sinead O'Connor tape. Preparing to return to Los Angeles, I selected gifts for the witches and Carlos.

Flo and the *nagual* (I was still adjusting to this reverent appellation) got the same book—a guide to profanity in five languages. Taisha would receive an arcane Taoist text for women, with instructions for circulating the womb's energy to create “the body of light,” what Carlos called the “double.” Carol's tastes eluded me; I decided on the Rilke.

For Claude I made an extra effort: With my mother's permission I selected my grandmother's watch and took it for repair. Alas, on my day of departure, the job wasn't finished. I wrote on her card that her *real* present was coming, and I attached the note to a tin of “Nury” tuna fillets, an obscure Spanish import I had never seen before (and never saw again).

Florinda chose her favorite restaurant, Trumps, for an elegant ladies' lunch. Only in Los Angeles, I thought, were there "witches who lunch." (On the same note, Florinda had once told me, "All those people out there accuse us of wearing Armani! Of course we deny it—but we really do.") They were to pick me up and, stepping into the car, I felt tension in the air. I was seated next to Claude, and we settled down to private conversation.

She said, "I *loved* that Sinead O'Connor album!"

"You liked it? I'm glad!"

She proceeded to render O'Connor's raunchiest lyric—the raciest line from the album. Claude sang, badly, "You fucked me so hard, there was blood on the wall," then tittered like a scandalized schoolgirl. It was staged; an obvious attempt at hazing. Don Juan had teased Carlos with far greater subtlety. I decided to challenge her.

"You like that, Claude? Rough sex, hmm? That can be fun. Now and then."

She flushed beet-red and began to stutter. "Well, *do* you like it?" I pressed.

She nodded frantically, evidently unable to speak. Fortunately, we had reached our destination. The venerable Scout emanated a frosty tension. She pressed her lips together tightly, her features seeming to sharpen. She reminded me of an agitated whippet.

Over lunch Florinda brought the conversation around to sex, as she often did. I told a story about an oddball party I had recently hosted. I was friends with some of the "edgy" feminist writers in the Bay Area—Susie Bright, now editor of the yearly anthology, *Best American Erotica*; Lisa Palac, who made a literary splash with her candid memoir, *Edge of the Bed*; and Laura Miller, now fiction editor of *Salon Magazine*.

Susie and Lisa came up with the idea for a ladies' *salon*—with a twist. The guests, all local poetesses, columnists, and novelists, were to be waited on by attractive nude men, who would give manicures and foot massages, brush our hair, and serve *hors d'oeuvres* while the writers read essays and poetry and sipped champagne.

What began as a lark grew into a phenomenon. I contributed what Laura called my “Byronic” house, the caterers, and the florist. Meanwhile the girls placed an advertisement in the *San Francisco Weekly*: “Seeking Naked Gentlemen to Provide Elegant Service at Ladies’ Salon; No Sex, No Salary.” We were *deluged* by entries. Out of the mass of hopefuls six men were selected, including a stockbroker, a real estate agent, and a surfer.

The event—a tongue-in-cheek play on Playboy Mansion galas—was a grand success. Literary women in glittering evening gowns, lacy corsets, tiaras and tuxedos fluttered down the hallways, plucking canapés from silver trays and reading from their works. Guests and gentlemen shared a delightful party.

Susie wrote an article about the *fête* which appeared on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s Sunday section, illustrated by R-rated photos taken by an eminent San Francisco photographer (who cheerfully disrobed). Susie’s piece was anthologized in a popular book of her essays, which contributed to the party’s cult fame, and appears on Lisa’s website, where requests to “serve” still pour in. We had inadvertently started a fad. Local imitations flowered, followed by parties around the country. Our gentlemen waiters pressed us to repeat the event; we received stacks of letters from local feminists and artists, asking to be invited to the next *salon*. Upon consideration, we declined to host another party, preferring to have achieved a perfect, elegant moment.

My story fell flat. Taisha made a dreadful effort to save the conversation by recounting one of her *stalking* roles as a real estate agent, during which she’d found “one of those *things*” (a buzzing vibrator) in a closet. She giggled, hiding her face with her fingers.

Finally I gave out the presents, which appeared to salvage the party. Muni graciously noted how much care had gone into each choice; Taisha said I had picked the *perfect* item for each of them. The only dark note came from a very petulant Claude—she wanted her present NOW! I promised her she had only two days to wait. She consoled herself with the “Nury” fish fillets, announcing it was a profound omen that I had found them, “since my father [Carlos] owns the company.”

At last I was taken home, quite certain that all was not well.

Within hours I received a hostile call from Carlos berating me for my self-centeredness, which I had revealed by “bragging about sex parties.” It was my first experience of his prudish streak, startling since he used ribaldry to shock and test, as had don Juan. Carlos grew so vicious that I began to cry. He hung up.

I called Florinda in tears, telling her that Carlos had been verbally abusive.

It was only abuse, she insisted, if I viewed Carlos’ attack from the human perspective, believing him to be a mere mortal. He was empty, egoless, he had no real feelings, she explained—moods and words flowed through him, perfect, “impeccable,” guided by an outside force. He was infallible. Besides, she said, they had *seen* today that I no longer belonged with them—it had all been a big mistake. My energy was red, the most pitifully human color, while theirs was blue, the most etheric and abstract. I was hopeless. I was never to call them again, she instructed—another teacher, a *kindly* master, would arrive soon, they *saw* it. Brusquely, Florinda got off the phone. (As a postscript, Trumps closed down soon after. Florinda blamed me for jinxing her favorite restaurant, insisting that my black magic, my “humanity,” had caused their financial ruin.)

Stunned, I called Muni, who breezily confirmed my fallen state.

I called Muni again at midnight. She said, “You’re waking me. I have to leave for the airport at six o’clock.” She hung up. I spent a fitful night, tossing between anger and tears, and called Muni again at 6:30 A.M. She answered, groggy with sleep.

“I thought you were going somewhere.”

“You upset me,” she whined. “I couldn’t sleep, and now I’ve missed my flight because of *you*. It’s your fault!” Again she hung up.

Muni was still there at 10:00 A.M., when she hung up at the sound of my voice.

“We’re in Business!”

*The day shall not be up so soon as I,
To try the fair adventure of tomorrow.*

—William Shakespeare, *King John*

After this fiasco I cried for hours, finally resigned to returning to Berkeley. I called my friend Sally to tell her the news. She had been my confidante throughout the increasing chaos, the dedicated “practitioner” whom the witches had met in Berkeley and sniffed at for not being young, thin, and well-dressed enough to meet their Hollywood Sorcery standards.

Sally was given to odd, sudden revelations once or twice a year—while she was gardening, for example; or brushing her teeth. She heard an uncanny voice that sent her unaccountable, invariably accurate messages offering strategic advice.

“Amy, I got one of those ... *intuitions*. It happened last night, while I was in the shower! *It’s for you*. Very short and direct. ‘It’ said: ‘If she just doesn’t say one word or put up any resistance, everything will be fine—and she *won’t* lose them.’ Amy, the voice says all you have to do is call Carlos in a little while, say goodbye, then let him do all the ranting and raving he wants. No protesting!—laugh if you have to. Everything will change *just like that!*” She snapped her fingers.

I called Carlos before he had time to change his phone number, a practice I soon learned was *de rigueur* when someone was bumped from the group. Before I could speak, he was ranting. “ABUSE? Now

you're *abused*? The witches told me! You're a professional crier! Sooooo self-important, so hurt! Do you think you're going to live forever, and everybody cares about poor baby you? *Coño! Carajo!* Freak of nature! *You're a whore!*"

He waited for that to sink in. Remembering Sally's advice, I laughed. "Well, I guess I missed my calling!"

There was a silence. Carlos' arrow hadn't hit home, so he tried with the opposite ploy. "So when are you going to stop buying your men? Aren't you a little *young* for that? When are you going to find a man who can pay for his own drinks? And you *scared* Muni, you *upset* her—you're so human, so *red*! We are not red beings—it's the most human color, the worst possible! We are blue. You're not our kind, not blue! This was a mistake, hopeless! Naked men!" he grumbled as an afterthought.

I remained silent, wondering how the *nagual*, the world's wisest being, could make an error of this magnitude.

"Are you *there*?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"Excellent. You're a whore," he went on, "milking your Daddy's death for attention! 'Oh, poor me, I miss Irving!' BULLSHIT. You've never loved yourself, how could you love Irving? And you *scared* Muni, my poor Muni, with your red fit! She's shaking over there, she can't even get out of her bed, you *hurt* her! You're spoiled rotten—born with a silver spoon—up your *culo*! Are you there?"

"Yes."

"The basis of sorcery is to leave the idea of 'me' behind—we don't have time for problems! Who can have a problem? *Death* is waiting for me. In my world, it's ten minutes to midnight! I have *no time*. In don Juan's day, you'd be kidnapped—you'd wake up and find yourself in a sack, in the back of a truck! But since I am the *nagual* of freedom ... no. You were given to me by Irving, as a duty—you're my duty and my beauty—but I *cannot insist*. *The warrior's world does not take volunteers*, Amy. If 'It' brings you to me—if Irving comes to me—I can't say no! This is why I do not accept people who chase me, who search in Mexico, *no jodas*! What am I, in business? To be *your guru*? No! I only want your freedom! *You must choose*."

“Yes, I understand. I’m going back to Berkeley, and I have a *presentito* for you. Is there someplace I can send it?”

“No, no, no! Wait! What are you doing right now?”

“I’m working on my book.”

“Can I pick you up for lunch? Right now?”

“Thank you, Carlos. I’d like that.”

“Wowie Zimbowie, *chica!* I’ll be there in an hour. *Now we’re in business!*”

Carlos took me to a seafood restaurant in Santa Monica, the same one we had been to with Florinda over a decade before, the day of the burning-toe-in-the-bathtub tale. Carlos was friendly, and I remained quiet and attentive, following Sally’s advice, showing no trace of hurt or anger.

Carlos ordered orange roughly without sauce, a baked potato, and apple pie for dessert. I was considering onion rings with my meal, when Carlos advised, “*Never* eat onions. Sorcerers don’t touch them because they resemble the human form, layer upon layer. Eating onions will reinforce your humanity.”

“And garlic?”

He was cagey about the garlic.

I chose salmon and an artichoke, dubious about its many layers, but he wanted to share it. Then I offered him a wrapped book. Carlos looked as delighted as a child receiving a birthday gift.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“I’ll open it later—it’s *my* present.”

He pressed the package to his heart, then tucked it carefully into his coat pocket. The gesture was so tender that I looked away to hide my smile.

As we ate, I listened attentively.

“This idea of the self—*mierda!* Don Juan used to say, ‘I wasn’t present when they made the contract—I never signed. I don’t have to live by its rules.’ You know, Amy, you’re not so red anymore—you’ve already given up some of your self-importance.”

“What color am I?”

“Peach. You have a soft, peach glow. Very nice. You’re coming along fast. You know, you’re just like Taisha Abelar—you’re a

stalker.” Carlos leaned forward, eyes bright with excitement. “There are *bona fide* other worlds, *chica*, *that* is what interests a sorcerer! Just last night I was in another realm, a world whose inhabitants have 360-degree vision. I could see in every direction! But ... you are certainly not a *dreamer.*”

“What?!” I burst out, annoyed. “Florinda told me I was just like her—she said I was a *dreamer*—that all writers are *dreamers!*”

“Pah! That’s just because she likes you. No, no, no. Taisha Abelar is infinitely more powerful than little Flo. Florinda Donner is *nothing.*”

“Florinda is just as powerful!”

“She is not! She’s *nothing* next to Taisha Abelar! No, no, no—Taishita knows *precisely* where to sign—on the dotted line. And so do you, *preciosa*—you know where to sign. Besides, you couldn’t find your shoes in *dreaming!*”

I had to admit that was true. I hadn’t a clue how to do it. Carlos led a vast number of readers to follow his first *dreaming* exercise, to search for their hands in their sleep. (“It was really my penis don Juan told me to find,” he explained, “but my publisher wouldn’t let me say that!”) I never once found my hands, much less my shoes. I laughed and smiled in agreement.

It was thrilling to be included in the sorcerer’s “mythology,” as he called it, to hear the terms Carlos had made famous to a generation. I knew that he revealed to few people in the group whether they were *dreamers* or *stalkers*—in fact, I never met one person who had been told. Everyone was dying to know into which category they fell, but knew it would show self-importance to break down and ask. A great honor was being bestowed upon me. He spoke rarely of the content of his books. In spite of this glamour, I was bothered. I wanted to be like Florinda.

“You see? *You know where to sign on the dotted line.* That’s power, *chola*, believe me. *You have it.*” Then he said, “Would you like to take a walk on the bluff?”

By “the bluff” Carlos meant the strip of pedestrian walkway overlooking the Santa Monica beach. I nodded. He grinned with delight.

“Now we’re in business! *Pucha!* And what a business! In this business, every act is final, *every act is one of life and death*. Sorcerers do not take vacations. What would I do? Go fishing?! I am a being that is going to die, *right now, every minute of my life*—I am not waiting to go fishing, go to heaven and be a saint in my toga!”

(Later I asked Florinda why she and I got along so well, when she was a *dreamer* and I was a *stalker*. “Because the two make a pair,” she had replied. “*I’m the one who will take you straight to Infinity*. I’m your *real* mother, the one who loves you.”)

As we waited for our check, Carlos and I fell to talking about authors. I told Carlos about meeting Gore Vidal under strange circumstances, and how charming I found him. My father had just died in Los Angeles, and my brother and I were numbly going about the business of arranging for the funeral and speaking to reporters; stiff with shock, we saw our father’s face on the evening news. The funeral was to take place in two days. The following evening, I was scheduled to hostess an anniversary party for *The Nation*. I had offered my home for the *fête* following Vidal’s keynote speech at U.C. Berkeley. In true Wallace fashion, my mother and brother told me to see to the party and visit my friends. I would return on the first morning flight for the funeral.

At the airport I stood, frozen in place, staring at the front pages of the newspapers, looking at smiling photos of my father puffing on his pipe, as tears rolled down my cheeks. By the time the party started, I was numb again.

When Mr. Vidal arrived, he gravely shook my hand, saying, “I’m sorry about your father.”

“Thank you. If I remember ... there was a small *contre-temps*?” There had been a minor literary scuffle, when Vidal had panned one of my father’s books, and my father had responded privately and politely.

“No,” Vidal replied gently, “just a *temps*.”

Carlos listened quietly when I spoke of Irving, but he frowned when I spoke warmly of Vidal.

“Ah, I met him! *Carajo! No jodas!* Gore Vidal told me, ‘The only thing that would give me true pleasure in life would be to be greeted daily like a Roman emperor—to have a standing ovation whenever I enter a room! I want to be greeted by a gallery!’ *That’s* what they’ve done to us, *amorcita!* What *egos* we have!”

Carlos spoke of the many luminaries he had known. He was especially fond of former California Governor Jerry Brown—now mayor of Oakland—and appeared to respect his spiritual quest. Of the great Latin American authors, he spoke warmly of Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. In general, he had harsh words for nearly all the famous people he met. He spoke with disgust of meeting Janis Joplin—at first finding her delightful, then depressing at a second meeting, claiming that cocaine had brought out her charm.

Finally, Carlos gently took my hand as we walked companionably, enjoying the sea breeze and the sparkling waves below us. He began telling off-color jokes and doing his funniest bits: he loved to imitate Indian gurus and phony shamans, and soon I was laughing at one of his best routines. “*When prana meets rama they unite!—and then we have PRANA-RAMA!*”

“You can’t have a *scrap* of humanity in you if you hope to slip through the crack between the worlds.” I remembered that phrase from his books. “You have to be *lean—with a thin, gaunt body—and* entirely empty of concern for yourself. *Or ... the door slams shut in your face.* ‘It’ won’t let you enter that *mystery.*” He waved his elegant hands at the sky. “*Something* out there knows when you are still human, when you haven’t *changed*—we call it ‘body-snatching.’ Body-snatching is when something else replaces the *you* that you’re familiar with. Friends no longer recognize you. You have left them, and they sense it. But if you cling to your human form, *It* will spit you out. Shall we sit on this bench?”

“Carlos, I’m having such a *déjà vu!*” I closed my eyes, pressing a hand to my brow.

“Sssh! *No!* Don’t call it that—don’t name it!”

We sat, and he held my hand once more, intertwining our fingers. Inscrutably, he began a hypnotic, meandering tale about his father's jam factory in Brazil. Gently, he pulled me closer, our bodies barely touching. Carlos' lips brushed my hair.

"Amy," he whispered. Suddenly, he was more solemn than I'd ever seen him. "You have to give your *poto* to the *nagual*. For magical purposes we must have a '*close encounter*.' It's the only way left to us. The hole between a woman's legs is magic and when the *nagual* leaves his juice inside it goes directly to her brain ... it's the fastest way. We don't have any time. It's ten minutes to midnight, and I can't leave without you."

I smiled. "Oh, are you a dirty old man guru, then?"

Carlos looked offended. "This is a serious proposition, *chola!* Muni made a bidding for you, *up there, to It*; what shamans call 'the blank check of affection.' It's good for any amount, and forever ... we must fulfill her promise to the Spirit. Why don't you go home to Berkeley and think about it? Call me when you've made your decision."

"No," I replied, a lifetime of false bravado behind me. I was imagining what an extraordinary adventure this would be, hiding the fact that I was profoundly unnerved. I glanced at my watch. It was four o'clock.

"Got an hour?"

Carlos looked stunned. I believe it was the first time I had truly startled him.

"No, no, no! Not *now!* It has to be *nighttime*—the night is magic time, the night *belongs* to sorcerers. It's twilight now—a good omen."

He watched me nervously.

"I'm having dinner tonight with my mother and my favorite family friend, Bob," I said, breaking the silence. "I'll be home about 10:30."

"Alright, *nena, excellent!* I ... I'll pick you up at Sylvia's after dark."

Outside my mother's door, he chastely kissed my lips. "I'll see you at 10:30. *Be waiting outside.* Next time I'll come in and say hello to

Sylvia properly. *Besos, mi amor!*”

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Carlos Castaneda Goes on a Date

The world widens when death comes near, all that lies in us apparent—our lens is widened, and certainly it is too much for the average person.

—Patricia Highsmith, notebook entry, July 26, 1969

I was in fact terrified, but determined to act brave, ready for adventure. I was deeply curious about Carlos' motives, and at last the supernatural possibilities had begun to entice me. What would transpire during sex? Would I shift consciousness, enter a palpable other world, a second dimension?

I sipped a martini during dinner and pushed the food around on my plate, struggling to keep up my end of the conversation. The hours slunk by; I snuck nervous looks at my watch.

I told my mother I was meeting Carlos for a drink, being picked up outside the house. Her mild "That's nice, dear," somehow made me all the more nervous. Carlos arrived in his Ford truck, dressed in elegant Southwestern casual—jeans, a bolero tie, and a beautiful belt with a silver and turquoise buckle.

We drove ten minutes to The Wilshire Motel. A few blocks from our destination I observed, "You look nervous."

"I'm as nervous as a cat!"

"Oh, come on. *You're* nervous? *I'm* the one who gets to be nervous. *You're* Carlos Castaneda—you do this every day."

He cast me a scandalized look. "*I do not.*"

"Oh, please!"

"I've been celibate for twenty years!"

“Oh, *please!*”

“I’ve been celibate for twenty years, *waiting for you.*”

I glared at him and muttered, “*Non capisco niente!* I don’t understand anything!”

He chuckled, pleased. “*Non capisco niente ...*,” he repeated, smiling, but I could see tension in his shoulders and neck. It struck me very strongly that he did not behave at all like my image of an accomplished seducer. Surely no one, however skilled an actor—a *guru* for heaven’s sake!—could have feigned such realistic anxiety.

Suddenly, he pulled over and parked on the street. “Do you understand what you’re getting into, *chica?* How *serious* this is?”

“Yes.”

“This is *dangerous, preciosa. There is no turning back.*”

“I understand,” I said, completely at sea.

Carlos looked at me doubtfully. His hand trembled as he turned the key.

“All right. But I must have your word. Your word means everything *to It.*”

“Carlos, I promise. I give you my word.”

He nodded gravely, and we drove ahead.

The motel was cheap, clean, and consummately innocuous. As we approached the guest register he smiled at me and, after a moment’s thought declared, “We’re Mr. and Mrs. Simon Parbatur! Mark this day in your calendar, Mrs. Parbatur!” He signed our “married” names. “Tonight Amy Wallace *dies*,” he whispered in my ear. As we headed toward our room, arms linked together, he made a solemn pronouncement: “*When you’re dead, nothing can hurt you.* What can they do to a corpse? Don Juan told me to ‘die.’ ‘How will I know when I’ve died, don Juan?’ I said.

“ ‘When you don’t need your friends, when you don’t need *anybody ever again,*’ he told me. ‘Go and find a cheap motel with green drapes and stains on the carpet, and stay there until you’re dead.’

“And that’s what I did, *nena.* I’ll show you the place; it’s in Hollywood. I only went out for meals and movies. I saw a lot of

movies. It took me three months. And one day I woke up and—I didn't need *anyone*.



Photo by Gerard Barbier

Los Angeles Wilshire Motel, where the author lost her “sorceric virginity.”

“I told you—something else *will* come. ‘Body-snatching’ is *real*. I love that movie, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. And I have the video of *They Live*—you’ve got to see that, *chola!* And *Blade Runner* ... *ay!*—it got me right *here*”—he pressed his heart. “Every time I see it I cry like you wouldn’t believe. ‘I’ve seen things you can’t imagine ...’ ” he quoted. “ ‘Attack ships on fire off the horizon of the Orion Nebula ... memories lost like tears in the rain; *time to die.*’ ”

Carlos was so nervous that he insisted we leave our clothes on. He seemed anxious to complete the act quickly and was strangely businesslike, evidently struck with performance anxiety. As he fumbled with buttons, I stopped him and whispered, “Let’s relax for a while—Carlos, let’s kiss for a moment.”

This pause brought a touch of sweetness to our frenetic encounter. At last Carlos overcame his awkwardness.

Afterwards, my own anxiety returned in full force.

“Hey, you better not have gotten me pregnant!”

We had used no birth control, nor had we discussed safe sex. Why I had done this I couldn’t imagine. I felt like blaming him for it, as though he had mesmerized me.

He leapt out of bed and stood facing me, hands on hips. “*Me* make you pregnant? Impossible! The *nagual*’s sperm isn’t human. It doesn’t match your juices! *You’re human!*”

He knelt down and peered gently between my legs. “Ah! We did it! I’ve planted a red spot of energy in your *poto*. I can see it! Don’t let any of the *nagual*’s sperm out, *nena*. It will burn away your humanness. If even a drop escapes, it’s a bad omen.”

He looked again. “Ah, nothing! Excellent, excellent.” He dashed to the bathroom and returned with a Kleenex, which he folded into a neat square. “Let this rest against your *concha*, so nothing escapes.”

“Carlos, I don’t know if I want to do this again.”

“That’s fine, *chica*, absolutely fine. We did it once—for Infinity. That’s all that counts. But let me tell you—being around the *nagual* is like being on a drug. Until you have begun to lose your humanity, it’s tiring, *heavy*. You’ll have to rest after seeing me. But you’ll want more of this drug, I swear to you!

“And by the way,” he snarled, “you sure can pick ’em.”

He was referring to my ex-husband and all my past boyfriends, particularly the most recent, whose noxious presence he claimed to feel strongly in my womb. He shook his head in disgust. This time I had no wish to argue.

“Now, *mi amorcita*, you haven’t had children, have you? That leaves a terrible hole in a woman’s energy body!”

This was well known to Castaneda’s readers, and I wondered why he couldn’t *see* this, being the *nagual* and all.

“No. I was pregnant once, in my early twenties, and had an abortion. Does that leave a hole?” I remembered that Carlos’ books were full of bizarre stories of witches committing acts of violence against their children to regain their lost energy.

“An abortion?” He considered. “Well, it’s not so bad. It only leaves a dent.”

On the way back to my mother’s I suggested we stop and visit my brother and his family in Santa Monica, a few blocks from my parents’ home. Carlos had maintained his own relationship with David and Flora over the years, though it had been ages since they’d last met. I was hoping to normalize the evening. Carlos acquiesced warmly, and we spent several delightful hours with them and their two young boys, whom Carlos liked immensely. He held court for the entire visit, telling us riotous stories, usually with himself as the butt of the joke.

My favorite was the one in which, at the peak of his hippie fame, he had made the acquaintance of a couple who believed him to be a struggling sculptor named Joe Cortez. They invited him to a celebrity party in Malibu. And who was the ultimate celebrity catch? Yes—they would introduce him to *Carlos Castaneda*! When they arrived, they were shown to a table piled high with books. A tall, bronzed, square-jawed man with a Nehru jacket and ponytail sat signing books, the works of Carlos Castaneda.

“Make it out to Joe Cortez,” he stammered, “Are you ... uh ... *really him*? I’ve searched a lifetime.... Is don Juan *real*?”

“Castaneda” returned a deprecating smile, handing a book forward.

“You’ll find *all* the answers you need, right here. My blessings on you, my child. Oh, go and pay the host, over there—”

Standing up to chat with a group of luscious, blonde, female arrivals, the six-foot-tall Castaneda received a joint, inhaled deeply, and began a long discourse on his remarkable adventures with don Juan in “our parallel universe.”

As we left my brother’s house, Carlos told me the visit had gone smoothly, that I was exquisitely gracious and relaxed. He beamed—this was a beautiful omen for us.

“You were so *at ease*,” he praised me. “Not nervous, and so beautiful, gorgeous and *powerful*. You’re not a bored fuck, *chica* ... there’s something different about your energy.”

Carlos elaborated on his description of bored fucks in the books. “If one parent has a spectacular orgasm, it’s possible to be *half* a bored fuck—better than nothing. The true ‘non-bored fucks’ have extra energy and can have sex without risk of losing energy. The rest have to be celibate, practicing the magical movements and ‘the recapitulation’—I’ll teach you this meditation later. *I* am a real bored fuck. I was conceived in a hurry behind an open door—that’s why I’m always so nervous and have had to be celibate.”

I argued that I was a late-born child, my parents both having affairs at the time. Although I was a *wanted* second child, my mother was suffering devastating nervous breakdowns. Carlos’ theory made no sense.

“Well, there’s *something* about you, then—I don’t know what it is. Amy, you just *don’t understand!* You’re bigger for us than the Eiffel Tower! You’re *the Electric Warrior, the being we’ve been waiting for—the creature to guide us to Infinity!*”

I looked at Carlos dubiously. This was *too* weird—blatant New Age flattery.

I left for Berkeley the next day. He called me at once, and then several times a day, romancing me continuously. He fussed over my health and my diet—he advised me to eat steak daily, and not too much fruit; to take antibiotic drops for an ear infection and to avoid dental work I badly needed (much to the horror of my dentist, when I told him Castaneda had forbidden it—and in the end my condition worsened, and I had to get *more* work). He regaled me with a panoply of bad jokes, which I returned in kind. It still hurt me that the witches rejected me, but I minded less and less as Carlos’ wooing continued and seemed to grow more profound.

“You’ll see, *mi amorcita*, this feeling between us is not one-sided, it’s *round*. *You’ll see*. Soon we’ll be howling for each other like two animals!”

Indeed, falling in love with Carlos was like falling off a log. He continued to call half a dozen times a day, even as weeks passed. Energetically, he explained, we couldn’t meet again, not just yet. But he greeted me in the morning with, “And how is the most beautiful woman in the world from the beginning of time until the

end of time today?” and every evening he murmured, “How’s *mi mamita, mi corazón*? Your man is going crazy for you!”

Carlos’ conversation sped from romantic whispers to heartrending epiphanies about death, as poetic as those in his books. Then, suddenly, he would begin one of his hilarious imitations—he had a huge repertoire of celebrities whom he mocked. He regaled me with the ridiculous scenario of Anthony Quinn playing don Juan in the movie version of his books, lamenting, and repeating, “And who will play me? I’m too short, too homely! Perhaps they will have to settle on Sean Connery!” He gave hilarious renditions of what would occur if he accepted the invitations to appear on The David Letterman Show:

“Letterman: ‘But did you *really* turn into a crow?’

“Castaneda: ‘Well, David, how can I put it? It’s like this, it’s—’ ” and on and on Carlos went with stammering, anguished evasions. As enchanting as Carlos’ storytelling was his ability to listen. It was intoxicating. His attention was total, his curiosity immense. He offered a striking contrast to the weak half-attention most of us give and receive in conversation. His manner invited confidence; people eagerly told him their secrets. In this way he reminded me of my father.

He said don Juan had given him the “sorcery task” of listening for hundreds of hours to a drunken, repetitive bum, until Carlos had perfected the ability to remain interested, to give full attention to another, and he advised me to practice this technique.

Carlos regularly toyed with nicknames for me. One was Pauline, for *The Perils of Pauline*—he found my innocence and ignorance about his dangerous world of sorcery to be an endearing novelty. After all, would-be apprentices really *did* camp out on his doorstep, having memorized his books. I was different. Another nickname was Pearl, for Pearl White, the actress who’d played Pauline. I refused them both, fearing they might stick. I knew that it was an important moment when Castaneda gave an apprentice a sorcery name, and I decided to hold out, praying I wouldn’t wind up with one of his *Star Trek*-style names such as Zuna or Beulah or Nuli—I was taking a risk. When I told him I liked the name “Amy,” he was utterly

disgusted. He saw given family names as being like “slave names.” This act of defiance so piqued him that I was to remain Amy for years.

Carlos swore he wanted to meet, so that I “could give him what he needed”—my energy—and he could do the same for me, in return. But some mysterious block would not permit it.

During this period I encountered a quandary.

My uncle had just died. My father’s sister was grieving with my three cousins and their families. Though I was always terribly out-of-touch, I wanted to go to the funeral. I already knew that Carlos disapproved of funerals, weddings, and all family functions—one had only to read his books to know that. I decided to fly to Los Angeles, take a taxi to Forest Lawn for the service, and turn right around.

I did, and a few weeks later I mentioned it in passing to Carlos, testing the waters.

He was shocked. “*You were HERE?!*”

“Just for a moment,” I casually replied. I was using Castaneda tactics on Castaneda, and it was one of the few times I caught him off-balance. I hadn’t asked permission, and I hadn’t asked to see him. I worried a little that I’d missed an opportunity, but discovered I’d done quite the reverse. I had acted like the characters in his books—I had been “inaccessible,” slightly mysterious, and independent of his commands. He was so surprised that he bumbled his speech, and became *very* eager to see me. I had accidentally opened a door.

Peeking through it, I had an early glimpse of what would become Carlos’ passionate love/hate relationship with my shifting independence and devotion, my flip-flops between ardor and disobedience. I could not have conceived a more ill-fated, stubborn, and inseparable pair.

Sex Magic Leads to Danger

They go ... because they have reached their limit. For men and women there is to everything a limit beyond which striving, further thought, leads to regression. And this is true even though men and women never set out at all; possibly are not capable of setting out. For those who do set out, the limit varies from individual to individual, and cannot be foreseen. Few ever reach it. Those who do reach it are, I suspect, those who go off into the further forest.

—Robert Aickman, *Into the Wood*

Soon I was back in Los Angeles attending to the finishing touches on *The Book of Lists*. As usual I stayed with my mother, waiting to see if “the energy” would allow Carlos and me to have sex three nights in a row—three, he now swore, was the magic number that would transform me into a witch and seal the bond between us. There would be “no going back” once we succeeded—whatever that meant.

When I called, Carlos was frantic. “*Chola*, you have to give yourself to me in Irving’s house—in *your childhood bedroom!* *That* is the magical way to pull you out of there, to pull you into freedom!”

“What? Yes, of course. My mother’s here all day, except for three days a week, when she sees her therapist in Beverly Hills; the secretary drives her. If you hurry—today is perfect. She has a late afternoon visit, the return traffic will be heavy.”

“No, no, there’s not enough time—we’ll have to wait for a better opportunity.” I thought he was being cowardly, but then, I didn’t know where he lived, just somewhere in Westwood.

“All right then,” I said, “we’ll try for the next one—the day after tomorrow.”

I was nervous about this new development. My parents’ house had no back entrance near my room, which was at the end of a hall—there would be no escaping my mother’s notice if our timing was off. But never mind—it was exciting, outlandish, *magical!*

I remembered a story Florinda had told me about Andy—the theatre director—during his early days as a disciple. She was driving with him in Beverly Hills and he showed her the house he’d grown up in where his mother still lived. His father had left the family for another woman and had died some years ago. As they drove by, the house was empty; his mother was out of town.

“Have you got a key?” queried Florinda.

“Right here. You can have a peek.”

“Amy, you wouldn’t *believe* this place! Modest for Beverly Hills—you know Andy has this complex about being from ‘the wrong side of Wilshire,’ as he calls it. But it was elegant! The mother sells jewelry at one of the best places, Tiffany’s or something, since the father abandoned her. A lovely house, like a stage set in a way—and, in a private, redecorated basement was Andy’s room—*preserved*. All his cotillion trophies, his chess awards, golf trophies, my God! A shrine to her *little baby boy*. The hell with his sister, and the older brother! She only had eyes for her darling Andy!

“But the best was this—the mother’s nickname is ‘Lambchop’—Lambie, you know? Some American cartoon you have.” Florinda sniffed, then she continued excitedly, “*His childhood bed was covered with stuffed lambs! Carajo!* I threw myself into the middle of the bed, the lambs flew *everywhere!* That was the only way to break the mommy spell, so he could join us. Afterwards we had to straighten everything up, so the room would look perfect, *untouched.*”

Had this been a sexual initiation?... Possibly. The witches, I was slowly surmising, gave brief sexual initiations to some of the men, or women, under Carlos’ direction.

I called the *nagual* on the big day. “Hurry, Carlos! Quick!”

I put on a gauzy summer frock and sat outside on the porch to wait. After fifteen minutes, my mother’s car pulled into the drive. “Oh! Hi! Mom—what a surprise! What happened?”

“I don’t know, I just had the feeling I needed to turn back. So we did. I don’t know why.” She shrugged.

I was completely dumbfounded.

“I was just waiting for Carlos, we’re going to lunch.”

“Oh? That’s nice, dear.” She went inside.

Within three minutes Carlos’ truck was pulling into the driveway. He looked natty and terribly nervous. I ran to him, the story tumbling out.

“Ay ay ay! *Coño! Carajo!* I’m *such a pendejo!* You were right, I should have come the other day—the opening was *there*—but I was too slow!”

“Carlos, it feels like my fault.”

“No, don’t be silly. She’s not ready to let you go, that’s all.”

“Why don’t we sneak you in? Let’s do it!”

“Oh no, *corazón*, never force things! Always follow omens. Let’s go to lunch!”

As I got in the truck, Carlos went on, “A sorcerer never forces his way. If a door closes—I was too slow—we wait for another door, we must never push. This is the great mistake the ape makes—we beat our head on a single door for a lifetime, when there are new doors opening all around us. We *insist*, because *something* is eating our energy—I’ll explain all that to you later. The Spirit passes us by, and we lose the Bird of Freedom. Once I failed *terribly, chola*,” he said ominously, “and freedom passed me by. That’s why I have so little time left, why I run so fast. And *you* must run after your husband. You *are* my wife now, do you understand? Ha! I don’t think you even *begin* to grasp what’s happened to you! I would *die* for you, there is nothing I wouldn’t do to set you free! Shall we go back to that fish place?”

We were immediately seated at “our” table. We smiled at this coincidence, like any sentimental couple.

“See?” he said, approving of the omen. “We are really *in loove*.”

We ordered as we had before, grilled fish and potatoes. I wanted an artichoke, too. I asked again, “Is it okay to eat artichokes? You said onions were bad for sorcerers, reproducing the layers of the human form—are artichokes the same?”

“Today we can eat anything—even onions.”

Our early dinner was a romantic, light-hearted affair, Carlos regaling me with his stories. We left the restaurant kissing and holding hands. I rested my head on his shoulder. It was twilight, the sorcerer’s magic hour.

We passed a tall, skeletal black man who had been slumped on the pavement when we entered. Now he was awake, his hand extended for spare change. He looked tragically debilitated; crack came to mind as I looked at the cavernous face and huge pupils.

Carlos did a strange thing.

Instead of giving some change or walking on, he faced the man, making a series of swift gestures—his index finger slashing his throat, which I read as a graphic “Fuck you, no!” followed by some rapid hand movements I recognized as insulting from the six months I lived in Italy. I couldn’t believe it. *Carlos Castaneda* didn’t have *street smarts*? He was actually provoking a dangerous-looking character. Was this some sort of a test?

We walked on and of course were followed. We walked faster, silent, arm-in-arm. At the truck the man closed in on us. Carlos just had time to get me into the passenger side and slam the door closed but was not able to let himself in.

Cornered, I watched the proceedings in terror. I couldn’t hear their words, but they were both talking. The man had his hand out. He hovered a good foot or more over Carlos, and all the time he spoke he never took his eyes off me. I have never felt so close to being killed as at that moment. Those hideous bloodshot eyes, the hungry ghoul’s stare; he was going to break in.

All the while Carlos talked. And talked. And fiddled in his pockets continuously, rattling his keys. At one point he extracted a handful of dollar bills and change. With astonishing audacity, he returned the bills to his pocket and handed over a few coins. Evidently

satisfied, the man turned and left, stopping to give me a last, voracious stare.

“Carlos, Christ. How did you ...”

He opened his palm. In it was a half dollar. He flicked the rim of the coin with his nail, and a switchblade popped out.

“Carlos, this is the most terrible omen! What does it mean?”

“*Nada, amor!* It’s this damn neighborhood—it’s gone down like you wouldn’t believe. I remember when Ned Brown came down here once, and some guy tried to grab him, and then—”

He was off on a long shaggy dog tale, aggressively obfuscating my question. He made a single remark: “The way he was looking at you, *carajo!*” Carlos slipped his knife back into the front pocket of his jeans. Years later, when I queried him, I learned it was a strong omen that I was “still paying taxes to the world.”

By the time we were parked in front of my family’s house, Carlos had ceased his banter and become deeply serious. He told a frightening, graphic story about killing a man with a garrote while in the employ of an unnamed government agency. It was before he had met don Juan, and he was undergoing a long apprenticeship with an elderly Japanese general who taught him the secrets of waiting; of *seeing* an opening, the fraction of a second for a kill.

“I took care of this man as he was dying. He died impeccably, like a warrior, but he had karma, so he could not enter sorcerer’s realms.” (This was the only time I heard Carlos refer to karma.) “Later, when I had met don Juan, I told him I had a terrible secret. *Terrible*, the *worst*, and I had never confessed it. I had been don Juan’s apprentice for years before I found the courage to speak of this *horror*.”

“ ‘Tell me, *estúpido*,’ said don Juan, ‘what can be so bad, eh? Is this why you’re always so heavy, so *pesado*? Why do I have to stand on my head to move you an inch? What is it, this *terrible* thing you did?’

“ ‘I killed people, don Juan. Lots of people.’

“ ‘*That’s IT??* You killed *people*? *Carajo*, Carlos, you killed *apes*. *That’s* what you’re so ashamed of? Killing a few apes? Believe me,

there are always plenty more to take their place. And you're making yourself sick with this Great Big Secret? *Qué coño!*'

"At first I was horrified by this—coldness. This terrible inhumanity! And then—I felt a burden lifting off me, my enormous burden. He forced me to see my insignificance. I was *so important* in my own eyes, my guilt was *so all-important!* In reality my actions meant *nothing*. Apes, that's what we are, my beauty, unless we *leap* and become the magical creatures we are truly meant to be.

"Up there," he pointed at the sky, "that's where the adventure is. Not here among apes. We burn brightly, for a moment, yes; but we are nothing in the face of Infinity. You are a spark, a spark which *dreams*. That is the warrior's way—to join that immensity. You know, whenever I go to a new town, I go to a confessor, to put my cards on the table. It has nothing to do with religion, or a god—I confess to clean my spirit, to face myself."

I sat quietly, pressing my eyes with my fingers to hide my tears.

"Ah, you are feeling a unique sorrow, what sorcerers call 'ontological sadness.' Only when you are not concerned with 'me' can you feel it—it is impersonal, it is a wave from that immensity, from the dark sea of awareness. When it hits—pow! That's when you need me, that's when you need the *nagual*, to make you laugh! Only I can help you release it.

"You see, my love, we've even turned something terrible into a beautiful moment between us—we love each other *that* much. Good night, my darling, I love you. Go to sleep right now, and call your husband *immediately* in the morning."

We kissed, and I went straight to my room. I felt darkly uneasy as I stared at the ceiling. It had been a bad omen, and I knew it.

The next day Carlos picked me up at my mother's house, entering to pay his respects. He entertained her with charming stories for a long time, until I became restless, anxious to leave.

When we were alone, he said, "Amy, why aren't you kinder to Sylvia?"

I was resistant. “We’ve always had a difficult relationship. You should know that by now.”

“But she’s seventy-three. What would it cost you to say ‘I love you’?”

These were words I used all too sparingly with my mother. Still nursing childhood wounds, I argued forcefully with Carlos. I was now in my thirties, but clung to memories of my painful upbringing with a clinically depressed and sometimes—I believe unconsciously—very cruel mother. Listening to Carlos’ simple suggestion, I realized I was finally old enough to view my mother as a bright, extraordinary woman who had done her best raising two children while suffering repeated nervous breakdowns.

She had no idea that she displayed a graphic ambivalence about being a mother, or that her behavior was bizarre and damaging. She was seductive with me, my boyfriends, and eventually my husband; and at the same time she was viciously critical of my appearance. She complained constantly about my father, and had no sense of appropriate boundaries. I tried to explain to Carlos how devastating life with her had been.

Gently, Carlos continued, “Just try it. Say ‘I love you.’ She’s old, and what will it cost you? Nothing. Besides,” he whispered, “if you say it long enough you might even begin to feel it, to feel it very deeply.”

Taking it as a dare, at the next opportunity, I hugged my mother a warm goodbye, saying, “I love you, I love you so much.”

She was startled.

“I—I love you too, baby.”

I continued to show her warmth and affection as best I could, with every phone call and visit. I even told her she had been a great mom and thanked her for all she had given me, something I had never done before.

When Carlos next saw us together, she and I hugged and kissed. My mother was beaming, radiant, and so was I. Carlos was delighted and said, “Now *that’s* what I like to see.”

Soon my brother came to town, and he caught me saying “I love you” every day to our mother. It was a notable change in family

style.

“Amy, *what* are you doing?”

I replied, “Well, she’s old, and I figure ... what the hell? Why be stingy?”

He was fascinated. “Okay, if you’re going to do it, I’m going to do it too.”

After some months my mother said, “All my friends are estranged from their children, but you kids are so marvelous, so *affectionate*. And you used to be so *difficult*.”

Carlos was absolutely right. I did begin to love her more deeply, *tsuris* and all. Perhaps without Carlos, I might have missed my chance; my mother could easily have died without receiving the full expression of her daughter’s love. Carlos’ magic was simple: my mother responded to love with love.

After several more trips to Los Angeles, Carlos and I achieved our three-days-in-a row love-making goal. He now referred to me regularly as his wife, and insisted that when “the energy was right” we would get married legally, so I “would take our union more seriously.” However, since we were energetically married, he deemed me ready for a honeymoon trip.

“Would you like to go to Mexico with your *marido*, *mi amor*?”

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Mexico with Castaneda

We should have died together, ten years or so earlier, rather than let it all happen to both of us. It is a good rule. When at last you are really happy, die at once.

—Robert Aickman, *The Attempted Rescue*

Mexico with Castaneda! I had never been to Mexico, and now I was going with the last and greatest of the *brujos* to his magical home. He would unlock its shamanic secrets. I pictured a Disneyland of the paranormal: Carlos and I creeping past cacti to underground caves where we would sip strange, mind-altering brews and converse with ancient wizards. We would explore the “power spots” described in his books. We would ignite in the shamanic death we dreamed of, “burning from within” together, in a rapturous ball of fire, emerging intact in another world, and nothing would ever separate us. What adventuress could possibly say no?

I flew from San Francisco to Mexico City where Carlos met me at the airport. He greeted me nervously and whisked me into a car driven by an affable, well-spoken young man named Antonio Karam. Tony, as Carlos called him, directed Casa Tibet, a Buddhist institute in Mexico City, and was a remarkable prodigy—friend to the Dalai Lama, and a magnet for paranormal happenings. Carlos fondly dubbed him “Tony Lama,” and Tony called him “*nagualito*.” Marivee, a friendly, middle-aged woman, sat beside Tony. Carlos pulled me to him, smooching eagerly in the back seat, until I pulled away, blushing.

“In front of your friends?” I whispered.

“They don’t even notice,” he insisted, amorous as a teenager in a drive-in.

We spent two days of continuous activity together, a non-stop spree of meeting Carlos’ fascinating friends, including Carlos’ Mexican publisher, whom he introduced as “my nephew.” Carlos gave three-hour lectures in Spanish—which I didn’t understand—to small, worshipful groups, also demonstrating simple Tensegrity movements. One speech took place in the conference room of a travel agency, another at a small New Age Institute. A woman histrionically fainted from the shock of being in the same room with the *nagual*. He was unimpressed, and someone carried her out. Life with Castaneda was incessantly dramatic.

Carlos wanted me to sit beside him in a chair before the first group as he spoke—a tremendous honor I had no idea was being bestowed upon me, as usual. After an hour I whispered in his ear that I was going to take a walk. This was my first evening, and I hadn’t moved since the long plane ride; he insisted Marivee escort me. Looking back, I realized I had seriously breached etiquette by walking out on the *nagual* and depriving Marivee of a rare opportunity to hear a lecture. But Carlos and Marivee were so gracious I never suspected my error.

During the lecture, I learned, Carlos taught the all-important “recapitulation” meditation, wherein one makes a list of all one’s sexual encounters, followed by a list of each person one could recall having ever met. Making the list alone could take months of steady work. Finally, one began the Herculean task of breathing away the noxious power these human interactions held. This was Carlos’ *fundamental* practice, barely explained in his books.

We stayed in a modest, pleasant hotel, the Maria Christina, in separate rooms. Soon enough we would share a room, but for now it was risky. “I might fly away and never come back!” he exclaimed. When I saw my room I had an overwhelming *déjà vu*—I *knew* the room, the furniture, everything. I told Carlos, who was extremely pleased, but as usual did not expand on apprentices’ paranormal experiences.



The Hotel Maria Christina.

In the morning Tony slipped Carlos some photos which Carlos refused to show, only telling me that they were of the *voladores*, or “flyers”—discarnate energy vampires who eat our awareness on a daily basis, creatures he had long alluded to. He insisted Florinda see the pictures first. I felt stung.

I found Carlos’ friends delightful. Tony was my favorite, and we enjoyed several meals together. Much as Carlos delighted in elegant dining, the *nagual* ultimately preferred a good, home-style cafeteria. At one meal he drew an exquisite watch from his pocket, *circa* 1940. He passed it around, saying it had belonged to don Juan. Wherever we ate, Carlos ordered a steak for himself: this he considered the key to dietary health. But when my steaming plate of *enchiladas con salsa verde* arrived, he attacked it, sour cream and all. I loved this “married” gesture, which reminded me of my Jewish family at table. Carlos claimed, in fact, to be a Sephardic Jew, *via* his maternal grandmother.

Happily, Carlos' friends liked me as well as I liked them. He told me proudly, "In Spanish we say *simpático*, when we like someone, but my friends found this word too small for you. They call you *encantada*, *singula*—enchancing, special. They adore you, just like your man does."

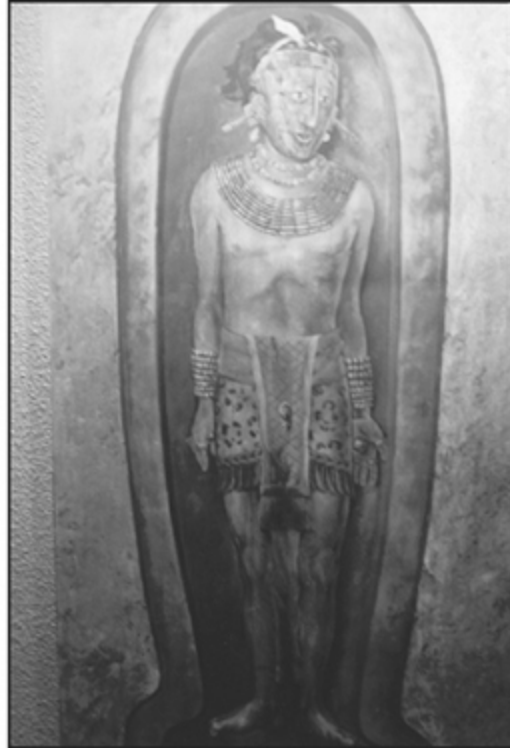
Carlos gave me a tour of Mexico City's magnificent Museo Nacional de Antropología, where we were joined by a friend, Ramon. Carlos warned me that the visit would move my assemblage point and might tire me profoundly. This was to be the first of many visits, he told me, so we should take care to "touch it lightly." His first concern was to show me half a dozen large statues which, he said, represented the witches and the Chacmools, according to his unconventional theory of reincarnation called "cyclicity," which he promised to explain later.



Photo by Richard Jennings

Mexico City's famed Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Photos: Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City



Left: Atlantean-style statue at the Museo Nacional de Antropología, which Carlos said “represents Florinda, with a jaguar pendant and great ferocity.” Right: The “Lord of Palenque”—a jade figure which, according to Carlos, had “healthy, strong lines of energy crossing its chest.”

Carlos made a point of showing us the jade “Lord of Palenque,” a famous full-length burial costume made entirely of magnificent jade. Carlos explained that the firm lines of stone crossing the statue’s chest represented “energy bars,” which, when tight, showing no signs of sagging, indicated an advanced warrior. He referred to someone in the group who came to him so weakened that he was tripping over his own sagging “energy lines,” but with self-discipline pulled them up.

Ramon was a serious student of extraterrestrial theory, and inquired of Carlos if the jade man might have been an alien intelligence. Carlos was brusque in his reply, saying sharply, “Who knows?”



Left: Atlantean-style statue at the Museo Nacional de Antropología, which Carlos said “represents Taisha—the most complex of the witches’ statues.” Right: Figure from the Museo Nacional de Antropología that Castaneda claimed was “practicing tensegrity.” Below: A typical chacmool from Chichén Itza, 900–1521 A.D., believed to be incense burners, but according to Carlos they were actually the witches’ guardians.

Photos: Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City



The apex of the visit came when he led us into a small room, waved his hand at a wall, and said, “There! Can you see it? Do you understand?”

On the wall was an ancient death mask that Carlos told me represented my father’s spirit, *was* my father, somehow—not merely a likeness. It so resembled Irving that I let out a cry when I saw it, and buried my face in my hands to hide my tears.

“My baby,” Carlos said tenderly, “it’s time for you to rest. As I said, being with the *nagual* is such *pressure*! It makes you tired until your body adjusts. And seeing Irving! That *is* Irving, yes or no?” Carlos’ eyes shone with his own held-back tears.

Once again he mimicked their routine conversations about looking young, adding, “Amy, believe me, we were a couple of old crocks, we looked like *shit*, lying like maniacs every year and laughing our heads off, and we knew it! It was marvelous! And every time I come here—and I’ve been coming for *decades*—I say hello to Irving. For years I have been greeting him. ‘Irving,’ I say, ‘How are you? You’re looking younger than ever!’ ” Carlos wiped away his tears and led me outside.

We stepped outside the museum to take some air. At that very moment, one of Mexico City’s most famous cultural events was beginning. On the museum grounds stood a remarkably tall pole—it seemed to be hundreds of feet high, as if, in my state of heightened imagination, it were brushing the clouds, reaching for the early twilight stars.

Six men, wearing leather belts around their feet, were climbing the pole. They wore colorful, strange clothes, but wherever bare flesh was exposed, I could see magnificent, lean muscles. They looked like creatures from a world so distant they could only have existed in one of Carlos’ books of dreams. He told me that they were known as “*voladores*,” or “flyers,” unrelated to the *voladores* of Tony’s pictures.

Photo by Richard Jennings



Photo © David Christie/Millennia Press Archives



The voladores (flyers) outside Mexico's Museo Nacional de Antropología.

They were as much feline as homo-sapiens—all grace and sinew and sublime concentration. One slip meant death even with the leather bands—the bands could so easily snap. Without exchanging a word or a look, just holding hands, I felt certain, as lovers do, that Carlos and I understood each other. All of life amounted to just this daring moment, aloft and unprotected. The *voladores*' art, their theatre, repeated for hundreds of years, was meant to wake us to the succulent, terrifying imminence of our end. They embodied the philosophy in Carlos' books, that "death must always be taken as our advisor, ever present over our shoulder."

Apparently, people waited all day for this performance. Carlos believed it was a tremendous omen, signifying the strength of our love, that we had walked straight from the museum out into the precise moment of the dance's opening. When he saw the dance begin, Carlos' eyes filled with tears again—and it was the first time I saw him fully cry.

“They’re reaching for infinity, Amy. They know their quest is futile, but they climb and climb and they never give up. They *reach* ... *that* is man breaking his chains, fighting his way out of prison, when he *knows* his fight is hopeless but nothing will stop him. He is full of joy, he says, ‘Fuck it! Fuck God himself! The joy is in the journey.’ Then he possesses everything. When what you have is more than enough, my love, *then*, and only then, are you on the edge of impeccability. *Something* sees; and that something loves our fight.”

We kissed. The dancers had reached the top. They remained attached by the cords at their ankles, but unraveled them so that they fell, magnificently, outward into the arms of the sky. Gloriously they circled and swayed, dancing with death with a precision and a discipline that I found nearly inconceivable even as I watched it.

“Once,” Carlos said solemnly, “I was with don Juan and this very same omen was given to us—we stepped outside and there were *voladores*, just beginning to climb. As they spun against the sunset, an enormous eagle—with wings *this big*—flew across the sky, above the pole, above the heads of the dancers. The eagle soared fantastically, so high that it became a tiny spot in the blue vastness; until all that was left was our memory of its flight.”

Silently we returned to the hotel. I knocked on Carlos’ door, dressed in a pale silk robe.

“You look like a nun,” he said wonderingly. He kissed my neck, as if it were something fragile. We held each other, and made love looking into each other’s eyes. All shyness gone, I said, “I love you.”

“What?” Appearing shocked, he replied, “*You love me?*”

“Yes. I do. I love you.”

“Ah. And I love you. You are mine, *preciosa*, *all mine*. You belong to me, and I belong to you, completely—there is no one else, and there never will be. I am *your man*, for eternity. Do you promise to give yourself completely to your husband?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what you’re saying?” There was an uneasy, fearful gleam in his eyes. “You will be the wife of the *nagual*. You can *never return*. The world—the world as you know it—is lost to you forever. I have been so deep inside you, merged with my adorable wife, that ... you are no longer human. You have said goodbye to the world. You wonder, why don’t you see the things I do? I must explain—if you learn biology, you take Biology 101. It’s the same with sorcery. Now, you are taking Sorcery 101.”

The phone rang, and answering it, Carlos began a prolonged conversation in such rapid-fire Spanish that I couldn’t understand any of it. I retreated to my room.

After half an hour had passed I knocked on Carlos’ door again. I found him sitting on the bed with his head buried in his hands. In his slippers and robe, silver hair disheveled, for the first time he looked to me like an old man.

I sat down beside him. “What is it?”

“I have to go somewhere, *chica*.”

“Can I come with you?”

“No, no—I want to stay *here*, with *you*, but I have to go with some Indians.”

“The Indians from your books?”

“No! Some other Indians!” He pressed his forehead in distress.

He cast me a defeated look. “I don’t want to go! I want to be here, with *you*, I want to *stay* with you—but I have no choice. You’ll have to fly home first thing in the morning. Go and sleep, my darling—I’ll wake you at five.”

He brushed a lock of my hair behind my left ear, and tenderly kissed my neck.

“So the other side won’t get lonely,” he said, kissing my right ear. His eyes were wistful, consummately sad.

“I’ll put you on the plane, and I’ll call you the minute I can, *mi corazón*. I love you.”

A Magical Tour of the Sorcerers' Secret Home

*Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend,
Nor services to do, till you require.
Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour
Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,
Nor think the bitterness of absence sour
When you may be, or your affairs suppose,
But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought
Save, where you are how happy you make those.
So true a fool is love that in your will,
Though you do any thing, he thinks no ill.*

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet LVII

Florinda contacted me by calling me in Berkeley. She scolded me for my bourgeois romantic feelings, saying it was absurd “to be in love” with the *nagual*. I protested that he had made this very avowal to me. She sighed with annoyance. Courtship, she insisted, was the scourge of humanity, the worst preoccupation of “the social order.”

It became increasingly clear to me that my waning preoccupation with Carlos' books after adolescence set me apart from the group, who had come seeking to be disciples. Florinda hinted that I had been tricked by Carlos' courtship in the manner of an earlier generation of apprentices. I was secretly flattered, yet also upset by

Florinda's insistence that I misunderstood my romance. I brought it up to Carlos.

"I know I shouldn't feel this, but I *want* you, as a woman loves a man!"

He replied, "I love you just the same way, *mi corazón!* As a man wants his woman! *I am your man.*"

Florinda, I privately decided, was the one who didn't understand.

I now met Carlos irregularly, yet our romantic passion grew. One sensual afternoon he pulled me onto his lap, burying his face in my neck. When he looked up, eyes luminous with tears, he said, "I feel so close to you—so *intimate*. I've never felt this way, *amorcita*, not even with my sister Muni."

And, curiously, Carlos was finding minor reasons to berate me. Perhaps it was in reaction to the very intimacy he had craved and found, and perhaps found frightening. His criticisms were hurtful—my clothes were not stylish, I shouldn't keep cats, I remained "human." Though confused by his combined role as father figure, lover, and guru, infatuation dazzled me. Carlos told me to announce our engagement. *Per instructions*, I told everyone but my mother.

"Why did you ask me to talk about it, Carlos?" I wondered; he was usually so secretive.

"I wanted to see what New Agers would do, with you engaged to Castaneda!"

"What did you see?"

"*Such* envy. Energy bodies quivering with hatred!" He shuddered.

Carlos at last decided that I was ready to visit his shamanic abode. He referred to it as the witches' house or "Taisha's house." He emphasized that it was a magical home, consequently, "We can never rebuild completely—we can only patch up." When "the energy" allowed, Carlos did extensive carpentry and landscaping, such as laying tile walkways replicating the UCLA paths where he "first achieved inner silence."

Arriving shortly before twilight at “dusk, the magic hour,” Carlos drove us from Brentwood to a residential Westwood area, stopping before a huge Spanish-style complex, a virtual compound surrounded by twelve-foot hedges. Taking my hand, he led me through a wrought-iron gate, into a verdant, mini-orchard of fruit trees—luscious figs, kumquats, oranges, peaches. One wall was covered with the climbing rosemary in which I had bathed, the plant born of don Juan’s cutting. We slipped, elfin, through the magical garden. He pointed to a gnarled tree.

“That one is Taisha,” he said mysteriously, “and that—” indicating a more delicate tree—“is Florinda.”

We approached a peach tree whose fruit was beginning to ripen. I smiled expectantly. Carlos smiled impishly and reached for a peach that had just flowered into sweetness. Plucking it, he whispered a command; “*Chola*, eat it *now*, eat all of it here.”

I felt like Persephone tasting her pomegranate in the Underworld. We crept on through the garden, Carlos gleeful as a child, making a perimeter of the sprawling 1920s abode, stopping before a door. The only decorations were two stone statuettes of frogs. “These are Florinda’s,” he said, “the frog, the butterfly, and the hummingbird are her three power creatures.”

He waved at the patio behind us. “This is where Big Florinda—don Juan’s companion, who stayed behind to guide us when he left—burned before my eyes! She was wearing a flowing white sun dress, and a wide-brimmed hat with a veil of lace.”

Carlos shook his head sadly. “She said we were assholes, impossible egomaniacs, and she couldn’t wait any longer! She was ready to go, and she grabbed little Flo by one arm, to pull her into Infinity! I grabbed the other arm, and held her back with everything I had! And—the big one burned! *Qué bárbaro!* Little Florinda was *furious* at being left behind! She made me *promise* that I would take her to Infinity myself, since I stole her chance. She says I’ve cheated her, and I owe her my wings to ride on.”

The house was astonishingly spare. White plaster walls, wooden floors, and no furniture besides the simplest necessities. Carlos guided me down a hallway and showed me a series of rooms. Each

was more minimalist than the next. A quick peek into his bedroom revealed a largish, long room furnished with a queen-sized bed, a bedside table, and a long, simply-constructed desk covered with piles of papers, a book of “Canciones” (Spanish folk songs), and a voluminous Spanish/English dictionary. Carlos’ eyesight was bad—Florinda hinted that he had cataracts, glaucoma, or both—and I noticed that the font size on the papers was large. There was neither a typewriter nor computer. Light filtered down from two beautifully constructed, spacious skylights which Carlos had installed. I later saw him operate these with long poles which he kept near the bed. In the corner of the room was a stand full of antique canes and walking-sticks, which he said had belonged to don Juan.

The only clutter was on his bedside table. It looked like anyone’s bedside table except for the fact that there was a large knife, along with strands of opals, moonstones, and amber lying amongst the everyday matchbooks, quarters, and a large-faced clock. A bizarre object caught my eye on the writing desk. It was a two-pronged rubber dildo. His eyeglasses were propped between the two protrusions. “That’s for my glasses,” he said a little anxiously, leading me out of the room.

We passed a closed door. “*That was the room in which la Gorda died because she was an egomaniac! We’ve never opened the door since the day she died.*”

Carlos led me back outside through the darkening garden and out onto the street. Electricity sparked between our fingers. While Carlos found his keys, I turned my head slightly, curious to see our street in case I was asked later. I was very bad at directions, and failing one of Carlos’ interrogations at paying attention could have fatal consequences.

Carlos froze, and slowly shook his head. “I knew it. I *knew* you would do it! What are you, a private detective?! *You looked! YOU FAILED!* That’s it. You’ve ruined everything.”

“I—I—”

Carlos was silent. I had misread the nature of my task. I thought that to be a good warrior, I should know where I was, noting the route inconspicuously. I sat and cried. As we reached my mother’s

door Carlos commanded, “Go back to Berkeley immediately.” He paused.

“You’re *such* a fuck-up! Oh well,” he shrugged, “so am I.”

He turned away when I leaned to kiss him.

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Ripe for the Picking

It was written I should be loyal to the nightmare of my choice.

—Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

At this juncture, I imagine most readers are asking: “After the honeymoon, why did you stay in such a verbally abusive relationship, increasingly becoming one of the group’s scapegoats?”

The seeds were planted in my childhood and adolescence. I had studied *chi gung* and other martial arts as a spiritual practice; I was a “spiritual seeker” during the ’70s and wrote a seminal book about psychic healing and telepathy. I was awed by meeting Carlos Castaneda, one of the great teachers and writers of my generation.

When the father I adored died in 1990, within two years I had found a surrogate in Carlos. I was “engaged” to a substitute daddy—virtually the same age as him, an equally bestselling and groundbreaking author for a generation. I was only half-aware of my motivations.

My family, though gifted with a multitude of talents, was also thoroughly dysfunctional. When household tension grew unbearable, we each developed strategies for coping.

My mother suffered from repeated nervous breakdowns in the wake of giving up her career as a Hollywood photojournalist to raise two children. My parents’ marriage, which had begun as a truly happy love match, deteriorated due to my mother’s cabin fever and my father’s frequent absences when he traveled for his work. My mother felt desperate, alone, and abandoned.



Photo by Sylvia Wallace

The author at age two with her brother.

In keeping with their values (and those of many of their generation), divorce was out of the question. Affairs and substance abuse crept into their lives. My father was prescribed strong amphetamines for weight control, then drank heavily at night alone in the wee hours to counter the effects of the stimulants.



The Wallace Family, 1966.

The whole family knew, though we never spoke of it, that he had one serious love affair with a publicist, and several shorter-term liaisons. Yet he once announced to me, in my mother's presence, that if she ever cheated on him he would end the marriage. I adored my father, and I feared a divorce would leave me in my mother's custody.

My brother David, eight years older than I, retreated into his own world of logic and numbers. By age seven he was inventing statistical games, and this resulted in a lifelong romance with information systems. This, along with a passion for sports, has led him to become the world's leading Olympic historian.

I worshipped him as a young girl, and as a teenager. It wasn't until my eight-year marriage—in my twenties—that I put some distance between us. Until then, my brother had represented the

ideal of someone who could depart the family home. After spending my adolescence in a New England boarding-school, I moved to Berkeley and lived with David in a commune.

I saw magic in his Houdini-like capacity to escape the family chains. When we returned to our parents' house to write books, these were temporary stays. Even so, at times the tension was virtually unbearable. In contrast, over the years my family frequently had happy, playful, exciting times, collaborating on three different editions of *The Book of Lists*, a column for *Significa*, and roaming the bookstores throughout Los Angeles. The whole family delighted in watching the Watergate scandal together, which brought us all closer.

As a child, when I sensed my parents' unhappiness growing, I withdrew into a world of fairy tales, reading voraciously and writing poetry and short stories at an early age. My fondest memory of my mother is of her taking me to the library and helping me choose stacks of myths and fables. These passions led to my solo career as a novelist and biographer.

When family pressures grew intolerable, our father simply got up and left the dining table or television room, retreating to his office to write. Or, more dramatically, he left the country for extended periods, first working as a foreign correspondent, later researching biographies and novels.

My mother's gloom and sarcasm were pervasive. Though we all enjoyed her Dorothy Parker-like wit, we were intimidated when her remarks grew cutting.

In the early '60s, we were portrayed as a model family in *Life* magazine. At six, I smiled for the camera while clutching the family cat. Decades later, it was *People* magazine's turn to perpetuate the image when my father, brother, and I wrote *The Book of Lists* series, which topped *The New York Times* bestseller list for a thrillingly long time.

Repeatedly, fans told me, "I can't get through a single *dinner* with my parents! How do you do it? How wonderful you all are!"

Inside the family we never talked out our problems, sweeping them under the rug instead. Behind the scenes, unhealthy drug use

and strife existed side-by-side with love, respect, humor, and hard work.

When my father died of pancreatic cancer, it was small surprise that I fell in love with the one man I knew who equaled my father's magical charisma, spell-binding story-telling, wisdom, experience, and indescribable charm.

And, I had found what I believed to be a genuine spiritual path, one that would cauterize deep childhood wounds.

My father's shows of love were sporadic—sometimes the carrot of acceptance was dangled and then withdrawn. Carlos expanded enormously on this “technique”; it became central to his philosophy. Of course, unlike my father, he saw it as “a warrior's path,” a form of sorceric tough love.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, the acronym PTSD became widely known. It stands for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the catch-all phrase for the long-term after-effects of trauma. Decades ago, the medical community believed that only soldiers who fought in battles suffered from this syndrome, with its devastating anxiety attacks and nightmares. Many of those afflicted have been reduced to an agoraphobic lifestyle, afraid to leave their homes for fear that seemingly innocuous events (a particular song, a dreaded location) would set off the symptoms.

We now know that PTSD can be caused by many things, such as suffering a natural disaster, an ugly divorce, chronic physical or verbal abuse, suicides, loved ones “missing in action” (during war or from other causes), or the loss of a child, spouse, or other intimate. And—leaving a cult, entailing as it does the loss of the sought-after “good family.”

Because, as Carlos said, it's *always* “ten minutes to midnight,” then “five minutes,” then “one,” our adrenal glands were overloaded with fear. Fear of being expelled, of being left behind, of being publicly and privately humiliated—*of losing heaven* (the Second Attention)—caused many of us to become chronically exhausted and sick. There was one thing I *did* know: The desire ruling my life was

to be free from desire. I didn't want to need love or fame or money or happiness or friends—all these things could be lost, or die, or be taken away. Or, as if they were fragile pieces of glass, I could drop and break them.

Carlos offered me a world all about *not* wanting—about destroying things and desires and relationships—a world I believed would set me free. I only had to listen to Carlos make fun of himself, or any guru, or of Andy's Hollywood aspirations, or my jet-setting childhood, to feel freer. I believed that he would liberate me from my earthly worries and goals.

In keeping with his suggestions, I threw away my book reviews. (One member of the group burned her birth certificate, thinking it would help her destroy her old, evil self—only to have to reapply for it.) I gave away all the objects I loved. These acts made me feel closer to what Carlos called “It,” and gave me hope that he would notice my hard work and sacrifice and love me even more.

Amongst the women in the group, a common physical manifestation of the ongoing fear and stress was premature disappearance of menstrual periods. One member of the group, in her thirties and of normal body weight, didn't menstruate for years. Recent studies have shown that under the conditions in which we lived, both men and women frequently lose secondary sex characteristics.

The relief offered by sex, drugs, and drink was of course forbidden, though many secretly indulged. In trade for being in a family, our immune systems took severe beatings. We lived constantly in “survival mode.”

Chronic depression is a common reaction to PTSD. Within the group, we were monitored for signs of depression (which was regarded as weakness) and punished if our smiles were not bright or didn't appear genuine. No warrior *dared* indulge in such human failings as sorrow and despair.

It wasn't until my final years in the group that I found a book—entitled *I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors* by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.—that would set me on a healing path. At

first I found it so disturbing that I was unable to read it without crying uncontrollably.

I learned that in 1975 a famous series of experiments was carried out by psychologist Martin Seligman, experiments so significant that they added a term to our language—the “Learned Helplessness Syndrome.”

In Seligman’s experiments, animals were given electric shocks from which they couldn’t escape. They couldn’t run from the pain. As Matsakis wrote, “At first the animals fought, tried to get away, and uttered cries of pain or anger. Then they sank into listlessness and despair. Later on, in a second set of experiments, the same animals were shocked again—only this time, by pressing a certain lever or completing some other simple task, they could stop the electric current. But they made no effort to do so.

“The animals had learned to be helpless. Due to their previous experiences, even when a means of escape from the pain was provided, these animals were too defeated, perhaps defeated neurologically, to take the simple action that would end their suffering.”

The well-known “battered wife syndrome” is a quintessential example of learned helplessness. Scientists observed that prolonged suffering led to the very same symptoms in human beings. In addition to remaining in an abusive situation, other symptoms are “outbursts of anger and aggressiveness, followed by numbing or listlessness and despair, a lack of interest in food, sex and play.” (Van der Dolde, 1988; Rossi, 1986.)

Dr. Matsakis articulated my feelings when she wrote, “[O]ne major reason abused persons have difficulty leaving their abusers and striking out on their own is learned helplessness ... they have learned, deeply, profoundly, to feel powerless....” According to experts in the field, slow recovery is possible. Ideally, the most powerful aids are a non-judgmental therapist, good friends, and a patient, supportive partner.

Jon G. Allen, Ph.D., wrote in his book, *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding*:

“Common sense dictates that someone who has been repeatedly hurt and mistreated in a relationship would do everything possible to flee or at least to maintain distance. Yet continually we observe the opposite....”

“Hard as it may be to believe, being abused and mistreated can actually *strengthen* the bond in relationships. And this phenomenon is not unique to humans.... Perhaps it is not so hard to understand why a person would maintain relationship *despite* abuse; any relationship may be better than none.”

During times when the group was undergoing one of its darker periods, we were often told to be “light,” or that “the new mood is lightness.” We obeyed, or tried to, and thus denied ourselves the only way back to health—the freedom to grieve losses and separations.

Few in the group were privy, as I later was, to the Muni, Florinda, and Taisha who sobbed and raged, desperately seeking relief, taking a much-desired sedative or drink. We were all instructed to renounce our natural feelings in order to be “impeccable warriors,” capable of joining the *nagual* on his “definitive journey.”

In essence, my family, for all its well-meaning love and support, provided the groundwork for my staying in the group and fighting to return when kicked out. I was indeed ripe for the picking. I was harshly dumped by a boyfriend as my father died, and I felt desperately alone. When I confided this to Carol she said, “This is the *perfect* time to get you.”

I could never leave the group, nor could I truly join. Some spark within me was rebellious to the end, and I never became a drone like my fellow disciples, because I dared to periodically tease and challenge Carlos, rather than consistently treating him as a deity.

Florinda played an important role in this drama, as important as Carlos’. She stressed that she was my “good mother, your *real* mother, the one who loves you, unlike Sylvia.”

Photo by Sylvia Wallace



Amy as a young girl with her father in Paris.

“You should push Sylvia down the stairs,” she often joked, adding, “Just kidding, of course!”

I was hungry for affection and companionship, longing for a “good mother.” My own mother couldn’t help being who she was—her childhood had been truly ghastly. Her family lived in poverty in New York City’s Bronx district, at that time a Jewish ghetto. Her

mother told her every day as she left for school, “If you aren’t a good girl today, you’ll come home and find me with my head in the oven, the way I found my mother.” My mother was naturally bitter, terrified, desperate. She told me that she “lived to hate,” and she took pride in her taste for revenge and malice. She was incapable of providing consistent love, but she *did* love me and sometimes, sporadically, felt free to show it.

Many, many years later, I learned something miraculous: my mother told her friends again and again how much she adored me, and how beautiful I was.

I feel certain that Sylvia didn’t perceive her behavior as bizarre. Most traumatic for me was her exhibitionism and flirtatiousness with my boyfriends and later my husband. These boys, feeling trapped and horrified, came to me in their distress, asking what they should do.

It started when I was a child. She lashed out at me bitterly from my earliest years, calling me fat and smelly. She pressed me roughly down over her lap, harshly forcing suppositories into me. She believed that my bathroom visits were insufficient, and she ignored my cries of pain. Then, she stood over me as I crouched on the toilet, demanding the results of her treatment. I was terrified.

She insisted that I wear her sweaters, pressing them upon me, then she sent them to the cleaners. When they were returned she told me, in front of family and guests, how the foul stink could not be removed—I had ruined her garments.

When I turned eleven, she painfully scraped and shaved the scant hair beneath my arms, then applied harsh deodorants that caused embarrassing and painful infections. The offensive odor that only she could smell could not be eradicated.

I wanted a new mother, I wanted a safe family.

Sometimes my father intervened, other times he withdrew, leaving the room and leaving me in despair. Thus I felt the weight of his absences, and his unreliability.

I always wanted my father back, for he was the parent who changed my sheets when I wet my bed, told me goodnight stories, and never, ever seemed angry at life. When I reached my thirties,

my mother mysteriously began to tell me that she thought I was beautiful. It was a blessed relief.

One anecdote strikes me as particularly descriptive of my family's dysfunctions. When the time came for *The Book of Lists #2*, Irving proposed that Sylvia be included. She sat, passive, listening to his plan.

I objected. I was all too familiar with the way my mother humiliated me, and I couldn't imagine how we would collaborate.

I said simply, "I don't want to do it, because we'll fight." Mayhem ensued. Therapists—my mother's and father's—were consulted. I was informed that I "only cared about making more money." My parents offered to pay me my mother's share. I stuck to my truth, saying, "With the success of *Book of Lists #1*, I have all the money I could want! It's nothing to do with that: honestly, *it's the fighting I can't face.*"

This was true—my finances were stable, and even if they hadn't been, I would never have allowed this to be my reason to go against my instincts and what I could expect, based on my history with my mother. Such a deception would never have occurred to me. Even my own therapist took their side, saying, "Parents versus children is a natural arrangement—you must say 'yes.' " I remained firm.

I remembered vividly a scene in the kitchen—minus my brother—where, my mother mute, my father said to me, "Your mother is psychotically sick. She needs this book." My poor mother looked like a deer caught in the headlights, and my father, I was convinced, had the best of intentions: he wanted to keep the peace, to keep the family together. All this unhappiness was motivated by a desire to be close, to be safe.

It went on and on, my mother silent and stunned, and my father insisting. I gave in, with a final frustrated outburst: "I give up! If you want to think it's the money, go ahead, sure, it's the money!" I lied. In the end, accustomed as I was to ultimately giving in, I submitted. Little did I imagine that decades later, I would repeat this dynamic with Carlos, buckling time and again.

The Book of Lists #2 was written by the four of us, and the process was a nightmare for me. My mother, dulled by her doctor's prescriptions, slowed everything down, arguing over minor details. Further, she couldn't write her share of the articles. The three of us—Irving, David, and I—grew so impatient we ceased to consult her and treated her like a piece of furniture, suppressing our tempers. My mother remained silent, or contributed meandering, oblique remarks. It was a horrible experience, and by unspoken consent, *Book #3* was written without her. My own strain showed in a very poor performance this time—I was unable to cope, to do my share of the work. This created tensions among my father, brother, and me. I know that they meant well, and they were tragically limited by the powerful family dynamics, as well as my mother's anguished history.

As the years passed, I glossed over and repressed my father's harshness at calling her "psychotically sick" while she sat there like a dummy. I did not have an ideal father, but I needed to believe I did. And of course, I continued to desperately want a warm mother. I needed *a family*—the family pictured in *Life* and *People*.

After my father's funeral, my mother insisted on seeing me to the boarding-gate at the airport as I returned to my home in Berkeley.

As I stepped over the threshold toward the plane, she blurted, "I've been having an affair for thirty years."

Shocked, I asked, "With who?"

She had always cornered the victim market because of my father's infidelity—this news was hard to believe.

"I'll tell you someday," she said coyly.

She didn't wait long. Within a month she came to visit me and told me her story. My fantasy that she had discovered a happy love—a form of recompense for the period when my parents' marriage had soured—was shattered. Her lover was her M.D., whom she always spoke of as "Dr. Smith," never using his first name. As she related the truth, the affair's profoundly clinical tone disturbed me.

She saw him three times a week. He gave her a shot of a strong narcotic, Demerol, which was supplemented by a daily prescription; she also received Quaaludes and a panoply of other drugs "for her

nerves.” Then they had sex in his office, even when the doctor’s wife was undergoing surgery for a double mastectomy. He instructed his receptionist not to put through his calls.

“Weren’t we *bad*?” my mother said. I was so stunned I could only stare. I felt numb.

I was born *very* premature and dangerously small, addicted to the narcotics in my mother’s system. I used to think that my mother had psychically ejected me; now I wonder if I wasn’t desperate to leave her womb. She was having sex with my father and this horrible man during her pregnancy—if any of Carlos’ theories about awareness in the womb were true, I was indeed energetically damaged.

If nothing else, the revelations of my mother’s profound addictions explained my memories of her stumbling and slurring so markedly that my friends thought she was an alcoholic. Because of a heart condition, she never drank. Now I understood that if she had, she would likely have overdosed on the deadly combination of pills and alcohol. I had spent my childhood and adolescence watching *Valley of the Dolls* become *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*—finally I understood why.

I had always abhorred Dr. Smith, and my mother periodically dragged me into his office so he could “see” me, something I found puzzling. He was the very opposite of my father: crude, vulgar, crassly dressed, and a name-dropper, for although he was married, he let it be known that he had affairs with his patients, some of whom were famous actresses.

There were no romantic weekend trips for my mother and her paramour; she even paid for her appointments (rather, my father did), which continued for thirty years. Perhaps she liked it that way—it was *bad*.

My father believed that Dr. Smith functioned as a pseudo-psychiatrist, even when my mother finally entered analysis and went to both doctors. The affair, I learned over lunch, began the very week I was conceived. I blanched so visibly that my mother laughed, in a clumsy attempt to reassure me.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “Your father is your father, I promise you.”

Her eyes suddenly took on a wide, worried look. She implored me not to tell my brother.

“It’s different for a son,” she said. “He won’t respect his father’s manhood.”

I kept the promise for a month or so, finally breaking down in need of a sibling heart-to-heart talk. I learned that she had told David immediately after telling me. He responded to my remarks with a flash of world-weary dark humor. I wanted to seem as cool as he was, but inside I wasn’t. And, I saw his point—it was a grotesque comedy, among other things—but all the same I was shocked and upset, and hid my feelings.

On one of my visits to Los Angeles, several years into my “apprenticeship,” I stayed with my mother. Dazed on sleeping pills, she implored me to call Dr. Smith to say hello. I declined, she begged, and, as usual, I gave in to please her.

He was close to ninety years old, and I didn’t expect him to pick up the phone.

He did. Dr. Smith began a senile, pornographic rant, centering on his irritation that I had arrived for a visit just when he was on his way over “to fuck your mother.” He invited me to watch—better yet, to join them. He raved about my mother’s oral sex techniques. Desperate to get off the phone, I had to ask an urgent question of this sick, crazy man.

I interrupted his grotesque filibuster, his mother/daughter threesome fantasy.

“I just want to know if—”

“I’m your father?” He laughed viciously. “No, not a chance. Now, why don’t I come over and you can give me my reward? After all, *you’re* my reward for not breaking up two marriages—I want you to —” I hung up.

I couldn’t trust the words of these two sick people, but examining my body, I knew that I was Irving’s daughter. For as long as I could

remember, people had told me, “You look *just* like your father, and your brother looks like your mother.” I even had my father’s hands—a freckle here, a mark there—my mind at last came to rest about my parentage.

I never told my mother the content of that vile monologue, but she was curious, insistent. I only told her that Smith said that he had refused to divorce and marry her. This made her furious—she insisted that she had rejected *his* marriage offer: she wasn’t going to give up being the wife of Irving Wallace to be a mere doctor’s spouse!

In shock and anguish, I called Carlos immediately after the phone call. He listened somberly, silent, finally saying, “Ay, ay, ay!” Then he hung up.

Shattered by Carlos’ indifference, I called Florinda, panic-stricken, desperate for comfort.

To my astonishment, she snarled at me, calling me an asshole for not getting off the line immediately. She insisted that I never tell Taisha, whom she considered unable to cope with sexual matters.

For once my anger overrode my fear, and I stood my ground, saying firmly, “For God’s sake, haven’t you *ever* opened a freezer door and found your fingers momentarily stuck, before you could pull them away? *That’s* what it was like! And, I wanted to hear him say he wasn’t my father, senile as he is—I was in shock—*can’t you grasp that?*”

Unaccustomed to being challenged, she slammed down the receiver.

I called Muni. She too found fault with me, criticizing me for listening to Smith’s obscenities. The conversation ended as my talk with Florinda had. Their only method of dealing with my anger was to disconnect, literally. The famous “sorcerer’s affection” was nowhere to be found.

I was stunned. The matter was never referred to again, until some months later, when Carlos, who had filed it away, devised a sick and cruel use for it.

In this sordid fashion my childhood prepared the ground that prevented me from leaving the sorcerers. They liked to say they were wild and free, like pirates. What outsiders didn't know was that we were always one step away from walking the gangplank for crimes we had no idea we'd committed. Despite the gaslighting and brutality, a true warrior would continue to fight to stay inside his or her "true energetic family." Out of desperation, I closed my mind to how very much of Carlos' philosophy sounded like the worst of guilt-ridden Catholicism. Even more disturbingly, I was entirely unaware that I was replicating the unintended sicknesses of my own blood family.

In a way, the fantasy of endlessly exploring new worlds and dimensions in "the sea of infinity" was as seductive as Carlos' love. I would, I dreamed, feel a sorcerer's joy, or a sorcerer's indifference, it didn't matter which. If I just worked hard enough, I would cease to care, and rise like a phoenix from the flames, unattached and wanting nothing, caring about nothing, free from all pain.

And so it was my family, trying "their shitty best," as Carlos was fond of saying, who primed me to dream of blessed indifference. Should I wind up actually *happy*, well, that would be the icing on the cake. Over and over people asked me why I *stayed*, why I eventually pimped and lied and lived in fear and misery. I was stuck in the quicksand of hope and despair, and I could not leave. What's more, I had cut almost all my ties with old friends, and I had nowhere to go outside this surrogate family. As the group scapegoat, I believed Carlos' and Florinda's insistence that this meant I "could take it," that I was "a strong fighter," soon to be free of all pain.

My mother was fond of quoting a favorite phrase, which she attributed to Freud: "When two people go to bed together, they're really in bed with *six* people: each other, and both sets of parents."

In Carlos I "married" my father's charm, wit, and authority and my mother's degrading sarcasm and cruelty. As an adult I at last understood. She never meant to hurt me, and she did love me very much, as best she could, but she was unable to escape the albatross of her own past.

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I Give Up My Cats, Become a Waitress, and Scandalize Infinity

Madness need not be a breakdown. It may also be a breakthrough. It is potential liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death.

—R.D. Laing, *The Divided Self*

I flew back to Berkeley the next morning in tears. As soon as I walked in the door, I looked at my beloved cats, Henry and Retsina—twelve and ten years old, respectively—and decided it was time to show my devotion to the warrior’s way by giving them up. Only now, while describing this event, have my tears finally come.

At the time, I enforced on myself the strictest mood I knew: I would feel nothing if it killed me. They weren’t children, after all, they were just—pets. People all around me were cutting off ties with siblings, parents, children—and quashing their feelings. Carlos instructed many apprentices to tell themselves when cutting ties with parents and children, “I send them to hell!”

I had lived with my cats for over a decade—Henry was an elegant, stray tabby who arrived on the doorstep as a kitten, followed two years later by a sweet, fluffy female, Retsina.

They had curled up in my arms when I went through a painful divorce and, when my father died of cancer, purred as I cried into their fur. They were mousers too—and bat catchers. I loved them madly.

This would prove to Carlos that I was serious, if anything would. But he wouldn’t speak to me, so how would I indicate my

dedication? I told Florinda of my decision, hoping she would pass it on.

An unexpected softness entered her voice.

“I know how you feel, Amy—I love cats, too, and I had to do the very same thing, once. I felt *terrible*, but afterwards, you’ll feel so much better, I promise you.”

Her kindness helped. I asked everyone I knew if they wanted two cats, determined to see Henry and Retsina go to a good home, yet knowing how difficult it was to give away two older felines.

I arrived at a plan. I would offer a dowry—several hundred dollars for each cat, and a bulk supply of cat food, provided they went together. I failed for weeks to find them a home. At last a couple appeared: friends of a friend. They were a hippie family living on California’s northern border, on acres of wild land, with dogs and chickens and horses. Their twelve-year-old daughter dearly wanted a cat.

We spoke and they were kind—kind enough to drive down to Berkeley in their big van, prepared with bedding and boxes for the long drive back north.

I forced down tears as I picked up Retsina first, hugging and kissing her while I whispered my love and said goodbye. She went docilely into the arms of these gentle people.

But Henry didn’t. He fought; he cried; he yowled and screamed. I had to run into the house and bury my head in a pillow, putting my hands over my ears to block out his howls of hurt, rage, and fear.

For a week I called the family every day. Henry had suffered during the trip, crying all the way to his new home.

And at the end of the week there was bad news. Retsina had disappeared—her new family could barely bring themselves to tell me. I was stoic, crushing down my fears. It was wild up there, she was surely dead. Henry was skulking miserably in corners, spraying, and hissing at the family dog.

I moped around my big, empty house. I didn’t feel better without them—not at all. I was lonely.

I spoke about it only rarely with Florinda, but she continued to be kind.

I called Taisha, but she was cold. “That was nothing. Now you have to get rid of the *big* cats, the *real* energy vampires—your parents. The ones who knead you with huge claws and suck your spirit.”

Three weeks later I received a jubilant call—Retsina was found! She had gone feral, joining a wild pack that lived beneath the house. She looked lean and happy. Henry moped, but sometimes Retsina came in and they played together.

Thank God. It was an omen—when Carlos finally spoke to me after a month’s silence I told him the story: if the tame female could go wild and hunt—then so could I. I referred to the story he had once told me, when we first became lovers:

“Amy,” he had said, “I know a cat that left its soft, easy home in Los Angeles. It went south, it crossed freeways! The Santa Monica Freeway, the 405 South.... It braved death, and it made it *all the way to Baja!* Think of that!”

“And what happened then?” I had asked.

“Ah, Amy, who knows? But what does it matter? It was a miracle, imagine!”

Carlos took my story as a good omen, and my sorrow lessened a bit, although he continued to berate me severely.

I was now in Sorcery Boot Camp. He stressed his disgust with my career. It upset him that I had gone straight to work instead of college. Although I had written non-stop since I was eighteen, publishing thirteen books, he ranted, “You’ve never worked a day in your life! Go get a job at McDonald’s!”

Within five days I’d gotten hired as a breakfast cook, waitress, and dishwasher at a Berkeley bed and breakfast. I called Carlos three days a week, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, when I returned from work at 12:30, having risen at 3:30 A.M. to do the baking.

I’d say, “Hello,” and he’d begin his monologue: “I piss on you. You’re shit. You think you’re so wonderful, so important, such problems! *Carajo!* What makes you special?”

“And such a Jew! What do think we are: a Mex and a Jew? You were raised with a silver spoon up your *culo!* You’ve never worked a

day in your life. Tell me, do Jews come to this restaurant?”

“Yes.”

“Do they tip?”

“No. It’s a bed and breakfast.”

“You see! The Jews are the worst—they don’t tip!”

“No.”

“Say something! What’s the matter, can’t you talk?”

“Well, the kid who’s training me is twenty-six, a punk with green hair.”

“Excellent! That’s very good. Because I piss on you. Well, there’s piss, and then there’s piss, of course. I’m doing everything to help you, and you only try to kill me—that’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“No.”

Sometimes Carlos hung up in a rage; other times he said, “Keep fighting until you realize what you are—worthless, nothing!” Usually one of his several lines rang and he got off the phone.

Sometimes I phoned Taisha (I had stopped calling her “Annie”) who was usually the gentlest of the witches, and who had seen me through my job-hunting. At one point I had called Carlos to help me decide between two positions I was offered, and I had to make an immediate decision. Taisha answered the *nagual*’s phone, which was so rare that she ruefully said it was the omen that we should speak. She instructed me on loving every moment I spent at my work; she told me inanimate objects were energetically alive, and I was to talk to the cutting board as I scrubbed it down.

“That’s what I do. Don Juan taught me this. At one time during my apprenticeship I lived in a tiny studio with only a desk, a bed, a chair, and a television. I cleaned them every day, I polished the desk and the TV, and I *talked* to them. One day, I felt a profound wave of affection wash over me—such *deep* affection for those objects. Objects are *alive*; they’re energy.”

I spent six months at the bed and breakfast, slipping away to one-day Tensegrity seminars whenever I could, a regular paying customer. The witches’ lectures had evolved into seminars in which

the Chacmools, or “guardians”—Astrid, Poona, and Zuna—taught the magical exercises.

A Tensegrity seminar was announced for several months away, in Los Angeles. It was to be a three-week event, in which Carlos Castaneda would finally go public! I wanted to quit my job and have plenty of time to strategize a move to Los Angeles, unbeknownst to Carlos. I felt I’d wait forever if I waited for his permission.

I rarely spoke with the *nagual* woman. But one day on impulse I decided to consult her about this problem.

“Muni, I want to leave my job, so I can come to L.A., but ... in Carlos’ books, when he was a short-order cook in Arizona, an omen came to tell him his job was over. I guess I’ve been waiting for an omen....”

“Asshole! *He* did eggs as a sorcery task, in one of the books! So *you* ‘do eggs!’ What omen? Are you an idiot? Don’t you get it by now?”

“Yes, of course,” I lied.

“Good.” She hung up.

I gave notice at my job, concocting a story about a sick relative in L.A. My bosses were very kind and sorry to see me go, asking me to return when I could. It would be some months before the three-week seminar, and in the interim my friend Sally and I attended all the short seminars we could. I schemed to rent my Berkeley home and find a month-to-month L.A. apartment. Also, I made occasional trips to Los Angeles on business. Sometimes when my brother was out of town I stayed at his house. On these visits, Carlos set up tests for me from afar, sending me to movies with the witches, so they could observe my behavior. I was never allowed to see him.

On one such evening Muni, Florinda, and I strolled in Westwood on our way to a movie. Muni began to massage my spine and shoulders, and I wondered if she was manipulating my assemblage point. Don Juan had done this in the books, by giving Carlos a hard slap on the back. As we reached a street sign, she pointed to the fuzzy green “Go” figure. “That’s how the energy body looks to sorcerers,” she said. “Someday, when you’ve erased mommy and daddy, you’ll see the energetic tour we took you on today.”

I flew home the next day, and Florinda called, letting me know I'd done well. I told her I felt strange but couldn't quite explain it—groggy, peculiar, not “myself.”

“That's part of it,” she said sharply, “but we don't discuss it.”

I wondered why not. In Carlos' bestsellers, he always asked don Juan “*why?*” But I was forbidden to do the same.

On my next trip to Los Angeles, Florinda called to convey a task Carlos had set: I was to gather my childhood toys and books from my mother's house and sneak them out in boxes (as if my mother would have cared!). Florinda made it exciting—everything was a top-secret mission. It was as if Carlos' own personal war against boredom was to make every act a matter of life and death.

“We'll have to engage Astrid in this maneuver,” she hissed, “and the *nagual* will send these things to Infinity. He may put them in his magic bathtub, where things disappear by themselves when you're empty enough. Now, gather all the photographs you can of yourself. Give them a thorough recapitulation, then put them in a box with the toys.”

Flo and Astrid arrived, like operatives in a John le Carré thriller. Astrid, the charismatic, Nordic-looking Chacmool, towered over us—no wonder they called her Florinda's bodyguard. They collected the boxes of stuffed animals and dolls, children's books and photos I had carefully boxed and sealed.

Carlos called me when I was back in Berkeley.

“You're doing fine, *amorcita!* The witches love you again! But you sealed the boxes with tape! ‘Ha!’ I told Florinda, ‘She's paranoid—she's afraid I'm going to look at them!’ ” He was so sarcastic I wilted, flushed with shame.

“Don't worry about taping boxes, *pendeja!* I'll never look at your private things! Now recapitulate and send me more pictures!”

I tried to pretend that I liked it now in my big, empty house without my cats playing and hopping into bed to nestle in my arms, but in truth I was becoming terribly lonely. I spent hours upon hours in my closet recapitulating (enclosed spaces were said to help,

“by putting pressure on the energy body), breathing in and out the story of my life, building a great pile of “energetically clean” photographs. At last there were enough to send. I called to tell Carlos they were on their way.

“Are you sure you recapitulated every one of them?”

“Well, it’s the first batch, but it’s a big one.”

“Okay, send them to Flo.”

I had a quandary, and I dared not discuss it with anyone. There were some beautiful nudes, racy but tasteful, taken by a gay female friend. I was naked except for a strand of pearls, and my body was at its most toned and muscular. Well, there was nothing shameful about them; I was no doubt worrying needlessly. The important thing was that they were the doorway to my freedom—Carlos would put the box in his magic bathtub, and the Spirit would accept this gift, the recapitulation, as Carlos had described to millions of readers. This “offering” would free me to live forever with my husband, “navigating in Infinity.” Done with purity of intent, this step was *essential*.

I put hundreds of pictures in manila envelopes. My family was photo-happy and with all the media attention we got, I felt as photographed as Prince Charles. I had hated it as a child. There were literally thousands and thousands of pictures to go through. To demonstrate my trust, I didn’t tape the envelopes shut when I sent them to Florinda’s P.O. Box.

Three days later my world exploded. Carlos called me in a violent temper, screaming into the phone: “You whore! You fucking *puta*! You send the *nagual* naked pictures! Dirty, filthy photographs, *showing yourself to some MAN! Carajo!* I am forced to send everything back!”

“Throw them away,” I said, stunned. My God, he must have gone through hundreds of photos to find them! And why ...?

“No! I cannot throw them away. This filth does not belong to me—you can do what you like with your property.” He slammed down the telephone.

I called Florinda in shock. She was screaming. “You did this on purpose to show off! Why didn’t you destroy those? I can’t believe

your stupidity!”

“But I thought everything went to the Spirit! He told me not to hide anything!”

“You should have *known*, *carajo*, *pendeja*! NO JODAS, Amy! You did this on purpose—you wanted him to see this *shit*! Exposing yourself, showing off!”

“But he swore to me he never looked at them, he *swore*, Florinda —”

“Don’t you *get it?!!* The *nagual* carries them himself to the Second Attention! He doesn’t have to open an envelope; he *sees*. You wanted him to see this shit!”

“I swear, I thought there—”

She hung up. I was, for the first time, absolutely staggered. I remembered Carlos telling me, “You should see my daughter *naked*! She is gorgeous, and her sexual organs are not human.” (Years later I saw her dance nude in front of the group—her sexual organs looked entirely normal.) Carlos made fun of the human race, as “the only apes who wear clothes!”

And most importantly, I knew in my heart that I had honored his wishes 100%. This was not an attempt to get attention. I spent countless hours reexamining my motives, and they were absolutely pure, without any doubt. I believed that anything less than total truth would block my way—I had trusted the *nagual* completely. And now Florinda, my ally, had called me a liar.

That was the day in which the first true seed of doubt was planted. No one, not even my heroes, could talk me out of the truth in my heart.

A few days later a box arrived addressed in Carlos’ neat hand. I peeked inside, and saw envelopes of photos and some toys. Why only some? I had given him three huge boxes. What had become of the rest?

Without a further look I buried it in the trash can.

Carlos stopped calling; and Florinda allowed me only the occasional call to her.

The greatest blow of this period occurred when Los Angeles was devastated by the January 1994 earthquake. At a moment such as this, rules about not calling Carlos seemed childish, even ridiculous. When the circuits were finally working, I dialed.

“It’s me, it’s Amy—I just want to know if you’re alright.”

There was a brief silence. He hung up.

I was so stunned that I couldn’t conceive the cruelty of his act, this crime against “sorcerer’s affection.”

I called Florinda, who told me they were fine. She was furious I had called. This time, I fiercely objected. “This is *absurd!* Of course I want to know you’re safe!”

“I *told you*—never call! EVER! *What’s wrong with you?* Why don’t you do what I say?!”

I wondered if the earthquake had been in Berkeley whether they would have called me. Probably not. These were not beings to trust, they were incapable of showing consistent care. But finally reaching and accepting that conclusion would have caused me to question all their methods—and to leave. I couldn’t face the loneliness.

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Disaster

*Oh, no no no, it was way too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.*

—Stevie Smith, “Not Waving But Drowning”

One day Florinda called to tell me that I had been on Carlos’ mind. “Something you’re doing is bringing you closer.” I told her that I continued to devote several hours a day to the recapitulation. Perhaps that was it, she mused. I was a fighter, they had agreed, I wouldn’t give up.

Carlos began to call again, tentative at first, and finally to arrange a date. He suggested I fly to Los Angeles for a few hours, to make love at an airport hotel and take the evening plane home. Perhaps this would yet again “open the door.”

He was waiting for me at the gate, and he was his former warm, affectionate self. In spite of the weird locale, our tryst was a wonderful success. Our old chemistry prevailed as if we’d never been apart. Then he embraced and kissed me as if nothing had ever happened.

Carlos enthusiastically asked if I would repeat the experiment the following week. On this second occasion, our interlude was inexplicably awkward. I was upset to find him distant, even nervous, as we made love.

As we lay in bed, Carlos suddenly turned suspicious, and grilled me about my drug use, past and present. I told him I'd been a wild child in my teens and twenties. He said acidly, "How long since you've smoked your beloved marijuana?"

"About fifteen years or so."

"Oh." He seemed disappointed, and probed further. I told him that I took prescription painkillers and muscle relaxants for my monthly migraines, which came when I got my period, and had for years, which was an improvement on my twenties, when I'd had frequent migraines. This appeared not to bother him in the least. I went on to tell him that I was taking Prozac for depression two weeks before my period to treat PMS, a new use for the ubiquitous antidepressant. It helped me tremendously. I took the minimum dose, had never had a side effect, and it could never be considered a recreational drug, which appeared to be Carlos' worry. He was vocally disturbed by users of marijuana, cocaine, and psychedelics, none of which I used. I had the feeling that he felt guilty for leading a generation into experimenting with peyote and similar "power plants."

Carlos flew into the biggest rage I'd ever seen him in, accusing me of trying to kill him by having sex with the poisonous Prozac in my body. I hadn't a clue it was forbidden, and I was stunned by his temper tantrum. Then he ranted about my youthful drug use damaging my aura permanently and his by extension, although it had been nearly two decades since I had taken anything "bad." I sat on the bed and cried. Silent with fury, he drove me the few blocks to the airport.

On the plane I was seated behind Maya Angelou, and the moment I saw her extraordinary face, which had seen so much suffering, I burst into fresh tears. Although we had never met, I introduced myself, and discovered that she had met and adored my father. I told her I missed him terribly, and her own eyes filled with tears. She took my hand and said, "I understand." Squeezing it she comforted me, exuding an unforgettable charisma and warmth.

"He was a wonderful man," she said, full of feeling. At that horrendous moment, she seemed like an angel on my pathway.

Somehow, obscurely, through this meeting I began to understand that my grief for my father was entwined with my sorrow over Carlos. Obvious as it was to many of my friends, I hadn't understood the degree to which Carlos was a substitute father.

Before disconnecting his phone number again, Carlos took a few of my calls, berating me severely, and repeating something he was telling all the apprentices—that he had tried to lift my “energy body” from below, banged his head on my damaged aura, and had to be driven to the UCLA emergency room by Muni. He insisted he had a concussion.

I wept hysterically to Florinda. “I let down Carlos!”

“No—*infinitely worse*—you let down the *nagual*.”

She was certain I had dealt him his deathblow, that he would never recover from my poisonous energy. I quit Prozac cold. I rapidly became suicidal. I stopped eating and refused to leave my house. My friends were worried about me; my brother was worried; my therapist was worried; no one could console me. I was wasting away, unable to leave the house, to pay the bills, to find any reason to continue living.

One of my dearest Berkeley friends, Richard, decided to drive us to Marin County for a hike, determined to get me outside and moving. We hiked up a long trail leading to a magnificent view of the Bay Bridges, a popular tourist attraction. There were families, joggers, and happy couples, all out for a refreshing Sunday. Halfway up the hill I said I was too tired to continue. I would wait on a bench until Richard's return. The bench overlooked jagged cliffs and crashing, foam-tipped waves hundreds of feet below.

I decided to jump. It was the only time in my life I had been absolutely serious about suicide, a moment away from taking action. I'd long had a suicide plan—to take a collection of pills and alcohol while sitting in the Northern California snow, beneath a tree. I didn't want to suffer, and I imagined it would be like falling asleep. And I didn't want to burden anyone I loved with a messy body.

This was different. In one second I could end my pain. I stood up and approached the edge of the cliff. I felt like a robot, programmed for self-destruction, until a wave of emotion broke through the haze.

A series of images stopped me, a reel of pictures insisting, insisting. The first was of my mother. It was the thought of her that stayed my step, as I hovered, staring at the sharp rocks below. I couldn't do this to her, it was *wrong*. Her own mother had threatened her daily with suicide, having found *her* mother dead. Taking my life was the worst thing I could inflict upon my mother, and I simply couldn't do it. Then, like frames in a movie, came my brother, and my dearest friends.

Finally I had a vision of Richard. I imagined him returning to find a crowd of onlookers, gawking at my body, a mangled puppet on the cliffs below. I imagined what a burden of grief and guilt I would be giving him for the rest of his life. I couldn't do that to my friend. I stepped away and sat down.

At that moment Richard reappeared. I joined him and we walked back down the hill. I didn't tell him.

I didn't tell anyone I knew. Instead I called the Hemlock Society, the controversial organization that supports euthanasia for the terminally ill. A kindly woman answered the phone. I told her I wanted to order their book of "recipes" for pharmaceutical suicide.

"Are you terminally ill?" she asked, in a worried voice.

"No."

"We can't ... the Hemlock Society was founded for people dying of mortal illnesses, who ... you'd have to join for three months first, then apply for the book."

She sounded anxious for me not to join. "Have you called the Suicide Hotline?"

"I'm responsible for someone's death. I ... I killed someone I love."

"Oh," she said softly. She sounded stricken. "I'm *so sorry*. Please consider talking to someone, counseling ... I have some numbers here."

"Thank you, I have a therapist. Could you just send me the forms? I want to apply." Regretfully, she gave me the information. Frozen

as I was, this stranger's warmth touched me.

Then I called Florinda. She was vicious. "You think you can get our attention? You think we'll care if you're dead? Amy, not only don't we give a shit, we won't even notice. Do you think we care what a poor baby like you does to get attention? That's all you're trying to do, naturally. Well, let me tell you, it won't work here."

I called Taisha. She laughed sarcastically. "Oh, everyone tries that!" She hung up.

I called Muni, asking if suicide was a viable warrior's choice. "Well, there are two kinds of suicide. One is a warrior's suicide, when you're prepared to face your death. The other is a 'poor baby' suicide—that's what I think is going on here."

Years later I told Muni how close to dying I had actually come, and how the thought of the moment at the cliff's edge still frightened me. She waved her hand dismissively.

"He accused us all of trying to kill him, to poison him. It's no big deal—it happened to everyone."

Despite this nonchalance, the moment I came closest to self-annihilation has stayed with me, as vivid as yesterday. Each time I think of it a shudder runs through me, at how close, how very close I came. One step—the penance for nearly killing a God.

I Hire a Private Detective

When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer.

—Corrie Ten Boom, Holocaust survivor

I was looking for a flashlight in the dark night of the soul. Florinda's "we won't even notice, much less care if you kill yourself" speech was off the point. Instinctively, I knew Florinda was wrong about my motives for suicide—which was the third time I had found her capable of wrongness (the first being her contesting the beauty of my love for Carlos, the second regarding the nude photos) and this cut a powerful chink in the armor of my dedication. But I wasn't focused on that. Of course there is suicide to punish and get attention—Florinda must have ripped her logic out of a high school psychology textbook. But there are other kinds. Mine had a simple motivation: to end pain.

When I joined the sorcery world, I was adrift in my life. The success of my first novel was keeping me afloat, but my boyfriend of several years had betrayed me, leaving me for another woman while my father was dying. I called him from a hospital pay phone to say that my father would be dead within a few hours.

He replied, "I can't talk to you now, there's someone here with me." I collapsed in the hospital corridor. My brother came and scraped me up, and we went back into the room to hold my father as he died, whispering our love to him, and praying he would hear us in his coma. When my ex saw the obituaries on the front pages,

he left a stream of telephone pleas, repeating with chilling regularity, “But I didn’t believe he was *really going to die*.”

My mother was in terrible shape, and my brother and I had new, difficult decisions to make. I had an idea for a second novel, but little motivation. At the heart of my depression was my father’s death. My mother’s condition worsened; she collapsed after a severe stroke and entered a steady decline.

I couldn’t put the pieces back together. I knew that the very way I woke up in the morning was wrong—I disliked consciousness, though I ate healthily, exercised fanatically, and did the “right” things. When the depression wouldn’t lift, I tried Prozac again and was grateful for the slight relief I experienced.

So when Florinda delivered her simplistic analysis of my suicidal wish, she either didn’t care, or thought I was crying wolf, and that “sorceric tough love” would call my bluff. She was wrong—I didn’t want anybody’s pity—I wanted OUT. I had wanted out long before Carlos came to fetch me. Out of pain, the ever-present, inexorable pain.

I renewed the Prozac prescription, and taking less than what was prescribed I began to hoard various pills as an unorganized suicide plan. For the moment it made me feel safe. I’ve since learned that this type of hoarding is not uncommon. Many people never make an attempt on their lives, but are comforted to know they have a private plan.

To return to the present. For the moment I had chosen life, bleak as it was, and I had to do something with it. My sole focus was Carlos—uncovering the truth about his conduct. Friends had suggested he was “a typical Latin womanizer,” a *macho* who needed conquests to feel secure, a problem made worse by his obsession with his height.

I closed my ears to this talk. I continued to believe with total conviction that he was trying to teach me, to initiate me. His blood was on my hands, and he might be dying from my poison. I had, in my mind, endangered the life of the world’s savior. No friend, no therapist, could get through to me. Only if I discovered that he was

a womanizer would I open my mind and begin the slow, grim task of recovering from this deception.

And if I couldn't recover, I had my fantasy of a simple end: taking pills and alcohol, then drifting to sleep in the snow, ushered to gentle oblivion. There was always Shakespeare when I needed him: "Neither poppy, nor mandragora, nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, shall will thee back to that sweet sleep to which you owest yesterday." Yesterday, when my father laughed and knocked the ashes from his awful-smelling pipe; yesterday, when Carlos sat me on his lap and cried, because he'd never felt so close to anyone before; yesterday, when we held hands and silently watched the *voladores* climb the pole to infinity in Mexico. Yesterday, when Florinda popped a chocolate into my mouth and said, "I'm here now, I'm your mother—the good mother who will never abandon you."

It's a wonder I wasn't angrier, but the psyche does its best. However, I had grown militant—perhaps a second cousin to fury. I was determined to uncover the truth of my seduction, and learn if a rival had taken my place, and Carlos was too cowardly to confess, hiding his deceit behind tales of near-death caused by our poisonous coupling.

Please don't misunderstand for a moment that my thinking was clear, or that I was ever free from guilt about possibly killing the last *nagual*. If I could have died painlessly in my sleep, without hurting those I love, I would have chosen it in a heartbeat. Ironically, besides being terribly thin from not eating (how Carlos would have loved my gaunt face and flat stomach!), I remained perfectly strong and healthy.

If I was going to live, I had to do something with my days. I had a little money saved to live on for a short time, yet I couldn't concentrate on writing. I was no stalker in the traditional sense of the word, one who would spy on Carlos. But I knew a man who could, a hard-working, streetwise, professional man. One of my oldest friends was a highly successful private detective. I doubted I could afford his fee, so I decided to first see what I could achieve myself.

I struck gold—or so I hoped—when I looked in the Santa Barbara phone book. There I was surprised to find the home number of the controversial Richard DeMille. Grandson of Cecil B. DeMille, he had written the only substantial speculative book about Carlos, which had been sufficiently popular to have been recently revised and updated.

I had trouble wading my way through the author's in-depth psychological analysis, which, in brief reduction, describes Carlos as a virtual schizophrenic: one-half of him had a lifelong history of insecurity and grandiose lying; and Carlos "the trickster" lived in a fantasy world in which he was powerful, and profited by it. DeMille had certainly done his homework—he'd interviewed everyone he could find from Castaneda's UCLA period and beyond through the '70s. The book was a thorough debunking; and consequently I had disdained it, until now.

DeMille answered the phone immediately and was brusque. He was constantly badgered by Carlos-hunters who assumed that he could lead them to their god. It took me a moment to convince him that I *knew* Carlos and only had one query: was Castaneda a womanizer? Did he often propose to women, then dump them flat? DeMille thought for a moment, then replied, "No, I never heard about that sort of thing."

Apparently their only encounter, according to DeMille, was an uneventful moment in an elevator. When I told DeMille Carlos' elaborate and oft-told account of attacking his biographer with sloppy gratitude ("You wrote a book *about ME?*"), thus terrifying the hapless DeMille, I was met with a moment of stunned silence, followed by a burst of astonished laughter.

Apparently it had been a novel conversation for him—he was tired of calls from the legion of Carlos-seekers, and of being known primarily as Castaneda's sole biographer, for he had written other books. We parted on pleasant enough terms, yet I was none the wiser.

Next I wrote to Michael Korda of Simon and Schuster (Carlos liked to call it "Simon and Shyster"), who had published Carlos' and my father's books for nearly the same twenty-year span. Carlos had

eventually left Korda, saying that Michael rejected a book about “hermeneutics” as too academic. Whatever hermeneutics was, Korda had declared it “uncommercial,” claimed Carlos. I guessed there was more to the story, for Carlos only spoke of Korda with contempt and went on to publish elsewhere. Perhaps, as he had with my father, Korda had insulted one of his bestselling authors. Many years later, I had the opportunity to ask a long-term S & S editor, who worked under Michael, why Carlos had left. He chose not to answer my repeated queries. It was a touchy subject. To this day I don’t know what caused this startling rift.

Michael was one of many perennial publishing figures from my childhood; he had purchased *The Two*, a biography of the original Siamese twins that my father and I co-authored. I wrote in my letter to him that I had been engaged to Carlos, who had suddenly disappeared. I asked Korda the same question I asked DeMille—was this behavior customary? Michael replied with a brief note, saying, “I never discuss Carlos Castaneda.”

I was at a dead end. It was time to seek out my gumshoe, and hope against formidable odds for success. My old and dear friend now owned a prestigious firm; of course he no longer did stake-outs himself. But this was a special case. He was very much of the “Castaneda generation,” and he wanted to help me out. He decided to take on the case, doing the work himself—he didn’t trust anyone else with a job this delicate. And kinder still, he gave me a tremendous discount, enabling me to afford to proceed.

The worst news for Alex, *unprecedented* news, was that I didn’t have a single photograph, only a few names and locations. To make the most of my limited budget, we settled on two approaches. Alex would do a traditional house stake-out and go to a few restaurants.

The restaurant visits yielded nothing. The stake-out was grim and useless; a tall hedge obscured the entire compound. In three days, Alex saw “a tall Swede gardening”—Astrid, of course—and a woman who was undoubtedly Taisha coming and going once.

Alex was somber. “Maybe he really is in the other world.”

It was time to take an expensive risk: the phone company. I paid the detective to find Carlos’ phone number from phone company

records. Common sense, intuition, call it what you will, I simply *knew* the account would be under the name of Anna-Marie Carter—the name by which I had first met Taisha.

Within days I was handed a manila envelope. There were four occupants in Carlos' house, three with two lines. It was a crap shoot whom I dialed. My gut was a coiled fist.

I struck pay dirt on the first try.

"It's Amy."

There was a long silence. Then, like a storm cloud breaking, "How did you get this number? Who gave it to you?"

I ignored questions. "I want to talk to you."

"All right, all right. Maybe this is the omen. I'll call you back."

I paced for ten minutes, fifteen. I couldn't stand it. I dialed.

"I told you to wait! *Carajo! Cojuda!*" He slammed his phone so hard the crack reverberated in my ear.

In half an hour the call came. I don't remember much. It was over in minutes. He said he would not inquire how I'd gotten the number (I later learned there was a frightening inquisition of the disciples in L.A.); he was going to take this call as the omen that the moment had arrived to meet.

We arranged another of our quickie dates. I was to fly to LAX within days, returning within hours. We would make love at an airport hotel and see if "the door" would reopen. I was to call him *only* with my time of arrival. He would be waiting.

I worked myself into a positive state of mind. The weather was blistering hot, and I wore a sundress, ankle bracelet, and sandals, ignoring the fact that Carlos likely despised such "Berkeley hippie" garb.

I emerged, and there was Carlos. He looked more nervous than I'd ever seen him, and he clearly disapproved of my outfit. The heat brought out his nemesis—body odor. Had I emerged in a crisp, tailored suit with demure, feminine heels, well-soaked in antiperspirant, I would have at least had a running start.

As it was he took my hand and we walked into the labyrinth of the LAX parking structure. He immediately informed me that I was to shower as soon as we found a hotel. We got into his truck and

drove tense and silent through bumper-to-bumper traffic. We stopped at the nearest of the depressing high-rise hotels. Anxiety caused me to sweat even more profusely. We were off to a bad start, but I refused to accept it. I was determined to succeed in reigniting my fiancé's love.

Carlos was too nervous to make love. I put my arms around him, held him close, and said, "Let's just hug and relax for a moment." My approach succeeded, and the rest of the visit was a success.

I flew back to Berkeley that night, and Carlos called me the next day with a magical invitation—a chance for forgiveness and redemption.

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The Truth-Defier

Faith in a holy cause is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves.

—Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer*

Carlos invited me to join the group the following week—without him—at the Los Angeles Airport, from where we would fly to Mexico City. Two workshops would be conducted by the witches and three movement instructors, the Chacmools. In between seminars, on the weekend, we would all go to the sorcerers’ magical town of Tula. Tula had appeared in several of Carlos’ books and was the town in which he had often met don Juan, a source of fascination to readers who made eager pilgrimages.

Unnerved by my recent fashion failure I called Florinda and asked what to wear. She replied, “Dress casual. Bring one good outfit in case we go out to dinner.”

At the airport, I saw immediately that I was inappropriately dressed once again. Over a dozen disciples were dressed in tailored, dark clothing, maintaining a frosty silence as they stood in line. I approached cheerily, in pale linen pants and a cream silk shirt. I received sour nods in reply to my greetings.

Additionally, I had the wrong suitcase. Everyone had identical, black, rolling suitcases. I had a hand-held, leather carry-on. Muni sniffed, “What dream are you in?”

A woman I’d met before was with the group, an ex-model I found markedly superficial. Tiffany seemed to be the center of attention, particularly for Rick Fosterman, Carlos’ agent. Rick had been given

a new name: Simon McKrindle. So had his buddy Andy Horowitz—he was now Guido Manfred. It was a lot to memorize.

During the flight I was seated beside a Puerto Rican woman, Sonia, who usually stood submissively beside her boyfriend Ramon. They maintained severe, dour expressions. I wondered what on earth was going on—I had expected a friendly reunion. I struck up a conversation with her, asking “How are you?” and so forth, which so irritated her that without a word she moved to the back of the plane for the rest of the flight. Little did I suspect that this mousy woman would soon rise to power as the group’s main bureaucrat, president of their new company, Cleargreen.

We checked into a lovely hotel. By evening, I realized Florinda that had entirely misled me. We had dress-up dinners every night, and I didn’t have the proper wardrobe. There was no time to purchase clothing.

The witches snubbed me so severely that when I encountered them in the hotel elevator they were silent and looked away, except for Muni, who let out a disgusted, “Oh, it’s you!” No one was friendly enough to speak to about borrowing clothes. Each night Tiffany appeared in a different, stunning creation, sending the entire group into raptures. Only Guido offered me the occasional gracious remark and warm smile.

The seminar offered a vastly toned-down version of the speech I was shortly to hear in Tula. At the end Muni read a poem in Spanish and English. It was a request to God for hardship. Some disciples kept it tacked on their refrigerators. I found its message intensely depressing, rife with Catholic guilt, an ode to self-sacrifice. It seemed as though I alone failed to appreciate it.

*Give me, oh God, what you still have
Give me what no one asks you for.*

On Saturday morning we got up early for our day trip to the mystical city of Tula and its environs. The tension on the ride

bordered on the unbearable. Our driver was a fierce and humorless Mexican woman; Tiffany was in the front seat, and I sat in the back with an Argentinean in her sixties who had been a philosophy professor in Buenos Aires.

For the rest of the hour, we learned about Tiffany's plans to be an amazing poet. She clutched her copy of Castaneda's *Tales of Power* while regaling us with epiphanies from his work. Periodically she checked her cuticles, and reapplied her lip-gloss. What on earth did the sorcerers see in her?

Our first stop was a small local museum on the outskirts of Tula, which contained statues and minor artifacts. In the bathroom I encountered Florinda. She spoke to me for the first time during our trip and was overtly angry, annoyed that our paths had crossed. She glared at me, made a remark about filthy Mexican bathrooms, and said she hoped I'd brought my own toilet paper. Evidently she wasn't sharing. She scuttled by me, a grimace of distaste disfiguring her pixie's face. She mumbled something about wanting a Coke, making sure to keep her body as far away from mine as possible in the cramped, malodorous room.

Now only a few people would speak to me, most notably Tony Karam. Following the witches' cue, the rest moved away abruptly when I came near. We entered the small museum. A few of us took notes.

Carlos first told us, falsely (as I later learned), that Muni was an M.D. Then she instructed us "not to listen with the linear mind" while she explained aspects of sorceric philosophy. The sorcerers' view of reincarnation was not in the books, and Muni explained, "Sorcerers perceive that there are cyclic beings. 'Cyclic' is *not* reincarnation. Human beings exist in strands held together by energy links—think of a bead curtain. I am a bead in the same string with the mysterious creature we call the Death Defier."

Carlos had given me a more comprehensible answer when I pressed him for his beliefs about past lives. He said that what we think is a memory of another life is actually a memory of our great-

aunt's second cousin's fourteenth child, our uncle's wife's mother, or any variation you could imagine. He explained that we are connected to all the memories in the world and had confused this "generational memory" with reincarnation.

We got back into the cars and vans for a short ride to the town of Tula itself. Here I made an enormous gaffe. I had spent so little time in the company of these people and had heard so much on the telephone about how there was no group and no hierarchy that I believed what I'd been told. Without a second thought, I stepped up into the nearest of two large vans. Guido looked at me with a pained expression while Florinda barked, "You can't sit here!" I had no idea there was a hierarchy inside the vehicles—I soon learned there was a hierarchy for everything.

Ashamed, I climbed out, and peered around for a car with room for a lesser being. I was relieved to see Tony, who cheerfully waved me over. As I was getting into his car, I heard Florinda shouting across to another vehicle, "Tiffany, Tiffany, come here and sit with us, darling!" She loudly slapped the empty seat beside her, the one I had just vacated, then embraced Tiffany fervidly. The happy woman squealed with delight.

"What, me? I get to sit with you?"

"Of course, my darling," Florinda assured her, caressing her hair.

Tula was a small, rural town and it was a quiet day. There didn't seem to be any tourists. We parked near an antiquated church. Nearby was a cheerful park, and a plaza where children played and couples sat holding hands on benches.

Muni stood next to a small chapel beside the church.

This is where the Death Defier struck an agreement with Carol Tiggs," she began, speaking of herself in the third person. "The creature had a gravelly voice that upset her. It sounded like a man's voice. The Death Defier intuited her feelings and fears, and said, 'There is nothing male left inside me. My assemblage point is utterly twisted.' " The Death Defier, Muni told us, gave an explicit description of its female genitalia, which embarrassed Carol greatly.

One of Carlos' strangest stories came to mind. Repeatedly he had spoken about "waking up to go to the bathroom, and peeing all over myself—I looked down and I had a pussy! *Carajo!* I was a woman—I was terrified, *terrified* that I would never change back to a man! I screamed and SCREAMED for Florinda and Muni to come help me!" We never did find out how Castaneda recovered his identity, or why being a woman—a hundred times more powerful than a man, as he constantly insisted—had upset him so terribly.

Now Muni described her seduction by the Death Defier, her tremendous orgasm, and subsequent fear of lesbianism. The Death Defier told her, "Don't be shy and prissy. Women have a big blast of energy in their uterus, and their way of opening up to the unknown is through orgasm."

Muni described her post-coital experience: "Carol Tiggs felt really dirty and full of shame, downright filthy. She was sure everybody in the church was watching, and thinking she was a disgusting lesbian.

"The Death Defier explained: 'No, no one saw—you are dreaming inside a dream. This church isn't even real. Now I want to ask something of you—help me to find freedom. I'll pay you any way you want, or my life will end with your line. I will make you all-powerful as a trade. If you want to be a man, say so. If you want to be the most orgasmic creature in all the universe, I'll make you into a superpussy!

" 'Do you want this to happen? This will be the ultimate adventure.'

" 'Yes. What should I do next?'

" 'Seduce Carlos.'



Left: Entrance to the chapel where the Death Defier struck an agreement with Carol Tiggs. Right: Inside the chapel at Tula.

“ ‘That’s a laugh—Carlos hates me.’

“The Death Defier said, ‘It’s time to change dreams, and go much, much deeper, deep into the sea of awareness.’

“ ‘Well, I sure love the beach. But what about Carlos?’

“ ‘I’ll take you to him.’ ”

We walked the short distance to the plaza, where Muni searched for a particular park bench. She stopped near one occupied by a pair of lovers.

“Let’s not disturb them,” Muni said, “nobody disturbed us when we were here.”

I felt an icy finger tracing my spine. So she *was* Carlos’ lover—or had been. All he told me about them as platonic brother and sister was a lie, and the absurd twenty years of celibacy! I was stung with jealousy and confusion. And Muni sounded wistful, as if she were still infatuated, *in love*. From that point on I fought intrusive images of Carlos with Muni, and the nauseating reality that he had lied to seduce me, to draw me into the group.

Only months before he’d told me one of his bizarre stories, saying, “Muni and I were *dreaming* together last night. Sleeping side by side.” I had glared at him, to which he replied insistently, “Oh, nothing sexual, *corazón!* We are not like that—she is my *little sister*.”

Anyway, in the middle of the night I woke up and screamed at her: ‘You can’t control your energy body! *Carajo, coño, pendeja!* Get the hell out, now! You’ve got to learn discipline, to control your energy body!’

“She didn’t make a sound, Amy, not a word—she just got out of bed, put on her things, and quietly left. It was three in the morning, it was freezing! I felt so bad I ran after her into the street, naked, yelling, ‘Come back, come back!’ You should have seen her; she looked so sad ... why do I do such things, *amor?* I am terrible, *terrible.*”

And now he had let me find out about their relations like this, *planned* it, in fact. As a shunned outsider here, there was no one I could speak to, and I had to control my tears. As Muni spoke I made my way from the back of the group, to stand squarely in front of her. She continued, “The next thing I knew I was sitting on this bench, and Carlos was on my lap.”

She walked us to a nearby hotel. “I passionately seduced Carlos for ten days. Since he had now merged with the Death Defier, what took me ten years he accomplished in only ten days! Now he was *truly* my brother. We are cyclic with the Death Defier. It doesn’t make sense, but that’s how come I love and hate him—a cyclic man and woman can never get along. Our only magical choice was to merge completely.

“I joined the sea of awareness, which has nothing to do with water. It’s a wave of energy that talks to you; perhaps that’s what ancient mystics called God. Inside it you feel complete indifference—and indifference is real freedom.”

Carlos had insisted I achieve this “indifference,” which would allow me to join him on other planes, free of distasteful human emotions. Lengthy descriptions of these planes can be found in Carlos’ books. My images of these worlds resembled those of my favorite childhood comic book, Marvel’s *Dr. Strange*. Coming out of my reverie, I returned my attention to Muni’s speech.

Photos by Richard Jennings



Above: Plaza and bench in Tula where Carol seduced Carlos and merged with a mystical being.



Left: The hotel in Tula where Carol and Carlos made love for ten days, sealing their bond with the Death Defier and entering the "sea of awareness."

“It took me months to find Carlos again, because I was so confused and miserable. One day I heard he was giving a lecture at the Phoenix Bookstore. He practically fainted when he saw me in the audience, because he thought I had gone according to ‘the Rule.’ ” (A reference to a complex schema laid out in Carlos’ early books.)

“Now I am chasing my brother like a woman *possessed*. I only care about *his* fight—that’s what gives my life its meaning. And finally I can tell you the Death Defier’s name, Xoxonapo, which means ‘fruit of eternal spring.’

“The Death Defier lived for thousands of years to help mankind grow. To speak her name in Tula will wake her spirit. She told me to speak Nahautl words, ending with the line:

*O xoxopanxoco o xoxopanxoco**”

Muni led us to the nearby park, instructing us to gather in a group bordering the grass. She selected Florinda and Taisha; the three Chacmools—Astrid, Poona, and Zuna; and Simon and Guido, grouping them on the lawn. She stared into their eyes, whispered the Death Defier’s name into one ear, and instructed them to fall stiffly into the arms of two helpers. Muni gave them “the Eye,” as it came to be known to the apprentices. Each fell backwards and lay quietly, except for Guido, who went into spasmodic convulsions. After five minutes Muni “woke” them with the assistants’ help. She said she would “do the rest” of us that night, though she did not. Over the years, per Carlos’ instruction, she hypnotized each of us in groups of three or four (with the exception, of course, of those who had been expelled, such as the Argentinean philosopher, Tiffany, and Tony, who courageously left of his own accord).

Then the group began to embrace, crying. I watched at a polite distance. Even in the midst of this life-altering experience, Florinda found a moment to snarl, “Amy, this mood of yours is what prevents any of us from getting close to you. We can’t stand being around you—especially Carlos.”

I took a step further back from the group.

Suddenly Guido approached, wrapping me in a tender embrace, eyes tearful as he held me close. “Thank you, *amor*,” I whispered.

He had made an incredible gesture: he had broken with the pack.

Everyone was getting in their cars. I headed toward Tony. Suddenly we all heard a voice from the #1 van: “Amy, Amy!”

It was Zuna, the quiet Chacmool who reminded me of a librarian and had been so kind to me at the first class I attended. She jumped down and raced toward me, giving me a gentle embrace.

“Amy! I couldn’t let you go without a hug!”

Another one who broke from the herd—two gestures I will never forget.

Back at the hotel we all retired immediately, exhausted. The second workshop was to begin the next day; but Florinda and Muni were overcome, and they flew back with Simon and Guido.

I elected to stay on, and that night Carlos said he was immensely proud of my dedication. He sent hugs and kisses, telling me to rest.

The three Chacmools conducted the workshop with Taisha. The theme was “A Sorcerer’s Affection.” The special two-person pass to promote abstract love was beautifully taught by “the little cousins” Zuna and Poona.

I was so distraught at being scapegoated that I sought out Taisha for a few words of counsel.

“I know what your problem is,” she exclaimed. “You think you’re the *nagual*’s woman!” I bit my lip because I’d promised Florinda never to speak to Taisha about my intimacy with the *nagual*, but I was longing to tell her the truth—I *was* his woman, his wife! No one had ever given me a reason why, but we were *never* to speak of sex with Taisha.

“Go on in there,” she continued, with a rough jerk of her thumb. “Go inside and practice the Pass of Affection with Tiffany, the big one, the one who’s pushing you out—the one who’s *replacing* you.”

At the Los Angeles Airport, Florinda and Muni arrived to greet the group and give them rides home in their vans. Hugs and kisses were exchanged, but I was excluded from these rituals. I collected my bag and headed for my connecting flight to San Francisco.

Whatever the *nagual* had *seen* of me in Mexico, which had made him bubble over with praise on the phone (saying, “I’m so *proud* of you, *corazón!*”) had somehow been undermined. Someone, or many, had spoken ill of me, and it had overridden his *nagual’s* power to *see*. Evidently gossip was stronger than magic. According to the reports, my new crime was Envy. I was guilty of wanting to join the group, to be one of Them, to be included—I wasn’t a true, solitary warrior. It was Musical Chairs all over again. The music stopped, and I was left standing.

*Years later I would stumble upon this translation of a Nahuatl poem about Tula:

I am the work of the only God, his creation ...
He created you,
He uttered you like a flower, he painted you like a song:
a Toltec artist.
The book has come to the end:
Your heart is complete ...
I cry as I speak and discourse with my heart,
Let me see the root of song,
Let me implant it here on earth so it may be realized ...
My song is hard and flourishes.
My implanted word is sprouting,
our flowers stand up in the rain.

—from the Nahuatl, translated by Edward Dorn and Gordon
Brotherson in *The Sun Unwound: Original Texts from Occupied
America* (North Atlantic Books, 1999)

Workshop Hopping Leads to Transformation

Nobody who is anybody uses his own name. What good had it ever done us, this cloak-and-dagger rigmarole? What harm had it done us, this endless wrapping up and hiding of our identities?

—John le Carré, *Our Game*

Despite this disgrace, I continued traveling to workshops with my friend Sally. We spent a small fortune going to Colorado, Hawaii, and elsewhere. I felt like Marlene Dietrich following Gary Cooper into the desert in *Morocco*. I was always snubbed, and now I was considered *overdressed*. I refused to give up. Carlos had warmed enough to ask me to call him from each workshop, as “eyes and ears.” Hawaii was a disaster, because he said I had not *seen* the bell-shaped, inorganic creatures who surrounded Florinda.

Carlos contended, however, that I had triumphed in a way neither he nor don Juan had believed possible: my extensive recapitulation had “repaired my luminous egg.” It was no longer flat, but oval, and with rare discipline I had reversed the effects of youthful drug use (some of which was inspired by Carlos’ books). He proudly told the group of my phenomenal achievement.

If I had known more about them, I would have realized that many in the group were drug users in their youth, and I had been mysteriously singled out for ridicule and expulsion. Perhaps I ought to have lied since it was becoming increasingly clear that Carlos could not read minds and *see* our lives. But I had promised Carlos never to lie to him. Early in my “training” he accused me of not

trusting him 100%. I responded with some heat, arguing that he was certainly asking a lot at the beginning. He ranted to the class, “Amy doesn’t trust the *nagual*, 100%! She’s insane!”

Relentlessly I attended workshops, continually rebuffed by the inner circle. At a workshop in a New Age center in upstate New York I broke through by imitating the disciples’ behavior. I dressed in black, and clipped my already short hair. I ceased addressing group members. As they marched offstage I deferentially avoided eye contact. Finally Florinda said hello.

I called Carlos at the workshop’s end, and he exulted, “You’ve done it at last! You’ve conquered jealousy!” He had clearly received good press from the witches.

I was ecstatic. He soon called to invite me to Buenos Aires with Astrid, where he would lecture and teach Tensegrity. Alas, “the door” mysteriously closed. I increased my hours of recapitulation, as Carlos bemoaned my immovability.

“What would you do,” I asked sadly, “if the door shut on you?”

“*Carajo! What FUCKING door? I’d kick it in.*”

I didn’t know how to do it, but it sounded great to me.

While he was gone I moved to Los Angeles, in 1994. I knew it was permanent, Carlos thought it was temporary. I asked Carlos what was so awful about Berkeley.

“Do your neighbors know you?” he had asked. “Do they say hello?”

“Yes, there’s a community atmosphere in the neighborhood ...”

“That’s exactly it! You’re trapped without *anonymity*! In Los Angeles no one knows anyone; I love it—and it’s one of the Earth’s energetic centers, like Mexico City.”

Muni said I was lucky to have lived far away, reading the books and practicing. Florinda warned: “Amy, *no matter how far IN you get, no matter how high up, there’s always more.* The competition, the struggle for position never ends, until you’ve destroyed the person your parents created. You have no conception of the suffering here.”

An intensive, three-week workshop in 1995 was held in Culver City High School's auditorium. For the first time Carlos appeared daily, teaching 250 attendees from around the world. For most it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. Carlos was so excited he lectured non-stop, correcting Tensegrity hands-on.

I stood in the back practicing movements in a far-away corner near Claude without speaking to her, only nodding when she did, which met with her approval. Soon Carlos and I were making love again, in his own bed—the complicated task of purchasing a magical stiletto and dagger for Carlos' collection had “opened the door”—and he continually insisted that I was his only lover.

As the workshop progressed, my stock increased. I learned from Claude herself of Dorothy's new sorcery name, Beulah Puckett. With them was Candice, a shy, awkward nine-year-old from Mexico. “This is my daughter!” exclaimed Beulah, winking slyly at Claude, who added, “Beulah's *long-lost child*.” They burst out laughing, while little Candice looked at her shoes.

One day Carlos took the stage, near tears. He announced, “The little girl Candice has to decide between her grandparents in Mexico, who don't love her and want to fatten her—and *us*. We are her only chance, but she chose tamales over Freedom. Tonight she is getting on a plane to go back to them.”

The crowd was hushed and disturbed. They had been introduced to Candice as an example of a special “cyclic” being. Beulah appeared depressed. Someone from the audience asked if Candice could change her mind and be taken back.

“*Never*,” Carlos opined. “It's too late. She only had one chance. All our decisions are final.”

The following morning Candice appeared and took the stage. Carlos said, “The little girl has something to tell all of you. It was her decision to speak, her choice what to say.”

In a tiny voice Candice told us she had chosen Freedom, and she apologized for setting a bad example to the group. I was suspicious—the speech sounded like it had been written by adults. There was a standing ovation. Candice reddened and was whisked away.

Tony Karam was there, along with some of the *nagual*'s acolytes I had met in Mexico, and they all remained warm. I was asked to escort them to a celebratory dinner at the workshop's end, after all the participants had received numbered diplomas, one of Carlos' inscrutable black jokes.

I entered a Beverly Hills restaurant with the Mexican contingent in tow. There were three round tables: one hosted by Florinda for Spanish-speakers; another hosted by Carlos, and one by Muni and Claude. I looked for my name and couldn't find it. Puzzled, I made another circuit of the tables. Each place had a hand-calligraphed name-tag. Just as I was about to inquire, Carlos appeared at my side. He led me to Claude's table and pulled out a chair, looking radiantly happy.

There was a place-card that read "Ellis." Carlos' smile broadened as our eyes met, and he settled me in my chair, walking away beaming. Everyone at the table looked at me: Claude, Muni, Guido, Zuna, Beulah, and little Candice. I was overcome.

Guido broke the silence by saying, "Ellie, Ellis, want some mu shu pork?"

Claude leaned forward excitedly. Evidently she had chosen the name, with Carlos' help. "Do you like it? I—if you don't, of course you can say no, *he* can pick one—maybe you'd rather—and I'm sorry I don't have a last name yet. You're an Irish pixie, and we only knew your first name—"

"Oh, no, this is perfect! I don't want another name."

I couldn't really talk, I was too close to tears.

Beulah said, "Isn't it wonderful not to be yourself?"

When she said that, a wave of anxiety rushed through me. For all that I'd struggled for this moment, I didn't want my new name to herald an annihilation of my entire identity. It felt very wrong. I had heard the continuous talk behind Beulah's back about how she had never changed for the better. What did my name truly signify, besides membership in a sorority? I tried to push these doubts away; after all, this was a celebration.

At the end of the party, I even got a hug from the frosty Tarina (a paragon of disdain from our first meeting in Berkeley). I had a family now, and I wasn't going to be alone again, not ever, not for Infinity.

Carlos pulled me aside and said, "Tonight Taisha spoke to me ferociously! She said, 'She simply *has* to have a name! She's *not* Amy anymore!' " Carlos mimicked himself putting a finger to his lips, saying "Sssshhhh!"

Taisha approached, whispering, "Now what is it exactly? Allie? Alice?"

"Ellis."

"Ah!" She smiled with satisfaction, and gave me a warm embrace.

That night Carlos puzzled over my last name. I hadn't given it much thought yet—I was still busy being thankful for not getting one of those awful Star Trek names. And thank goodness I held out when he had tried to name me Pauline, then Pearl!

"Something Irish," Carlos' voice brought me back from my musings, "because you're a pixie. McSweeney, Murphy, O'Conner; we'll get it..."

On the heels of my initiation, Carlos gave me sorceric tasks. The first was volunteer work at the short-lived Chacmool Center For Enhanced Awareness, where I answered the phone. One day an order for office supplies required my name.

"Finnegan," I replied.

I asked Carlos what he thought of it. He was inordinately pleased with me for choosing without asking him. Carlos and his contradictions; well, this was my favorite of his multiple personalities.

"*You* chose," he exulted. "Only Claude's done that! Finnegan! Wonderful!" Carlos told the class I was a "*duende*"—Spanish for "elf" or "pixie." I approached Claude.

"If my middle name starts with 'L' my initials will spell 'elf'—got any ideas?"

“Laura!” she said. Then she sputtered nervously, “If you don’t like it, you can ask *Him*—”

“No, I like it very much.”

From then on I was Elf.

My second job was to manage the seminars’ bookshop, a position I haphazardly acquired. Assisting during its *naissance*, I found that my managerial skills were duly noted, having long managed a staff for *The Book of Lists*. The workshops increased in number, size, and cost; for the first time I was given the privilege of being Florinda’s “energetic guard” at a weekend workshop in Arizona.

The last workshop of the year shattered our sense of safety as a group, tenuous as it was. Carlos got angry at Astrid for something she said—I don’t know what—which he claimed was self-important and competitive. At the workshop’s end he announced to a large crowd, “You’re about to see real sorcery in action!” He proceeded to humiliate the three Chacmools one by one, ripping them apart in the most shocking display of public humiliation I’d ever seen. He mocked them, he mimicked them, he accused them of grotesque statements. The inner group cried, while the stunned audience tittered, unable to make sense of this crisis. Carlos culminated by accusing Astrid, probably his most honest, loyal devotee, of stealing from him. He sang in his rich baritone, “Astrid! Astrid! What have you DOONE with the FUUNDS ...?”

That day Astrid must have known what awaited, for she gave a stirring impromptu speech. Always passionate and larger than life, much beloved by the audiences, she announced her intention to commit suicide should she fail as a warrior. I was not present, but heard it was a rousing, controversial address. Some audience members were moved to tears by her devotion, while others felt similarly to my friend Jeannie, who told her husband, “If they offer you Kool-Aid, don’t drink it.” Astrid told a favorite story of hers and Carlos’: “I gave the *nagual* a bottle of pills and said, ‘If I don’t make it to Freedom, give this back—I know what to do.’ ”

The Chacmools were reformed with four additional members and renamed The Energy Trackers. Astrid told me, “Ellis, I feel I’m going to die. Not metaphorically—*really die*. I’m so connected to Him, and I’m killing Him—if He dies, I die. *You don’t understand*—my life hangs by a spider’s thread.” I’ll never forget her gaunt, pale face, a frame for her tortured eyes. She was never entirely reinstated to her place of honor.

There were workshops in Mexico, Barcelona, Argentina, Italy, and Germany. The witches and Trackers went to Europe without Carlos. Speaking in Oakland in 1996, he became dangerously ill. He “could no longer travel north,” he said; it would be deadly. He formed VerdeClaro, Mexico’s sister office to Cleargreen in Los Angeles.

Carlos’ next task for me was a book. He believed that despite an agnostic upbringing I viewed myself as Jewish. He badgered me constantly, saying, “What are we, *a Jew and a Mex*? You have to give up affiliations, you’re simply a *being that is going to die*. People talk about revolutions—such crap! First change *yourself*. Until you’ve achieved internal revolution, efforts to save the world are meaningless.”

Carlos spoke of a long-lost dissertation read in graduate school, which proposed that Jewish origins are actually Christian and “mongrel”; there were no “chosen people.” He believed that proving this would destroy the wretched Amy Wallace.

I soon found the brilliant Jewish scholar Raphael Patai, who had written extensively on this subject. In his nineties and still writing, he was listed in the New York phone book. While highly supportive of further research on the subject, he told me this would be an arduous task, perhaps impossible because records had been destroyed by the Nazis. I began my research, working with my friend Don, a Christian scholar, as co-author. At the same time I was writing a novel and a weekly column for *Salon Magazine*. The witches approved the project; and Florinda strongly urged me toward fiction. With so much writing for me to do, she gaily

announced, “There’s your next two years!” How fortunate we were, ignorant of what those next two years would bring.

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The Sunday Class

The gods have their own rules.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Following the traumatic workshop, Carlos decided to have some of us pluck from the list of attendees a group of two dozen for a series of private classes.

Carlos had experimented with private lecture series before; this was to prove the longest lasting and most involved of his efforts. I was invited, and “The Sunday Class” met for two years.

During the second session, while the Chacmools taught movements, Carlos pulled me outside for a passionate embrace. After ten minutes we reentered, rumped and flushed.

Carlos usually paired his women, but he was unable to partner me, saying, “There is only *one* elf, one *duende*.”

As a symbol of their union, the women often received baubles in pairs: jeweled butterflies, dragonflies, or bees. One day Carlos tested my ego by giving all the other women beads of amber. My amber was given privately. This was the sorcerers’ symbolic stone, representing our unique energetic hue, superior to the white sheen of humans. (What, I wondered, had happened to the early days when they were “blue”?)

Soon, Carlos happily put a shimmering chain around my neck, which held a tiny star sparkling with diamonds, and told me, “This necklace is unique, just like you. First an apprentice rides on the *nagual*’s wings. You were a fairy fallen in the mud, until I pulled you

out. You fought so hard, Spirit could *not turn you away*. Besides, the witches go bananas fighting over you! Taisha has *never* loved anyone like this, she and Florinda fight over your company, but you're *my* ward! The others lack your intellect, your *finesse*. *Amorcita*, how they envy you!"



Carlos leans over to kiss the author, who displays his signature haircut, outside the Sunday Class.

Carlos appointed me organizer of the Sunday class, and I struggled to keep up with his changing directives. I was instructed to call the members and reveal my sex life with the *nagual*, describing my “magical” orgasms, and informing them of their frigidity. I fearfully dodged this command, and it was forgotten.

Carlos often had me call forty members and suddenly cancel. An hour later he reinstated class. People were frantic getting babysitters, furtively changing plans, trying to comply with the *nagual*’s insistence that they lie to their families in accordance with his books’ famous teachings.

I developed warm and lasting friendships with members. Lunching with one of Carlos’ favorite students, Richard Jennings, I was seen and reported on by the increasingly envious Alice, anxious

to tell Carlos that I had broken a rule I never knew existed—a dictum against mixing with the lower echelon.

Because I was the group's only liaison to Carlos, members called to pass him messages and ask for help. The teenaged Joey asked me to seek Carlos' advice. He wondered whether to cut off his parents for life as Carlos' books advised, or to accept their offers of financial support. Carlos told him to "take the money and get an education."

Like all of life with Castaneda, Sunday Class had exquisite moments. The high point for me occurred when the group pooled resources to give Castaneda an amazing gift. What, after all, does one give the world's last *nagual*?

Carlos insisted we needed "balls, or ovaries, of steel" to burn with him and the inner circle, and "to navigate Infinity forever." After enormous expense and difficulty the class, represented by Richard Jennings, presented Castaneda with a custom-made pair of solid gold balls, an inch and a half in diameter—the size of plastic balls given us to press magical points on our bodies.

When Carlos opened the velvet box and saw the golden orbs, he cried. We all did. He treasured the golden balls, keeping them on his bedside table. Over the phone, I could hear the *clack-clack* as he rolled them in his palm.

Every Sunday Carlos gave electrifying two-hour lectures, often promising the group paranormal experiences. He planned to bring us "a half-rabbit, half-cat which lived at the witches' house." Next he promised "a hundred-pound, footless pigeon brought by Taisha from the Second Attention." After squeezing the pigeon into the trunk of Simon's car, Carlos was suddenly afraid "the Sunday class couldn't take it—the shock would be too great." Besides, he had already told us that objects couldn't be transported from other realms.

He kept us busy with a steady outpouring of unpublished magical "tips."

"Never hug your parents face-to-face," he insisted. "Don Juan taught me that we have a 'key' in our abdomens, and our parents

have the energetic ‘lock.’ With a direct hug they steal our energy. Always approach them from the left side, only putting an arm around them.

“There’s a weed that grows all around Los Angeles in the cracks of the sidewalks, a relative of the chamomile plant called pineapple weed. Grind it in a mortar with butter, and rub it on your chest: it will generate a subtle feeling of increased awareness.

“And eat ants! If you’re depressed or nervous, the sorcerers told us to eat ants.” (I knew from *Book of Lists* research that certain African tribes ate ants to calm the nerves. Western scientists discovered that certain species of ant contain a chemical similar in effect to lithium, the most widely used drug for manic-depression.)

The placement of one’s bed was all-important. Florinda was forever directing me to move my mattress, until I finally discerned from Sunday lectures that a bed should never point west. Worse still was the north, which Carlos called “the direction of death.”

An important instruction was to cover mirrors, which “encourage focus on the self.” Most disciples obeyed, although I didn’t, and Carlos and the witches all had small mirrors. Florinda greatly enjoyed gazing at her *ensembles* in my full-length mirror, “because I’m vain, and that will *never* change!”

Carlos scoffed at conventional astrology, telling me that “sorcerers have their *own* astrology.” The aim of don Juan’s astrology, Carlos explained, was to give us “the exact number of hours you need to wait before making an important decision. Some of you can act immediately, while others, like myself, must wait twelve hours or more.” He gave a favorite member, Richard, a complex set of instructions for calculating our relations to certain constellations based on the time and location of our birth, excluding the year. Richard created a computer program to facilitate computations, which are described in detail on his website, www.sustainedaction.org.

Richard was a lawyer, mediator, and prominent gay rights activist who also had the distinction of having been drawn to the group not by Carlos’ books, but rather from reading the books by the witches. He and I became fast and dear friends, remaining so to this day.

When women didn't have time to bathe in rosemary, Carlos told me, "It's equally powerful to wash your *conchita* in hot water—but never douche! It upsets the body's natural balance." Florinda advised the attendants of the Women's Workshop never to wear panties, telling them to "go outside in the moonlight and spread your legs, letting the wind fuck you! Don Juan claimed it unleashes powerful forces." Florinda told me that she could control the weather, although I never received a demonstration of her powers. She also said that Tensegrity prevented menopause, though she had pulled down her panties in front of me and shown me her estrogen patch.

Carlos insisted we not say "my parents" or "my child," etc. "My" was replaced with "the," resulting in the awkward construction "I said to the father, 'I am no longer your son' "; or, "I said goodbye forever to the child." Devoted to these semantics, Zuna scowled if we called ourselves "people."

"Creatures!" she corrected, "*we are creatures!*"

Carlos advised the few married couples in class to sleep separately from their spouses, preparatory to leaving them. "The energy bodies *merge* when you share a bed! Very dangerous!" He suggested sleeping above ground in a hammock or tree-house "to facilitate *dreaming*" though we all, like Carlos, slept on mattresses atop box springs.

Another tenet, this one passed on by Zuna, was: "In the sorcerer's world we must cover our knees." Muni added, "Never let hair grow on your knees, because bare knees perceive energy."

Carlos urged us to meditate alone on New Year's Eve, using the power of midnight "to intend the new year forward and silently link with the power of Intent."

Showing increasing weakness, Carlos told the class he had diabetes. His chronic vision problems were actually caused by glaucoma and cataracts, but he told us they resulted from cosmic traveling. An optometrist, he laughed, accused him of having "too many orgasms." The class was consistently warned of the evils of

masturbation, and constantly exhorted to remain celibate until he deemed them “free of ego.”

“I wish,” he lamented, “that I had don Juan’s power, but I don’t. If I could, I would pull each of your egos out like a nail, the way don Juan did to me. When you *are* free,” he promised, “you can do *whatever you want!* Have lots of sex! A *fiesta!* But not yet—I’ll tell you when you’re ready, when you’ve reached inner silence.”

Just as the *nagual* and the witches alone could have sex, so too could they get angry, “because we get angry *impeccably*—it’s not the same thing.” Carlos hung up on me so many times that one day, in a rage, I hung up on him. He was so affronted—for only Florinda and Claude were allowed this privilege—that he sent me to the back of the classroom, raving for weeks about my shocking behavior.

“*Ellis hung up on me!*” he repeated to the group, endlessly astonished.

I was fascinated that Carlos seemed unable to kick me out altogether—he found me insufferable, yet irresistible, just as I found him. I knew that every elitist group appeared to have a scapegoat, and this increasingly became my role—but that didn’t explain everything, it was too simplistic to enclose our bizarre and melodramatic relations. But, throughout the *sturm und drang*, or because of it, our passion intensified. I later learned that he tired of many of his women sexually, and they were relegated to the status of Tensegrity instructors, assistants, and procuresses; or more politely, celibate acolytes undergoing the magical task of conquering jealousy by relinquishing Carlos to others—others they recruited to please him.

Energy Vampires

The Lord was in His heaven, whatever name you called Him, as assuredly as there were demons here below, whatever faces they wore. Him you worshipped, them you wrestled; it was as simple as that. The only trick was not to lose your faith. The nature of the belief didn't matter ... what mattered was its intensity. He had a high regard for superstition.

—T.E.D. Klein, *The Ceremonies*

The subject of energetic theft hovered over all the years I spent with the sorcerers, and it was one of Castaneda's most important subjects for discourse, public and private.

In the books, readers were told that our children steal our energy, as do our parents. Arcane, black magic took place in the middle books, with don Juan's party of witches engaging in shocking maneuvers to regain energy. One of the famous witches of Carlos' literature attempted to murder her son to regain her lost power, but her progeny outsmarted her. Readers of the books were deeply affected by this—were they actually being advised to murder their children?

As far as I know, no reader ever tried this, though I did receive a heart-wrenching letter at the Cleargreen offices from a woman who, in an attempt to be a good sorcerer, based solely on reading the books, gave her child up to her estranged husband. In the husband's care the child died. The anguished mother wondered how to find peace after what she had donea—had she been a good warrior, or had she failed? This type of letter I could only kick upstairs. I never

learned if she received a reply. Another woman read Carlos' books and awoke in a mental hospital after overdosing on belladonna.

Other followers were afraid that they would be failed warriors if they didn't tell their parents, as Carlos dictated, "You have no child. You are not my mother. My mother is dead." Behind Carlos' and the witches' backs, I consistently suggested to followers that they not do anything conflicting with their principles, no matter what Carlos said or wrote, or just because an authority figure had told a crowd what to do in a lecture. I always stressed that within our group instructions were individual, and I was grateful not to have been ordered to cut ties with my family, and in fact would not have done it. I was convinced that Carlos knew this from the beginning—if he was so eager to get me that he would track me for twenty years, he knew he had to accept a rough diamond. "If Irving were alive," he often told me, "he'd never have let you go." He always stated it this way, never observing that *I* would never have "let go" my relationship with my father.

The ultimate in theft was energetic vampirism, the province of the creatures "Tony Lama" had captured on film. Carlos explained this to us in detail:

"Tony was at a Tibetan Buddhist event in Teotihuacan—he knows the Dalai Lama, you know—and it was the Vernal Equinox. There were 100,000 people gathered there at the pyramids. Because of this 'spirituality,' that's really just fake and egotistical, the *intent* of this mass anthropomorphized the form of *an inorganic being onto the negative*. Tony is weird! All kinds of strange things happen to him, but this is the weirdest one yet! He photographed don Juan's *most important secret teaching—he caught on film a voladore, or flyer*.

"Don Juan told me this information was too dangerous, too volatile, to make public—but Weird Tony's photographs are the omen that Spirit wants me to tell you this: *we are being eaten*. I've told a lot of you without telling you *everything*." Carlos shot a look in my direction. "I've told you that we are *food*. That we are ... *chickens*! That's right! *Coño! Qué horrible!* Monstrous! Something is eating our awareness, all day, every day, even in our sleep. These are the beings don Juan named the flyers, or jumpers."

He handed around a stack of black-and-white 8- x 10-inch prints. Against a background of pyramids and mountainous scenery with an enormous crowd below was a black being an inch long and half an inch in diameter in the sky. Its features were not precise, only its shape, and it looked like a gargoyle on a medieval temple, wings open, arms and body in a backwards arc. It looked malevolent and, I thought, a little fake. But I was certain Tony Karam would never fake a photograph. (When the pictures were shown at workshops, some attendees remarked that it looked like a blurry piece of dust. I thought it had more personality than a piece of dust ever could.) Our class gave a collective shudder, and I faked mine. This thing looked cartoonish to me, and Carlos' sci-fi philosophies had never attracted me. And yet, Carlos swore, this was don Juan's most important secret, revealed at last.

Carlos continued his explanation. "The ego—the 'I, I, I,' the 'me me me'—is caused by the flyers eating us. Our sheen of awareness *should* be an oval egg-shaped covering, surrounding our body. But it has been chewed *down to our toes*. Think of the owners of a chicken coop. They really don't care for the well-being of the chickens! They just raise them and eat them—and that's how the flyers are with us. If one chicken escapes they don't waste all their time chasing it down to bring it back. A few of us might escape, by doing the magical movements and the recapitulation. *I can't save you!* But without me, you don't even have a chance...." I remembered my first reunion talk on the phone with Carlos. He had told me to suspend disbelief, and to consider that we are "food," because "this is a predatorial universe."

"Man is being exterminated," he went on. "There's NOTHING of our own in our minds! We have FLYER'S MINDS. The mind, to a *seer* of energy, has a pendulum-like, back-and-forth motion—that's the flyer. They make us morose, depressive; they fill us with kinky sexual thoughts—all masturbation comes from the flyers. And we don't even like our own genitals! That's the flyers, too. They make us frigid. Maybe they have some kind of tool that destroys the energy, and only the *nagual* can fix that. And luhhhvvvveee ... that's the worst thing of all, *human love*." Carlos imitated a stoned hippie

strumming a guitar. “It’s a flyer trick, looking for ‘love,’ but we just replace one head with another, changing all the time! That’s not *love*.

“Because the mind is nothing more than this—a *foreign installation*—it agrees with itself! None of our questions come from us—they’re all from this thing that possesses your mind. You talk yourself into everything. And everything is flyer, flyer, flyer! I saw *The Seven-Year Itch* with Marilyn Monroe recently. I couldn’t believe it! Why was she so popular? She’s such a stiff version of a woman. It’s the Flyers at work.

“The *most important secret is this—don’t try to be creative*. It’s *impossible*. There is no such thing as art. No one has ever had an original thought. I knew a guy who told me, ‘I want to make *real* movies from my real self.’ That’s absurd! He can’t do that, then he’ll have an audience of one! No one will distribute real art, never. They only allow you to see what the critics approve, so it’s already been previewed by them. *When we think we’re getting to our REAL SELF, that’s just another layer of Bobby the Flyer*. I call them ‘Bobbies’ because that’s a little boy’s name, a little boy in shorts.”

I wondered how Carlos accounted for the popularity of his works, literature that had made a generation consider something beyond the visible in our lives.

Carlos then described the mechanics of the flyers’ eating. “ ‘But *how* do they eat us, don Juan?’ Don Juan answered me, ‘With their fat, flat tongues.’ The flyers are as big as buildings, and they walk along the ground. They *slide*, and swoop, and they love cities—Buenos Aires is their homeland! There is a higher concentration of flyers in Buenos Aires than anyplace else on Earth. The only country they don’t inhabit is Ireland. They are installed in the mind between ten and twelve years of age. They like the dark, and they like men better. They lick us as if we were ice-cream cones.”

It upset me to hear him talk about the flyers to the young Candice, who Carlos said didn’t have the flyer’s mind attached yet. “The installation is like that of an octopus. With a dry surface it attaches firmly, and can’t be removed. But we’re letting a little

moisture in there, so there's a little slippage. Candice asks me, 'How many tentacles do I have loose now?'

" 'Three.'

"She says, 'Well, if I work really hard maybe I can get another one loose.' "

Then he entered into an arena that disturbed me more than all the rest of his commentary. He began by telling us, "When the flyers took us over, they taught man that you've got to fear God, you have to plead and beg for forgiveness, and have to look up to some big entity. The flyers were especially strong in the Middle Ages, when the Church controlled everything." (Taisha had told me the opposite about the Middle Ages—that mankind was actually freer then.)

"Even today, Catholics and others are in the mode of supplicating, begging for things. Don Juan said it doesn't work that way. You command It. If you start begging It for something, *most especially if you say*, 'Please don't let X happen!' then it surely will—X WILL HAPPEN TO YOU. *It* will make it happen. So if there's anything you don't want to happen, don Juan would say, 'Don't beg!' Don't say what you don't want to happen, *mierda!* It slams people who are in a supplicating mode."

I still believed there was a way to pray without begging. Once I asked Taisha her opinion of the classic book of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which had given me hope during my darkest period of expulsion from the group. "Whatever quiets the mind is good for us," she had replied. I often turned to a favorite quote: "Because it is not what you are nor what you have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be."

Once, as we sat on my rooftop, she commented that it was safest to be "high up, away from the band of human thought that infects us, where the flyers have a harder time reaching us. They don't like us to be up in trees or off the ground for prolonged periods."

On three occasions I thought I saw flyers.

Leaving a New York workshop, I saw in the airport what looked like a black lump sitting on a man's shoulders. Carlos solemnly confirmed the vision, but wouldn't say more.

The second time was in Guido's office. I heard him walking around and went to say hello, but there was no one there, only a shadow moving on his wall, yet there were no windows. Carlos was much impressed by this second manifestation, and told the class.

The third time, I saw a shadow pass slowly under my bedroom door. I jumped up, but there was no one. I ran to the phone to call Carlos.

"Was it a flyer?" I asked, frightened.

"Of course, you freak of nature! *Cojuda!* What do you think it was, a ghost?"

At the end of his life Carlos had a vision. He *saw* that there was a form of inorganic life *beyond* Bobby the Flyer, called "Seymours" because they ate advanced practitioners who could "see more." Seymours were long, spindly, stick-like flyers who slipped under doors and between cracks and into one's soul. He *saw* that there were more layers of danger than he had imagined. No one in our group besides him was truly free. He became increasingly avid on the subject, trying to fulfill his last duty by revealing "don Juan's most vital secret knowledge."

The fact that Tony captured these creatures on film was an omen to Carlos to offer Karam the position as his successor. As far as I know, although at least half the women were told they were "The Electric Warrior," Tony is the only man to have been offered "successorship." He declined, telling me years later that based on his knowledge of Mexican culture, he believed don Juan to be a fictional character. Thus Tony would be leading a group based on lies—something he did not view as "magical." Carlos castigated him, without telling us what actually happened. Tony withdrew with a humility I found admirable—in all my years amongst these people I found him to be truly "impeccable." He never partook in hierarchical struggles, was not seduced by Castaneda's offer when he perceived that it clashed with his values, and has retained affection and respect for all that was most admirable in "the *nagualito*."

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Fairy Dust

*... the hours after you are gone are so leaden
they will always start dragging too soon
the grapples clawing blindly the bed of want
bringing up the bones of the old loves
sockets filled once with eyes like yours
all always is it better too soon than never ...*

—Samuel Beckett, *Cascando*

At the seminars there was terrible tension about what to wear at the sit-down lectures that closed each strenuous day. After the Tula disaster, I was determined never to be underdressed again in the sorcerers' company. Taisha was the first to voice her approval, saying, "You changed like *that*, overnight! Now you're *always* the most elegant person in the group."

The week-long intensive at UCLA promised to be an exceptional seminar, since all the top echelon would be speaking. The schedule was so packed with activity that sleep-deprivation alone would probably cause the participants to experience an altered state.

I went shopping with great care the week before the conference, finally discovering a dress that appeared to meet all sorcery requirements, as well as pleasing me. It was made of white satin, with a soft, feminine boat neckline; the bust tapered to a slim waist, then flared slightly, the hem stopping just above the knees. It was slyly modernized '50s high-fashion. I bought slim-heeled white satin pumps to go with it (not too high, for fear of rebuke—heel-height

was a touchy issue) and wore a string of pearls. Looking at myself in the mirror I felt lovely, and saw nothing that could offend. My neck and shoulders were visible, but there was no suggestive *décolletage*, the hem-line was sorcery-proper, and the A-line cut was classical. Carlos had given me one of his best, very-short haircuts that morning, leaving a few ringlets of curls. In the sorcerer's world, where vanity was a sin to be fought, I rarely indulged in the heady sensation of feeling pretty—but tonight I did. I wore a flowing, black velvet coat to complete the *ensemble*, and headed for the auditorium.

On my way I passed one of the group's newer male members. "Heeeeyy ...," he said. "Wow!"

I smiled. I was bad at so many things in the sorcerers' world, it seemed—it felt good to achieve success at something they set such store by: looking elegant.

I was heading backstage to say hello to the witches and the other Tensegrity instructresses, a.k.a. "The Energy Trackers." I paused to wave to Guido and Ramon just outside. They stopped their conversation cold. Guido stared at me.

"Ellie ... you're *breathhtaking*." He took my arm and pulled me closer. "Look, Ramon, look at her—she's—"

Ramon flushed and said, "Ellis, you shouldn't look so good...."

Guido was touching my hair gently, as if it would break.

"Look at her hair, Ramon. You should always wear it like that, Ellie, from now on. *Always*." (Didn't he know my haircuts weren't mine to choose? Not if I wanted to stay in the group. Perhaps the men didn't know!) "Ramon, feel her hair."

Ramon reached out and gingerly caressed it.

The flattery was overwhelming to me. We all fell silent. Guido and I stood staring at each other, blushing. It was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I shook myself awake and, smiling, reached for the dressing-room door. I was leaving Shakespeare to enter *All About Eve*. A roomful of assessing eyes were on me, and I squirmed as I felt the daggers entering my back.

Florinda spoke first. “That *coat*,” she said, shaking her head, “why do you have to be so *extravagant*?”

“Oh,” I said, nervously, and took off the coat. I was met by the proverbial deafening silence. Someone broke it by complimenting someone else’s dress, and the women in the room began to chatter all at once, excluding me from the conversation. I paid a few compliments, received none in return, and fled. “Call me,” Florinda muttered in an ominous tone.

The bookstore was closed for the evening, so I helped out a little around the auditorium then went to a pay phone to call Flo.

“Hi! What’s up, Flo? Is something wrong tonight? Everyone backstage looked a little upset. Stage fright?”

“*NO JODAS! PENDEJA!* What’s *wrong* is *you!* That ... that *dress* symbolizes everything that’s wrong with *you*. GET RID OF IT! NOW! I can tell how expensive it is—you’d better find a place to sell it.” She slammed down the phone.

I felt like I’d been stung by a poisonous insect. I had to find someone to talk to, and I was out of change. I looked around for someone to borrow quarters from. Guido was hovering, watching me.

“Want to borrow my cell?”

I nodded.

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t—talk about it; I don’t really know.”

I called Muni. The hot lines must have been working overtime because she was fully prepared.

“Florinda told me about your *dress*. *DO YOU KNOW HOW CLOSE YOU ARE TO BEING KICKED OUT?* You’re hanging by a thread! You wore that to get *attention*. You’re trying to stand out, to look special! Why can’t you just fit in, like the others! Listen, Ellis—say, are you on a cell phone?”

“Guido’s.”

“Get off it, quick. Is he watching you?”

I looked around. “No,” I lied. “Absolutely not. He doesn’t even know where I am.”

“Good. Excellent. *I don’t want my number on his phone.* Better get off NOW! Call me from a pay phone.”

I handed Guido the phone, borrowed change, and went outside. As I dialed, I noticed that Guido was following me at a distance.

Muni took up where she had left off.

“This is your last chance. You’ve been *given EVERYTHING!* You seem to think you should get something, like other people! You’ve already had EVERYTHING in the world given to you! Give it up! All that’s left to you is to *give BACK!* You’ll never be able to make up for what you’ve been given, if you spend your whole life trying! I *can’t believe* how long you’ve been here and you still don’t GET IT!” She raged for a while longer, until I ran out of change.

I left the phone booth totally confused and in shock. Guido was waiting a few feet away.

“I was watching,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, you know I can’t—” I gave him a wan half-smile. “Thanks, I’m going to go home for a while.”

I went home and cut up my dress and shoes with sharp scissors, and shoved them into the trash. I didn’t have the stomach for driving the dress around town, looking for the best second-hand consignment store.

I changed into one of my old, approved outfits, a white suit rather like one of Taisha’s, a bit school-marmish. I sat on my bed wondering if there was anyone who could help me understand. I decided to do a radical thing: I called Beulah, who hated me, wondering if by asking for her help I could bridge the gap between us.

She sounded understandably shocked to hear from me. When I told her my story she said, “Well, as the *nagual* told me, ‘You’re never going to get *anything, ever,* again. All that’s left for the rest of your entire life is to GIVE BACK, GIVE BACK, GIVE BACK—and *be grateful.*’ So just you put that in your pipe and smoke it, Missy!”

“Thanks, Beulah. That was thoughtful of you.”

“No problem, call anytime,” she said.

When I returned to the lecture hall, Guido looked puzzled. “Why did you change?”

“Oh ...” I made a vague gesture. “Wasn’t quite right for the situation.”

He sat next to me and smiled. “You’re incredibly beautiful.”

During Carlos’ speech Guido stretched his big frame once, like a cat, and let his leg fall open against mine, his arm coming to rest behind me. His fingers played lightly with my hair, a forefinger brushed my ear, and we pressed our legs together throughout the two-hour speech. Very slowly, I let my neck fall into the curve of his arm.

Now, Guido and I had established contact, of a sort. After the Incident With The White Dress, I didn’t know what to do. And I had the strange sensation that this truly was *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that Carlos was practicing his brand of urban sorcery on two of his favorite apprentices.

I decided to take the next decisive move. Guido was leaving for a few days of business in Dallas, Texas. I found a postcard—touching, shivery, and innocently erotic—of two kids, about ten, exchanging a heart-stopping kiss. The girl was taller by an inch, with flouncy dress and ponytail; the boy had a crew-cut, childish Doc Martens, and blue jeans with “Dallas” printed microscopically on the back pocket (into which he had James-Deanishly stuck his hand as he arced upwards to meet her lips).

I made up a package including the card and several books. Inside I put one of my dearest treasures, a slim, battered edition of Samuel Beckett’s poetry which included my favorite poem, “Casando.” I wrapped the package with great care, and that night after class, I slipped him my gift. His brows lifted, surprised.

I drew Guido aside. “It’s something to read on the plane—promise you won’t open it before.” Fingers curled within ribbons. We parted, silence exploding all around.

And then I waited. It was awfully strong stuff for the Victorian world we lived in, for two sorcerers who didn’t believe in “human

love.” Was this the sorceric kind, I wondered—and what was the difference? I knew in my heart that this infatuation had blossomed for a variety of reasons, one of which was Carlos’ fierce neglect of me. Not for several years did I learn that Guido was enduring a similar anguish with one of the witches.

I waited, haunted by Beckett:

*the churn of stale words in the heart again
love love love thud of the old plunger
pestling the unalterable whey of words*

*terrified again
of not loving
of loving and not you
of being loved and not by you
of knowing not knowing pretending
pretending*

*I and all the others that will love you
if they love you*

It was two days before Guido called. His voice was choked.

“Baby. Thank you. I was ... stunned. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Did you—” His voice cracked so that I could barely hear him.

“Did you see that the little boy’s pocket says *Dallas*? Did you *know*?”

“Of course.”

“It’s so *small*.”

“Yes.”

With the whip crack of a horror movie’s shock, his voice became harsh, nearly breaking. He snapped, “This is not—I—” He made a guttural noise; the line went dead. I had the flat, ironic thought that never had so many people hung up on me as in the last five years.

Like a war bride, I waited.

I wondered if he still ... loved me? I had no language for this. When Guido entered the office next my back was to him. I was

explaining the warrior's way to an ardent Japanese caller. Like a claustrophobe in an elevator, my heart made a pounding, desperate pitch for release. The clamor was terrible.

Guido was dressed in black overalls, his most playful (and ridiculous) getup, over which he wore a swashbuckling black coat. Seeing him out of the corner of my eye, I didn't turn my head. I continued to quote Castaneda on *dreaming* to my caller, who was worried about spending \$600 plus travel and accommodations.

Guido brought me a glass of Perrier, smiled radiantly, and set it beside me like a perfect ... lover. A lover or a head-waiter. My blood unfroze. He wasn't mad at me anymore. I felt as happy as when I'd seen my first high-school love after summer vacation.

I joined the group in the kitchen, where the whole office was gathered to hear Guido's Texas tales. He was the brightest light in our dour "temple," as Carlos had named Cleargreen, walking a fine edge with irreverent humor.

At our reunion lunch, Guido, Ramon, and I ate good deli food with plastic forks and paper napkins—cheese with onions and bagels and mustard, olives and smoked fish—while the others ate their individually prepared crock-pot meals—no-salt, no-condiment, low-carbohydrate meat stews, brought to the office in Tupperware bowls. It looked like prison food. Guido sliced a rich slab of smoked salmon, smeared a bagel with cream cheese, and slammed the sandwich onto my plate, saying:

"Presentation is everything."

Guido kept us laughing for an hour.

I remained quiet, with a hyper-conscious lovers' anxiety and narcissism—I was certain that everyone at the table was reading my mind. My voice sounded strange and foreign when I spoke, and I couldn't meet Guido's eye.

I stood washing dishes while the group dispersed, feeling Guido approach me from behind. He pretended to reach for a dish, leaning the full length of his body against mine. A shudder ran through me as he encircled me with both arms to wash a dish, his chest pressed warm against me. I felt small and conquered, an animal surrendered.

He whispered, his lips against my ear, "Playing house."

We didn't say anything else until closing time, only once crossing paths in the darkened foyer. We instinctively reached to touch one another—he caressed my hair, while I rested my palm lightly against his chest, then touched my fingertips to his neck.

Guido called me that night before class. We had evolved a strange form of telephone intimacy—I thought of it as the "not-doing" (a term from Carlos' books) of phone sex. We would stay on the phone for five, ten, fifteen minutes in silence listening to each other's breathing. Periodically one of us would whisper, "Do you want to go now?"

The other would reply, in a hushed tone, "No."

As we finally tore ourselves away to prepare for class, I blurted, "I hate you, Guido."

I heard an intake of breath.

"You do?" he whispered. "I hate you too, Ellie."

That night in class he rushed to me, a tremendous grin on his face.

"You *really* hate me? *Just as I hate you, I hope?*"

"Yes. Yes, just as you hate me."

He spun away, sparkling with joy.

As he saw me to my car he surreptitiously handed me a heavy manila envelope. When he was gone, I dumped it out on the seat. There was a wooden, framed daguerreotype of a happy, Gibson-type girl, all curls and smiling green eyes. (Guido told me later that this was a small treasure he'd found in a shop in Mexico, "a long, *longtime* ago.") A silver souvenir spoon fell out of the envelope: it read "Dallas" on the handle. There was a plain white card which read, "I guess you know where this belongs." It was a joke on a joke Carlos often made about me: "Ellis was born with a silver spoon—up her *culo*."

However, above the words was drawn a large heart.

Right after this, Florinda began including Guido on our regular movie outings. For several months we made a threesome, often going out two or three evenings a week. I knew perfectly well that Florinda's outings were usually directed by Carlos. He—*they*—were up to something, testing us. For our fidelity to group rules? To bring the boil of human love to the surface? Or—was Florinda simply playing dolls, once again? No, it wasn't that simple; she never made a move without the *nagual*. They were trying to rattle our egos—for all the innocuous façade, Castaneda was burning his disciples.

One night Guido collected us in one of the Big Black American cars he was forever leasing, chauffeuring us to our favorite sushi restaurant.

As a surprise, Florinda had invited Alice, a longtime, perennially fringe member whom neither Guido nor I much liked. Florinda said that “smart Jewish kids like you and Guido were the bane of Alice's high-school existence—she slaved to make good grades and be the perfect student, while you were the sarcastic, brilliant Jews who never included her in your cliques.” This was meaningless to me, but I hadn't gone to Beverly Hills. There were no Jewish cliques in a Vermont prep school, much less long-suffering Chicanas like Alice. And, Florinda claimed that Alice had a mad crush on Guido, who had ignored her for years.

Perhaps due to this stewpot of tensions, we got drunker than usual on sake. (Alice was “in recovery” and hadn't taken a drink in twenty years.) Guido, usually a light drinker, made an extravagant fuss over Alice. Florinda whispered to me that his unprecedented attentions flustered her.

Alice began to choke. And choke. And swell; and turn red.

Florinda and I watched, numb. Alice was drooling now, as her choking grew weaker. Florinda turned away in disgust. Only Guido, who had been a paramedic, recognized that this was a near-death situation. He leapt to Alice and performed the Heimlich maneuver, squeezing her ribcage beneath her voluminous bust. A chunk of rice

flew out of her mouth as if jet-propelled, nearly hitting Florinda in the eye.

Alice's color slowly returned to normal. Overcome with embarrassment, she began a litany: "It was the seaweed, it was the seaweed—"

Guido patted and comforted her. Florinda whispered in my ear, "That was disgusting! She's not coming with us to the movies!" and sprung into action.

"There, there, Alice—you're alright now. You *must* have a drink! Sake will soothe your throat. Guido, pour a cup."

"Oh, no, I can't!" Alice wailed, "I haven't touched a drink in twenty years!"

"Fuck that! You *have* to!" Florinda insisted.

In the end she capitulated, regained her dignity, and spoke the final words on the subject: "It was the seaweed."

As we got up to leave, Florinda made a transparent excuse to rid us of Alice (she had received these painful dismissals for years), and the three of us reentered Guido's black chariot. I was in the back seat.

Florinda began to put on a show, reminiscent of Carlos' displays when he placed a girl's hand on his crotch while a table of jealous women watched. Once I had refused to participate in hurting the other women, and he had shoved me away in disgust.

Now I *knew* she and Carlos were up to their magical tricks. She caressed Guido's thigh, petted his ears, and entwined her fingers with his, holding their hands up to me.

"See, Ellis, see—see what we *do* together?"

I decided to trump her by leaning over and giving her a French kiss. She blushed. (She had lately been trying to shock me, under orders from Carlos, by greeting me at his door with ardent kisses.)

Guido turned to Florinda. "She's not *known* for that, is she?"

"No, she isn't," replied a rattled Florinda. As payback, she intensified her caresses to Guido's thighs, arriving perilously close to his crotch, which betrayed the results of her game. Guido looked at me in the rearview mirror, shrugged, and took both hands off the wheel in a "What can I possibly do?" gesture.

Arriving at our destination, Century City's outdoor mall, we walked hand in hand with Guido in the middle. Suddenly Florinda stopped.

"Wait, we'd better *link arms* instead—it's much safer—what if Claude were to see us? And Guidito, wouldn't you rather be at home, writing? Don't you have work to do?"

"Flo, I'm drunk, I'm aroused—I wouldn't get much work done."

Discovering that all the promising movies were sold out, we bought tickets for the only thing available, a grade-B thriller with Damon Wayons.

Suddenly Guido stopped short. He pointed at a nearby *Häagendazs* parlor.

"It's *Astrid*."

Indeed, Astrid bore an enormous banana split, luxuriously dripping chocolate sauce and whipped cream.

"What should we do?" Guido asked, delighted.

"Join her!" Flo grinned.

Seeing us, Astrid's near-transparent skin paled unbelievably. She looked as if she might possibly faint. Seeing our smiles, she let out a wail of relief. We embraced her, then moved toward the shop.

"It's you! Oh my God, it's *you*! If it had been anyone else—Claude, Beulah, Zuna—I'd have been ... I'd have been ... oh, thank God! You're *the only* three people I can trust! What an omen!"

We sat down to eat our sweets, and invited Astrid to the movies. Guido devoured his sundae, obviously nervous at the sexual tension still palpable amongst the three of us. Astrid appeared too stricken by her close call to notice. I had the opposite reaction—unable to eat, I threw away my unfinished ice cream.

Soon we were in the theatre. I ducked into the inside seat, Guido firmly moved in beside me, Florinda next to him and Astrid on the outside. The two women volunteered to get candy, popcorn, and sodas.

Alone in the dark, Guido and I reached for each other. I immediately discovered he would not permit kissing—too intimate. But oddly, he lost no time in caressing my bare calves and slowly, tenuously, stroking my thighs beneath my skirt. Then he fondled my

earlobes, and held my hand, running circles in my palm with his fingertips. I was dissolving.

I put my hand on his thigh and rested my own fingers lightly on—where is that prude D.H. Lawrence when you need him?... Guido's excited manhood. He did not back away as he had from the kiss.

When Astrid and Florinda came back the movie had begun. Angling himself toward Florinda, Guido's broad shoulders blocked me entirely from her view. We carried on through the entire movie. As Guido fondled me, he kept up a running, comic annotation in both Florinda's and my ears.

At the movie's end Florinda turned to us with an apology.

"That must have been terribly boring for you two. Astrid and I like that junk, but I know you both have higher standards. Well, maybe tomorrow night—"

"Oh no!" we chimed in. "No problem! We weren't bored at all."

"We had a great time, didn't we, Ellie?"

"Oh, it was just fine! We didn't care."

"Good!"

As we hugged goodbye she said, "You have no idea what it meant to run into you three, what an energetic boost it gave me!"

On the short ride home, we laughed about Astrid's predicament and planned to see another movie as soon as possible. Stopping at my apartment, Guido locked Florinda into her passenger seat and came around the back of the car, where he could embrace me unseen. Still no kiss; instead he nuzzled my neck and inhaled deep breaths of my hair. With a whispered, "See you in class," we parted.

“Heads Will Roll!”

Any excuse will serve a tyrant.

—Aesop, The Wolf and the Lamb

There was always a Sorcery Theatre in the making. These were referred to as Shamanic Theatres, said to change the viewers' perceptions by shocking them out of deeply held beliefs. They consisted of highly irreverent skits written by Carlos, Guido, and sometimes Tarina. At these events, occasional musical recital or martial arts performance was interwoven.

Sometimes we had theatres a month apart; sometimes two years would pass between events. They were equally anticipated and feared—there was always the possibility of becoming a star, and the equal likelihood of total failure. (Except for Carlos' favorites of the moment, of course, who could, and did, get away with incredible gaffes.) As Carlos gleefully proclaimed, “Heads will roll! After every theatre, heads will roll!”

I attended half a dozen, though I never participated. On one occasion, Claude asked me to impersonate Patsy Cline; an enormous brouhaha amongst the witches, Carlos, Claude, and I erupted. As luck would have it, Florinda succeeded in winning a battle *against* the performance. She believed, she told me privately, that the envious Claude was trying to sabotage me by setting me up to fail. Florinda argued that, like a Roman Emperor, Claude would give me a “thumbs down” whatever I did; that Carlos wouldn't dare defy

her; and that Claude could finally have me publicly humiliated and banished forever.

In my first year with Carlos he deemed me “energetically unfit” to attend a theatre, although he dangled it in front of me for weeks as a possibility, if I could only transform fast enough. Consequently, I missed the infamous night where, as Carlos told me, Claude “went to the Second Attention and brought back the sorcerer’s food.” Multi-dimensional catering? I later heard from a guest at the party that Carlos prepared a translucent gelatin and a flavorless broth containing hallucinogens, to be taken on an empty stomach. One concoction was almost certainly datura, the preparation of which he described in an early book. He instructed the acolyte who told me about it to prepare several weeks in advance, by giving up sugar and caffeine. The invitation she received depicted a primitively drawn stick figure about to take flight, and the words, “Come fly with us!”

The first shamanic party I attended was catered by a restaurant.

One night, as we stood in our places at our evening class, a treat was announced: Guido and Ramon were going to surprise us with a preview of their piece for the next theatre. The scuttlebutt was that Florinda had okayed the skit without having seen it.

The two men began an outrageous, blasphemous routine. They incorporated Tensegrity and martial arts “long forms” with camp homosexual parody, spiced with a touch of the Three Stooges. The popular partner pass—“the Sorcerer’s Pass of Affection”—was mixed with simulations of anal and oral sex and Keystone Cops head-bashing. Our familiar magical maneuvers were woven into comedy with black thread.

As we recognized each new piece and watched its degeneration, we collectively lost all sense of decorum, and howled and hugged our sides with laughter. Seeing private jokes built on the foundation of Guido’s wicked comic gifts was remarkable. Even though I hated slapstick, this was one of the funniest things I’d ever seen.

For the first few moments, however, the audience was frozen, as we slowly realized a farce was unfolding. We all turned to watch

Castaneda's face.

He laughed.

And then, having seen the emperor smile, we burst into hysterical gaiety. We were a swollen piñata, our pent-up emotions exploding into waves of laughter, louder and louder. I heard sputters, coughs, and Sonia's shrill, hysterical squeals; I heard screams of laughter. I was laughing so hard my lungs ached and I began to cough.

I caught a glimpse of Florinda, her tiny face white and shocked, her mouth frozen in the rictus of a smile. Taisha emitted guarded chuckles, while Muni was a bit more vivid. And Carlos kept smiling, chortling, and grinning.

The piece went on for a remarkably long time without losing steam. My God, I marveled, they must have rehearsed for hours—the choreography, the synchronization, the detail—it was spectacular. When it was over and we had applauded, given ovations, and finally quieted down, Carlos gaily announced, “There's the first skit of our next Theatre! We're on our way—we are in business!” Another round of applause.

As soon as I got home I phoned Carlos. I did this after every class unless I was in trouble. Living alone gave me a special advantage. With no one to slow me down I invariably reached Carlos as he walked in his door. Later, when the Dark Ages came and calls to Carlos brought only rebuke, I stayed out. I took to having a pastry, an espresso, or a cocktail at a nearby Italian bar, hoping to dawdle long enough to miss his calls to me.

But that was later. This was a period of relative peace, and I dialed Carlos immediately. No answer yet; I'd beaten him home. He required his chauffeur, Astrid, to maintain the speed limit.

I called Guido. “Oh, baby, that was the best! You're brilliant! And Ramon! I didn't know he could be funny! When did you find the time to practice? It was flawless! I've damaged myself—my stomach hurts from laughing!”

“You liked it?” He was out of breath, he had just walked in.

“Like it? Oh, Guidito, that was incred—”

“Oh, baby, there goes my phone! Let's talk later! Thanks, sweetie! I'm so glad you liked it—you never know, you know? Call me back,

baby!”

I was elated, giddy with pride and pleasure as I dialed the *nagual* to praise Guido. Carlos answered the phone with his comedic “Yeeeeesssss?” By his breathlessness, I could tell that he too had just walked in.

“*Nagual*, wasn’t that remarkable? It’s going to be some kind of a stellar theater, if this is the beginning!” I was radiant with admiration for Carlos—he had accepted being the butt of an enormous joke. Perhaps it was true that he was egoless; this was the proof that he hadn’t fallen for his “guru” publicity. Carlos interrupted my reverie.

“You thought it was funny, *chica*?”

“Incredibly funny! I thought I would choke, I laughed so hard! What did you think?”

“So you did think it was funny, eh?”

“Truly. That Guido is—”

“AN ASSHOLE! An angry asshole—and so are you! You’re exactly like Guido Manfred, you ARE GUIDO MANFRED. You’re two peas in a pod, identical twins!—ANGRY! All of them are angry, but especially the two of you—Wallace and Manfred, angry Jews! Why don’t you get married? Angry with *the nagual*!! And what have I ever done to you, except break your chains? Give you your only chance at freedom?! Tensegrity is sacred, those movements are sacred, and you mock them out of petty anger with ME! ME—the one being who’s trying to help you! They are not to be made fun of, ever! You piece of *mierda*—you are Guido Manfred—exactly, you are his double! All you need is the eyebrow hair!” He slammed down the phone.

I was calm. Ice picks were busy in my stomach, and I noticed that I was panting slightly. But I felt no tears behind my eyes ... hadn’t I seen Him laughing? We all had! And Florinda had supposedly given the green light. It had felt wonderful, to all laugh together, to watch Carlos take a joke. Was everyone Guido Manfred’s evil twin, or was it just me? And why was our Jewishness part of our mutual deformity?

Class was suspended indefinitely. The sorcerer's world reminded me once again of grade school, where the wrongdoer was made to feel his pain all the more deeply because his friends suffered for his misbehavior. And of course, we were being punished for complicity, because we had laughed.

Guido put on a brave face and came into Cleargreen the next day to help out. I kissed his neck when no one was looking. He reddened and went on humming, "These Boots Are Made For Walking." I smiled and said, "These minds are made for talking...." "Hey, that's a good one." He smiled weakly.

The punishment lasted two weeks. When class was renewed, there was no mention of the wrongdoing, and Guido was returned to his place of honor in the front row. My perennial place was now in the far back corner, where Carlos had banished me. At least I was close to the bathroom, where I could hide and cry. That night Florinda told me, "The men are jealous, that's all. They want their own movements."

And they received them. Carlos instructed the men privately, then brought the "Men's Series" to the evening class. The repetitive, strenuous movements resembled farm or factory work, and the use of primitive tools. And at the August 1996 workshop in Westwood, the men—Guido, Simon, Ridley, Ramon, Buddy, and a member who arrived from Mexico—appeared for the first time in public as "The Elements." They wore non-descript slacks and button-down shirts in pastel colors. I stood near Guido's side of the stage the entire time, performing the movements in synchronicity with him. Afterwards, he said, "You don't know how important that was to me, baby, having you there, being able to see you—it meant *a lot*—more than you know." Then he added, "Wearing that blue polyester shirt was the hardest sorcery task of my life."

The Theatre of the Real

To betray, you must first belong.

—Kim Philby

Finally, Carlos began to cook up a sorcery task for me that might have come from one of his books—well, the urban version. He had created a part for me, not in the group’s private-performance “Sorcery Theatre,” but in what he termed “The Magical Theatre of the Real.” Carlos had decided that it would be beneficial to me to have a fiancé.

His motives were not entirely clear—sometimes he wanted to create contention between my brother and me, though exactly why and how this was to be accomplished was vague. I suspected he couldn’t resist making an attack on the infrastructure of any family, so violently did Carlos despise ordinary family life, although he had always been partial to David.

Guido Manfred was Carlos’ first pick, though he never clarified in what manner Guido could fluster David. In truth, I thought my brother would enjoy Guido’s “uber-nebbish” look and splendid wit, while reveling in his encyclopedia of celebrity gossip.

Ramon, the lantern-jawed, unsmiling Puerto Rican, was now Cleargreen’s accountant. I found him both lovable and staggeringly pompous. He bragged that he had arrived “half-cooked” in the sorcerers’ world, more spiritually advanced than the rest of us. Carlos considered posing Ramon as my beloved, “dressed as a military man.” Carlos was confident that this would rattle David. In

this scenario I could *only* imagine David being amused—had Carlos entirely forgotten what my brother was like? Was his memory slipping? Ridley, the shy and literate Argentinean, was cruelly discounted when Carlos told the class “he doesn’t have the punch for the task.” Riadley flushed as he absorbed this blow.

I sensed that Carlos was about to spring a lesbian test on me, so I proposed it first. I put my arm around Astrid’s waist—she towered over me—and said, “I’ll take her!” Astrid jumped right into the part, promising to wear black jackboots, leather pants, and the *de rigueur* truck keys dangling from her belt loop. Carlos vetoed the scenario, “because I don’t want Sylvia to cut you out of the will! They fucked you up so much, you deserve recompense—they owe you!”

Florinda made a continuous pitch for one of the most mild-mannered men in the group. Florinda insisted that because he was “fat and unintellectual,” he would constitute the most ridiculous date possible. She was trying to test and torture me, making it up as she went along, as I now suspected they always did.

“Flo,” I queried her privately, “How could I possibly bring that off? They’d see right through me! What would we talk about over dinner?”

She was adamant. “You just take mommy aside and whisper, ‘I can’t keep my hands off him! You can’t believe how he eats my pussy!’ That’s the kind of thing don Juan assigned us to do. Why should any of you have it easier?” Carlos remained unmoved by Florinda’s pleas. The plan was jettisoned.

The only practical motive of all this (besides to rattle my egoic cage) was to get me out of family functions such as Thanksgiving and Christmas, which, oddly, Carlos loved to celebrate. It was still early fall, but the *nagual* was planning ahead. He reasoned that I needed a man who would make constant demands on my time. Holidays were difficult for me to juggle, between my family and the group parties. Carlos’ *fêtes* were well appointed, with turkey, presents, and dreadful Bingo games. He usually expelled someone after a party, saying, “The pressure is too great—after every party, *I guarantee you*—heads will roll!” In my darkest moments, I imagined he liked ratcheting the group tension up to the maximum.

Thus, over time, Guido remained Carlos' candidate of choice. At last a dinner was arranged with Guido, my mother, my brother, and my beloved family friend, Bob. I chose the restaurant—Santa Monica's elegant *Michael's*.

When I called Guido to tell him, he approved of my choice, saying solemnly, "The *nagual* used to go there." But when I told him I'd invited Bob without asking permission, he was furious.

"Ellis, you can't just take these things lightly. This is a maneuver! You can't just ... *invite someone!* Don't you understand? This is *heavy*."

The morning of the dinner Carlos told me that Guido would not be going. The "energy" was no longer there—the door, remarkable as it may seem, had closed. I was instructed to cry at the table when I realized Guido had stood me up. This was to elicit my mother's pity—and of course, to put me through a test. When I called Guido to inform him, he was both wistful and stoic.

"I wanted to kiss your neck in front of all of them," he whispered.

The evening went as planned. I looked effectively heartbroken as I glanced at the empty chair beside me, and everyone appeared sympathetic. And now the holiday season was approaching, the problem yet unsolved. Guido was reinstated.

My brother, who lives half the year in France, was going to be in Los Angeles with his two teen-aged sons. On a casual Saturday night, they were taking my mother out to a trendy pizza place. We planned to meet there, but this time I would have Guido in tow.

And at the last moment, Guido lost the job for the second time. But in this chapter, the cut was much more cruel.

Carlos replaced him with Dexter Dupree, formerly Juan Gonzalez from Buenos Aires. (Sorcery names were generally as far from the owner's old name as possible.) Dexter was a conventionally good-looking, cheerful chiropractic student. He had teetered for a few years on the group's edge, finally winning Carlos' favor.

I liked Dexter at first, and as usual, had been one of the few to chat with him when he was merely Juan. Beulah in particular

disliked him, finding his eyebrows “too hairy—like a worm!” Because Carlos considered hairiness in either sex a “human trait, relating us to the ape,” Dexter’s bushy brows were a strike against him.

Dexter enjoyed flirting, and as usual, no one had told him it was forbidden. When he tried to nibble my neck during his first weeks in class, I smiled and told him to “be careful.” He seemed not to understand. I knew that if I warned him of the rules—and he told—I could be kicked out, so all I could do was hint, which was what Astrid, Guido, Poona, and Zuna had done for me in my early days. I had no romantic feeling for Dexter, and receiving his attentions was as dangerous for me as it was for him, if not more, since women were punished far more severely than men, and I was already considered to be “a flirt.” Sonia made regular reports from the office to the top brass when she caught me talking to a male.

Guido disliked Dexter, this peppy, self-confident newcomer, a pretty boy who was so narcissistic that the witches referred to him behind his back as “Antonio” or “Mr. Teflon,” because his self-centeredness made advice, insult, and teaching bounce right off him. Even Taisha, who thought it was shamefully human to have preferences, guiltily confessed, “I like Ridley better.” Carlos observed, “Dexter is missing a few cards in his deck,” tapping his own skull to demonstrate, then added fondly, “He reminds me of myself when I was young.”

Much like the fabrication of Claude as a magical alien, when she was really just a spoiled, overgrown child, Dexter made a superb irritant for the men’s egos. While no mystical claims were made about him, he regularly got away with all manner of blunders unpunished—stupidities that would have been grounds for expulsion for other men.

Guido responded to the news of his dismissal as my fiancé with his usual restraint at such moments. This was a serious affront to his place in the group’s hierarchy as the alpha male under Carlos. The *nagual* was effectively jostling three egos: smashing Guido’s, inflating Dexter’s, and sending mine on a roller-coaster ride. Carlos delighted in planning the big caper before the class, and Guido had

to take it on the chin while Dexter replaced him as the male center of attention in the soap opera.

First, Dexter needed a name and a profession. With the help of the half-Italian Nancy, Carlos named him Dr. Piero LaBruna. Dr. LaBruna had aristocratic blood and was an M.D. twice over: he had a degree from a Roman university and another from Johns Hopkins.

Dexter and I met at my apartment to straighten out our story. Carlos had abruptly cut the maneuver short—instead of dinner, we would have the briefest of meetings with my family and our friend Bob. Piero was to hurriedly pick me up, claiming that we were late for a reception at a chiropractic convention. I suspected the better part of Carlos' magic was already done, as his three disciples grappled with their feelings.

And from the looks of it, Dexter didn't do much grappling, he simply inflated more. When I mentioned to Dexter that Guido was a tad jealous, another reason to tone down the neck nibbling, he was stupefied.

"What? Why?" he queried.

"Never mind," I sighed. Dexter was missing a few cards from his deck.

Dr. LaBruna was instructed to pick me up at the pizza parlor.

Carlos had directed me to jump out of my seat, embrace Dexter passionately, and exchange a few words in Italian. Then, after the swiftest of introductions, we were to race hand-in-hand out the door. Dexter was not to sit down, so anxious were we to be alone.

During our last preparatory meeting, Dexter began to inhabit his role. Perhaps I did, too. He began to treat me like a wife. He was ordering me around, reminding me repeatedly of Carlos' instructions, and insisting that I do things according to his interpretation. He was truly annoying. What was this green puppy doing pushing me around? I snapped back at Dr. LaBruna, and we parted until after dinner.

I was deadly nervous during the meal, picking at my pizza. I knew what it would mean to fail at this: kicked out once again. And, I felt

guilty about lying to my family and my brother's family, but this was sorcery, the real thing. Of course, I had talked Piero up excitedly to them—I had even told my mother that I'd made a brief trip with him to Rome to meet his parents. And now here I was in a noisy mall, waiting for the love of my life.

Piero appeared exactly on time, reeking of cheap cologne. I almost started coughing. I mastered myself, however, and threw myself into his arms, and we kissed as passionately as propriety allowed. Bob told me later that we "looked as if we couldn't wait to run to the nearest bedroom."

Piero spoke French with my brother and my nephews, asking a few requisite questions about Provence. His manners were excellent, and he charmed my mother with his ebullience. Except for the cologne, I believe he made an entirely passable fiancé. The picture of Young Joyous Love, we raced hand-in-hand out the door, precisely as we had been instructed to.

Outside it had begun to drizzle. Dexter and I danced in the happy rain and whooped, hugging and exulting, "We did it! We did it!" He picked me up and spun me around, laughing. We had performed in Carlos Castaneda's Theatre of the Real! We had stepped into the great man's books!

I called Carlos immediately, just as soon as I could get out of my clothes, which reeked horribly of scent. He was delighted, anxious to hear all about my mother's reaction. As I soon learned, Dexter had been a perfect success with her. She was thrilled with her prospective son-in-law and was soon telling her friends, and asking me if we'd set the date.

The next night I went to class excited and above all, relieved. The group gathered at the foot of the stairway, as always, waiting for the yoga class to end. Dexter and I were smiling, and when Carlos arrived, driven by Astrid (for he could no longer see to drive), I stood next to Dexter smiling and mugging lightly, as if posing for a snapshot.

Carlos turned on me. "Asshole! *Mierda, babosa!* What do you think you are, *married?* You *believe* it! You think Dexter is your man! *Carajo! Pendeja! You fuck-up, you—*"

He turned away from me in disgust and headed up the stairs. Astrid looked at me sadly—it was all beginning again. I went to my usual dunce’s spot at the back of the room, wishing there was somewhere further away I could hide. Dexter and I had both been smiling—I hadn’t made a spectacle. Why was I taking all the blame?

I wasn’t kicked out, but Carlos shunned and ridiculed me all the same. Now, Carlos informed me, I’d have to end the play, because I’d “ruined everything.” The Dr. LaBruna episode was finished, and my holiday excuses were gone. What, I asked Carlos, did he want me to tell my mother?

And now he pulled one of the cruelest stunts in all the time I’d known him. He used my mother’s twisted sexual relationship with her doctor against me. Presumably it was a “test,” but it stank of sadism.

Carlos said, “Tell her that you went back to Italy with him—and now you realize he’s been using you for money, he’s a lousy gigolo. A man who can’t even pay for his own drinks! And that isn’t the worst! The BIG problem is—he demands blowjobs six times a day! Call her! Tell her! That’s what you have to do!”

I got off the phone and cried. I called Daphne and Ridley, two members of the group I trusted, to discuss what I had to do. They helped me rehearse, they suggested suitable language, and I did it, still wondering if Carlos could in some measure read my mind, or if the Spirit or the Selector was watching. I told my mother that the LaBruna family was aristocratic but penniless, that Piero didn’t really want to work, and that I would be stuck across the Atlantic as an “Italian wife,” eternally doing laundry. Finally I explicitly confessed our sexual problems.

This rolled right off my mother’s back. “Men!” she exclaimed. “They can be so selfish! Well, plenty of fish in the sea! I’m sorry, baby, but I’m glad you found out now!”

Chronically indifferent to shock about sexual matters, my mother had foiled Carlos’ plan to upset her. As he became increasingly ill, Carlos’ plots to subvert his apprentices’ relations with their families grew ever more perverse; but he had not counted on my mother’s

eccentricities. He seemed disappointed when I told him that it had gone off painlessly.

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Fat and Bodies

*Terrible experiences make
one wonder whether he who
experiences them is not something terrible.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*

No account of a life with Carlos Castaneda would be complete without addressing the subject of fat.

Carlos was obsessed by fat: his own, his disciples', and the fat of the world at large. He wrote about it in his books, he spoke about it at lectures and in interviews, and he harangued those closest to him daily if they didn't meet his physical standards. Body fat was "not sorceric."

For the first twenty years during which I knew Carlos he was consistently plump. Never obese, but round and chubby—a magical Pillsbury Dough Boy. Sweet, soft, endearing, and asexual.

When I encountered the new, lean Carlos before my first Tensegrity class, it was a big shock. I found him immensely more attractive. I noticed first that his black hair had turned a beautiful silver; but the biggest change was that at sixty-five he had finally lost his baby fat. The lean, muscular Carlos appeared altogether more manly.

He told us don Juan had teased him mercilessly about his weight; how he (Carlos) had eaten "eleven bacon sandwiches a day." His idea of gustatory Nirvana, he said, was "a bread sandwich—two slices of bread with a slice of bread in the middle!" He had a sweet

tooth that he fought but never defeated, and a taste for cappuccinos, which he forbade the rest of us from enjoying—unless he was spoon-feeding the women from his cup. Carlos spoke guiltily about his coffee and pastry binges with Claude, after which they both got sick. He quoted her pleading, “We might die tomorrow, so let’s have a cappuccino!”

Once Claude had Carlos fire one of his new lovers from Cleargreen, from classes, and from her “father’s” bed, ostensibly because the young woman offered to make Ridley a cappuccino. She had never been informed of the rules, and she too had been spoon-fed coffee by Carlos. Ridley demurred, but when the young lady insisted, he politely took a sip. Claude appeared unexpectedly, railed at Ridley that he was “not a man!” and threw a screaming hissy fit at the new employee. She was never seen again. “I lost my best employee!” Sonia groaned. The girl had a severe breakdown and required extensive therapy in order to recover from the brutal rejection.

For years Carlos told the crowds of seminar attendees that he never touched caffeine, saying, “We are too sensitive even to drink tea—to go to Infinity one must give up coffee, sugar, and carbohydrates.” In the last months of his life, I was sent on surreptitious missions to the corner bakery to purchase his breakfast cappuccino and pastry. Florinda made these missions delightfully cloak-and-dagger. “It’s for *the nagual*,” she whispered, as if I hadn’t a clue. “Don’t let anyone see you! I’ll be waiting outside my door! *Hurry!*”

Carlos was an excellent cook who made a superb *chile verde*, roast beef, and creamy desserts, which he sometimes fed to me after making love. Besides being delicious, the food was said to be imbued with his power. I share the folk philosophy that the spirit in which food is prepared affects its flavor, but Carlos took this premise to the extreme. Florinda was forbidden ever to cook for the *nagual*. “I don’t know why, but it’s poisonous to him,” she told me, “although I am a good cook.” She was happy enough not to have the responsibility.

And so it fell to the long-suffering Taisha, who was forever being criticized for her bland creations. I regularly volunteered to do grocery shopping for her, and she was warm and grateful, always careful to pay me back to the penny. When we went shopping together she usually bought a bottle of Stolichnaya vodka, saying, “It’s not for me!” though it was an open joke that Taisha tiddled. Carlos also made a delicious vodka/fruit cocktail, which he called the “Atom Bomb.” Another vodka creation he served has a disputed provenance. Carlos told me this recipe was don Juan’s: the master had taught him to pick ripe kumquats and marinate them for months in vodka—a single kumquat had the punch of two martinis. Simon told me that *he* had invented the recipe. I believe it was Carlos’ creation. I never saw Carlos drink more than a glass or two of wine or port, and he frequently gave me a glass of fine *porto* as a restorative after making love.

As for Taisha, considering the enormous amount of pressure she was under, I was relieved to learn that the jokes about her drinking were based in truth. According to Florinda and Carlos, the *nagual* had stopped having sex with her fifteen years before I joined the group. She put up with a lot of criticism from the others at the top of the hierarchy, with scant appreciation in return. She gave her all to preparing Carlos’ meals, though he periodically accused her of trying to poison him.

The only thing Carlos ever said to me on the subject of their relations was, “Ah, my little Taishita—she used to be *my whore*, so delicious! And then she traveled across the border to the Inorganic World, and when she came back, she was an *arid* being. What a sensual creature she used to be!” It was Florinda’s theory that this deprivation was the source of Taisha’s chronic tension.

In one book Carlos recounted his battle to quit smoking. To the end of his life he refused to wear a shirt with an upper left-hand pocket, explaining that his hand still reached there to feel the security of his pack of cigarettes, and he was trying to break his body’s reflexive habit. Taisha and I sometimes shopped for his shirts, and we had some difficulty with the pocket problem.

Don Juan, Carlos wrote, had tricked him into quitting smoking by taking him on long, shaggy dog hikes in search of “power plants” such as datura and peyote, walking him for miles daily, pretending to be lost, until his nicotine cravings had passed. Walking like this, Carlos finally began to lose weight.

Carlos looked terrifically fit to me. The tendons in his arms were lean and strong, and the muscles in his legs and back were those of a much younger man. His stomach was flabby, as is natural with anyone whose weight has gone up and down; and he had a scar from a hernia operation. Theoretically, daily Tensegrity was keeping him in excellent shape, though increasingly he had trouble keeping weight *on*. Little did we know, during his last year or so, that this was an early symptom of liver cancer—the “Big C,” for which he derided “mere people” for succumbing to “the tension of their ordinary, bored-fuck lives.” Carlos disapproved of his former editor, Michael Korda, writing a book about his successful battle with prostate cancer, saying, “Now we’ll all be wearing armbands for the Big C!”

Carlos’ obsession with size affected us all. We lived in terror of gaining a pound, although if one grew *too* skinny, Florinda might throw a fit. For the most part, though, we were hugely grateful to her for criticizing Carlos’ body fetish. “You’re worse than Balanchine!” she railed during class, and the entire group broke into applause. It was the only time I recall seeing Carlos stopped in his tracks out of embarrassment. “Who is Balanchine?” whispered Patsy. “A sadistic ballet impresario who berated his dancers to anorexia,” I said, hoping to comfort, since she was one of the long-suffering *zaftig*.

Carlos’ favorite pupils, naturally, were the thinnest. Claude’s slim, boyish figure delighted him, although the group included beautiful, curvaceous women such as Daphne and Carol, whom he constantly berated for being fat. They felt horribly overweight; having large breasts was a detriment, as were feminine hips. It pained me to watch such superbly beautiful females depressed and anxious about their bodies. Muni was forever pinching her thighs and bemoaning her curves, though I thought she was beautifully proportioned. Both

men and women found her beautiful, but the one man she had loved, since the age of nineteen, persisted in his cruel teasing, calling her “*Siete Culos*” or “Seven Asses.”

A Sunday class member, Daniel Lawton, later expressed his views about Carlos’ thinness fetish on one of the most active of the many Internet Castaneda discussion groups, sustainedaction.org:

“There was a three- or four-class period where Carlos ragged on gay men. His claim was that gayness was caused by sexual boredom, the implication being that the person had chosen a boring life path which led to compensatory aberrant behavior.

“If you assume that Carlos was an all-seeing *nagual*, who was simply telling us an absolute truth—from an energetic point of view—then the comment would be fine. But I believe he was spouting opinions as if they were fact.

“So a good question might be—why would Carlos take this view? I myself have never gotten bored and thought, ‘Gee, maybe I’ll have sex with men today.’ Carlos’ idea that boredom could cause homosexuality indicates to me that when he got bored, he thought about it.

“I’ve noticed that people who openly attack gays do so for a number of reasons. One is religious doctrine. But Carlos really didn’t have such a religious affiliation. And that leaves what I’ve observed as another motivation: latent tendencies which the person is fighting; anti-gay people trying to come to grips with their own attraction.

“I think you could also find evidence for this behavior in Carlos in other ways. He required the women in his life to transform themselves into little boys. Their hair had to be short, their breasts hidden, and he didn’t like make-up. But besides all that, he seemed extremely bored.

“I know most men think, ‘Well, who wouldn’t have sex with ten women at once if they could!’ But it’s an unrealistic fantasy. I sure wouldn’t. It would be way too much trouble. It really shouldn’t take so much variety to satisfy someone’s sexual urges.

“With so many partners, it’s hard to imagine any true intimacy anyway, which could be a reason Carlos was so bored sexually.”

Astrid had the splendid physique of a classical Amazon, and as little body fat as an Olympian. Yet, because she was tall and big-boned, Castaneda told us her athletic legs were “huge.” (He told the group the same thing about my muscular arms, which Florinda so admired, urging me to buy sleeveless dresses. Ashamed, I refused.) Distraught, Astrid considered liposuction. Her shame tormented her, and when she had over-dieted, her face looked disturbingly gaunt. How shocked the seminar attendees would have been, as they emulated this perfect physical specimen! Once she wore a skirt for a special occasion, and a livid Carlos sent her home to change. It was unseemly, he told us, for her to show “her huge legs, trying to play the little girl.”

Both Zuna and I carried our extra weight in our stomachs, which Carlos pinched and prodded during class. I developed a hunched-over posture and wore baggy sweaters to conceal this “defect.” During times of minor stress, I overeat. During times of great stress, I can barely eat at all. Thus, on a few occasions, I lost five to ten pounds seemingly overnight. Instantly, my status in Carlos’ eyes improved. When he felt I was too fat, Carlos insisted on making love without removing my outer clothes. When I was thin enough, he preferred to see my body.

One night, as we lay side by side in bed, he said, “I want you to be the president of a big corporation I’m about to start.” (Cleargreen was incorporated shortly thereafter, with Sonia as president.) I was flattered, but extremely worried. I bit my lip, wondering if I would ever write again, knowing it would become impossible if he chose me for the job.

He went on, “For this task, I am *dreaming* you—last night I saw you in my dreams, a *gaunt* elf.” He sucked in his cheeks. “You must be gaunt, *chica*, to fit through the eye of the needle to freedom.” I promised to lose more weight.

Carlos had another intense obsession regarding women’s bodies. He wanted us to remove nearly all of our body hair, so we would look less like our primate forbears. To be “an ape,” as don Juan had taught him, was to be “human.” Taisha had spent years with Carlos’ favorite electrolysis, Faye, removing *all* body hair besides eyebrows

and lashes. Faye said it took years just to do an average woman's two legs. Muni, Carlos complained, was "very hairy," while Florinda was almost hairless. He dispatched me to Faye to create a perfect bikini line, a painful, expensive, and time-consuming process. When he announced my visits to the whole class, I slunk out afterwards, ashamed. No doubt it was his usual ego-busting technique—surely he knew most women are sensitive about such matters, and few people like to have their genitals discussed in public, much less criticized. I was very upset, and I nervously confided in Guido as he walked me to my car.

"You must know all about this, anyway, because of the witches."

"WHAT!" he screamed. "*Whatever* gave you *that* idea?"

I looked at him, shocked. I knew he'd slept with Florinda, and probably Muni, for by now they hinted so broadly I assumed it. And Carlos, too, had spoken of it. Of course, I couldn't be sure, with all the lying and bragging about conquests. Our conversation went dead—the last thing on Guido's mind was sympathy for me, it seemed, and I had accidentally stepped over one of his many undefined lines. I drove home, feeling lonely and ashamed.

Within the hour, I received a call from an enraged Florinda. "Ellis, the things you say are *barbarities!* *BARBARITIES!*"

I was genuinely puzzled. What was barbarous about referring to sorceric sex, since she had told me so much about it herself, and Carlos talked about it daily? As for Guido, in the middle of our Victorian affair he had run to Mommy! Why was he such a coward, why could he never act for himself? And *why* had he gotten so upset? A discreet "I prefer not to speak of this, Ellis," would have sufficed. But going behind my back, like the kindergarten tattletale! I was beginning to understand Florinda's cruel jibes about the male disciples. Once I had thought her senselessly crude; now I saw why she called them "*castrati*."

Guido shunned me for days. I tried to talk to him in his office, but he threw a tantrum as Dexter passed by. Dexter was hardly lurking—he strode swiftly down the hall—but Guido raised his voice in a

jealous snit, “You’re doing this for HIM! *Right in front of him*, so *he* can hear it!”

“I didn’t even know he was there! He didn’t hear us, and wouldn’t care if he did!”

Guido was flushed with rage; I turned and left the room. His silent treatment ended when I resorted to one of Carlos’ teachings: a *stalking* maneuver. I wrote Guido a mushy, almost craven letter, claiming full responsibility for the painful incident. It was “entirely my fault, for crossing inappropriate boundaries, I shouldn’t be speaking of matters touching on morality.” The letter seemed to satisfy him. He never spoke of the incident, except to take the moral high ground about morality. “This is *NOT* a *moral* place!” he chided, implying that I was hopelessly prudish. He renewed our former relations, teasing and joking, pressing his leg against mine under tables, caressing my hair in the Xerox room, calling me breathily late at night—business as usual.

Carlos’ obsession with body hair focused on a subject even he deemed too personal to bring to class. He insisted it was *magically critical* that I shave my pubic hair in certain ways—his directions altered over time. Carlos insisted, “This is of the utmost sorceric importance—you must shave the lower half of your *conchita*; it will allow the energy to flow smoothly, and make you less human.”

I was never thin enough for Carlos, but the muscularity and shapeliness of my legs made up for this defect. He gave me the nickname “*piernitas*” (“little legs”) or “*piernudas*” (“little nude legs”), and the singular right to wear short skirts to the office and to parties. I was permitted to wear higher heels than the other women, presumably to accent what Carlos regarded as my best feature.

The Truth about Hierarchy

She would wait and watch, as she had always watched and waited, hoping that such a puzzle would one day come to her. But the mending of broken hearts be a puzzle neither wit nor time had the skill to solve.

—Clive Barker, *The Hellbound Heart*

Florinda was the biggest advocate of the sorcerer's refrain: "There is no group!"

She told it to inductees long before there were lectures. At lectures she never missed a chance to expatiate upon the subject. When Carlos went public, he forcefully stressed the topic. Many a time I heard him telling a huddled group surrounding him, "We are not a group! The concept of 'group' doesn't exist among us. *We never see each other*. A few of us might go to an occasional movie, but that's rare." In the half dozen years since my initiation I went to the movies and to restaurants almost nightly with the witches, to lunches with Carlos, and of course we had our classes nearly every day.

"We never meet—maybe once in a while to exercise. But we are not *friends*. We know nothing about each other's lives; we don't live together. We have no group, no meetings, no hierarchy. We are strangers, except that don Juan's *myth* has brought us together. And there's Ellis, a *bequest* from Irving. I cannot say 'no' when I am asked—how could I refuse?" He made a characteristic gesture, shrugging his limber shoulders, palms open.

It was startling to see how the sorcerers *lied*, or “stalked” as they put it, as naturally as the human beings they so completely dismissed *breathed*. In reality, a handful of us did live alone.

Florinda was so passionate about the subject she nearly screamed at her audience,

“Everyone wants to *join*, to be *in*, and there is nothing to join! It’s a joke! The ape always wants a place—we are *not* apes. *You* are, but *we* have changed. Give up trying to join us! *There is no us.*”

This was gaslighting, pure and simple. I imagine Carlos and the witches were trying to work their magic—to inspire individual action while bringing up the most bilious feelings of envy by acting more cliquish than the worst group of junior high school kids. Whoever could survive this cognitive dissonance might indeed jump out of his or her ego—I believe that was the plan, which governed some of their seemingly deranged behaviors.

I pondered another hidden agenda, as well. It was embarrassing to the *nagual* and the witches to look like a club. It was so—*social order*. By stating unequivocally that what was there for all to see *wasn’t*, well, that was *stalking*... In this case I thought it was ludicrous lying with a pseudo-magical purpose, markedly unsuccessful in this arena. It brought out the worst in everyone, and I never saw a single person conquer the pain of it, and the unreality of it, bouncing out the other side shed of their human striving.

For example, at the seminars the hierarchy took a form similar to that of a rock and roll concert. I had dated musicians and married one. I was familiar with the ropes. More to the point I was the child of a celebrity, although writers acquit themselves somewhat differently than rock stars. (I like to think.) I’d done my book tours in the heyday of promotional spending, when *The Book of Lists* enjoyed a thrillingly long stay atop *The New York Times* bestseller list. I’d been hustled through autograph-collecting crowds to green rooms full of pill-popping celebrities, I’d been limo-ed here and there, and seated next to Famous Writers and Publishing Giants and an Assortment of Stars. I’d seen all this, and I recognized the whole show.

The first two rows of the lecture halls were roped off for Us, and we were carefully placed in order of importance within the group, a name card on each seat. If you were an audience member, to even *speak* to one of us, to receive a nod or a smile, was Important. For it was plain for all to see—in spite of *everything Carlos said*, in his books and on stage and in interviews, about how the Spirit picked his disciples, *not he*, disciples *were* found in the audience. Seminar goers periodically appeared, without explanation, in the front rows and onstage, wearing matching T-shirts, sneakers, and crew-cuts. *And*, a smile from the *nagual* might mean enlightenment! Was he adjusting one's energy body with a glance *à la* don Juan, linking it with his own—who knew?

Eager would-be warriors were taken aside by Astrid or me and invited to a private class, a lecture, even a dinner with Castaneda. The rest was tragedy, comedy, or stardom. Or all three. Possibly there was a plan behind the travesties that followed, but I never unraveled it. Increasingly I came to believe that Carlos made everything up as he went. It was the only fitting explanation.

Eventually the audience was told that we, the apprentices, “could read energy as it flowed in the universe,” so most of the crowd believed we could read their minds. I too had once believed that of Carlos, the witches, and the three Chacmools, until mountainous evidence piled up to the contrary. Maybe the plan was to keep the proverbial fire lit beneath the multitudes' rear ends, or to force Envy to the surface like a boil, until it destroyed or elevated the ardent disciple.

Some practitioners stalked our homes and offices; others were assertive, asking questions and giving gifts. A thoughtful regular, a jeweler who knew I liked pearls, made me a beautiful necklace and bracelet. Astrid told me to get rid of them, which I dutifully did. She insisted, “You can only wear jewelry from *him*.”

Another sort of attendee chose the quiet, ever-present approach, always helpful, always in the back. There were the volunteers that we could use—an offer of free labor was often an excellent foot in the door. It provided status, was considered an honor, and it defrayed the high cost of the workshops because it made discounts

and free meals a possibility. Some of the seminars cost as much as \$1,200 for a week, not including housing, food, and travel. People came from Japan, Argentina, Russia; their costs were phenomenal. But the possibility of seeing the *nagual* in the flesh was the dream of a lifetime. So many had invested decades of their lives in following the precepts in Castaneda's books, decades of longing, never dreaming that the chance to see him would arise—and how many readers wondered if he existed at all, even if the books were fiction? It was staggering to see the flesh-and-blood Carlos Castaneda.

And then there were the ubiquitous Mythological Introductions. I was exempt from these, existing as I did in a nebulous region, never appearing on stage, observed to be mysteriously intimate with the witches, which I much later learned was a source of considerable speculation.

At each seminar, Florinda or Muni would announce the performers by name, and each disciple would stand up and take a little bow to applause.

"This is Poona Wiltee, who has a degree in law [small bow] and Ridley James, a credentialed therapist, specializing in domestic abuse [small bow]." And so on. Everyone had an advanced degree, or an important, high-paying job. With the exception of Guido as an authentic director and Simon as a genuine producer, these accolades were either exaggerated or totally false.

The effect on the audience was to make them feel awful, and I suppose that was intended. People I spoke to moaned, "I've gone into \$45,000 worth of credit card debt to come to these ... and I work so hard just to make a living and afford the workshops ... and the recapitulation and Tensegrity take so many hours. I don't see how I can go back to school like they suggest and get a degree! And my kids ... I don't know *what* to do about my kids! How do other people find the time? How do *you* ... well, you don't have families, of course, and maybe you're not 'bored fucks.' You must have energy I'll never have ... unless—I do more movements and sleep less. If only the *nagual* would hit me between the shoulder blades, like don Juan did to him, I could have that instant blast! *My God, you are SO lucky,*" they lamented.

For those of us in the group who were not introduced—of course that hurt, too. Once, after a particularly colorful set of introductions, I escorted Taisha out the door where Guido sympathetically caught my eye. “You’re such a trooper, Ellie,” he said, sad and tender. His love went straight inside my heart, deep inside my box of intangible jewels, what Carlos called our “scrapbook of memorable events.” These were the unforgettable bursts of sublimity that come to all of us, if we keep our eyes wide open.

Toward the end I had become Taisha’s companion assistant at workshops, because she chose me, I presumed, and because Carlos and Florinda permitted it. Very much to my puzzlement, they found her interfering and considered me “the only one who could handle her” and the only apprentice whose company soothed her for a prolonged period.

Seeing me with Taisha, the predictable Claude and Beulah as well as a new disciple practically spat on me. For me to share the company of a witch upset their sense of the order of things—losers weren’t supposed to escort royalty. They didn’t know that I was with the witches behind the scene. Claude, who was kept entirely in the dark about my unusual status, bristled when she saw me use a cell phone during a seminar. She suspected, correctly (probably due to my Spanish endearments), that I was talking to Carlos and snarled, “Who’s that?”

“Hot line,” I smiled.

She stalked away, flushing to the tips of her ears, thin lips compressed with rage.

I continued to talk to workshop attendees as a regular person; Astrid did the same. Years later I received moving thanks from people snubbed time and again by the frosty Poona and Zuna, the arrogant Tarina, Claude, Patsy, and Beulah. The identical haircuts and uniforms made it all the more painful for outsiders. The performers wore matching bracelets “from the Second Attention,” matching track shoes, matching sunglasses. And the worst were the giggling, whispering cliques. No one who has been excluded in school as a

child can forget that awful feeling of being on the outside. Years later word came to me that I was considered to be “with them, but not of them.” It was one of the most beautiful compliments of my life.

For several years when I had the job of bookstore manager, I enjoyed a delightful vantage point. We ran the concession during seminar breaks, and it was grueling, but also terrific fun. We sold Carlos’ books, “recapitulation pens” that lit up in the dark, tote bags and T-shirts with slogans such as “Tensegrity, For Every Energy Body,” and “Self-Importance Kills—DO TENSEGRITY.” I got to meet hundreds of people and field angry questions about the merchandising of spirituality. I liked managing a team, too; I loved my job.

And my position delighted Carlos. “Ay ay ay!” he would howl, doubled over with laughter. “Irving would be turning in his grave, to think of his own daughter, his little darling—*running a shop! An elf shop.*”

“A shop in the Second Attention,” Taisha warmly added, attempting to lend my position greater dignity.

It is truly daunting to try to convey the level of envy, pettiness, and competition that pervaded many of our lives, although Carlos wrote of it at length in his books. If I had observed Carlos’ methods working successfully, and we’d all been broken of our struggles for dominance and position, I would have applauded his Theatre of Cruelty, the Carlos Castaneda University of Tough Love, as a supreme accomplishment. Instead I saw spirits crushed, particularly by public humiliation; I saw malevolence, breakdowns, illness, and anguish.

Much of our suffering sprang from conditions described eloquently in *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power* by Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad: “For the guru to become sexually involved with some and not others causes a hierarchy of preference. Since the guru’s appeal is his ostensible offer of unconditional love [read “sorcerer’s affection”] to all, this causes an undercurrent of

jealousy and resentment among the followers ... and it is far easier for a guru to gain and maintain power if he is celibate—or pretends to be.... Celibacy undermines coupling when presented as a higher state than sexual intimacy.... Some gurus actively discourage having children or separate parents from them, which is done to decrease distractions from the guru. To counteract family influence, gurus often try to undermine disciples' ties with their own parents.... Sexuality with disciples sets up hierarchies of preference where disciples compete for status through who is attracting the guru more. If covert, it also creates lies and secrecy among disciples."

The hostilities inside the group seemed to alternately amuse Carlos and increase his rages. Again, it was impossible to know to what degree these rages were caused by his incipient illnesses. Typical was the time Carlos reviled me violently in class, and still unsatisfied when I failed to execute a magical pass properly, he punched me hard in the shoulder, leaving a bruise. I wasn't permitted to show emotion, but I couldn't control the tears rolling down my cheeks. Carlos spoke to me under his breath—"Believe me, *chola*, if I knew another way to do it, I would—but there is no alternative."

Equally typical was a Christmas party where, at the end, Carlos passed out cashmere scarves to all the women in the room—there were fourteen of us—and bypassed Daphne and me without a word. Any reaction would have been grounds for severe punishment. We kept the flat, unmoved faces we knew he demanded.

One evening Carlos berated me so severely that when class ended, I walked rapidly to my car so no one would see me crying. However, someone reported on my face to Florinda, and I received a call from her as I entered my apartment.

"*Someone*—now don't ask who!—it doesn't matter, so don't even try. Besides, why should you care? *Someone* reported that you had a sullen expression! Are you trying to make us feel sorry for you, asshole? Are you crying for attention? What a poor baby! I know what you're up to, Ellis—you can't fool me, and *believe me, people are watching*—don't think you can get away with it. If you keep this

up, you won't be asked back! You know what the difference between us is? You're a cunt, and *I'm* not."

Sometimes Florinda softened and bemoaned the mess the group had become. Watching the anxiety after one big workshop, she confided in me that she found it tragic: who *he* kissed, who *he* touched, who *he* whispered to, who *he* fondled. All eyes were not on Infinity—they were on his every move. Whose hair had he cut? Who wore shoes that matched those of the witches? Who did *he* take to lunch? Who had whose phone number? And was it the most private one? Who went to the movies with Flo? Who had a sushi dinner? Who got to work in "don Juan's garden"? Who was given money, clothes, a new car? Who got a gift that had been worn or used by one of Them? Who watched a video *chez* Carlos? *Who did he last sleep with, and how often?*

And sometimes Carlos left his mark. One day we made love so passionately that he bit my lip until it bled—then he sent me off to do an afternoon's work at the office. I ducked my head and daubed my lips with gloss.

For a time Poona and I, who had developed a warm friendship, exchanged Chinese massage treatments similar to "cupping," which left marks on our necks that looked like hickies. Guido told me, six months after seeing my neck like this in class, that "the top of my brain exploded with jealousy."

For those who lived communally, the stories of their sufferings chilled my blood. Carlos would call one over for sex; she took her bath and gussied up without a word, in a frenzied hurry, while the others continued watching a video together or eating their dinner. These people really had it bad.

Patsy, a young, noisy, aggressive Argentinean, shared a room and a phone with Nancy, a gentle Italian who reminded me of a doe. To my amazement, Carlos preferred long, giggly phone calls with Patsy. Often she left, after the requisite cleansing bath. Then Nancy lay face down on her bed, fists clenched, fighting back tears, trying to be "impeccable." Sometimes Patsy returned with a new piece of

jewelry, but discussing the pain would be human, lowly; what *people* did.

Sonia and Astrid were another pair, and rumor had it that they were the most compatible. I felt safe enough with Astrid to confide in her my sorrow that Carlos had ceased to so much as touch me outside of his bedroom, except on rare occasions, and that I was sad and jealous. She revealed that “a certain person” had suffered hideously when she once watched Carlos pull me into a corner outside the Cuban restaurant, engaging me in a wildly passionate embrace, leaving us disheveled and flushed. Astrid hinted that this was the source of Sonia’s animosity toward me—apparently he never touched her “like that.”

Once I asked Flo why I’d never been paired. She laughed with delight, as if it were obvious. “*Who* could you possibly live with?”

Maybe it *was* obvious. I was a loner, and watching my “partner” depart for an ecstatic romp with our “husband” would have caused me to flee, if nothing else did. I often wondered if Carlos was so brilliant that however flawed his methods, he was capable of sensing each and every one of our limits, like an acupuncturist who knew where to place the needle, within a millimeter of an ego’s explosion.

Jewelry Wars

She had tried to remember what she had expected. Had she hoped that things, even one small thing, might change? Not back to the way it was, but just for the better.

—A.L. Barker, *Just In Time*

For pain, anguish, and ego-crushing sorcery at its finest, nothing could touch the Jewelry Wars. Carlos used baubles from the cheap to the highly expensive, from cubic zirconias to Tiffany diamonds, to provoke, incite, and inflate egos.

It was a masterful tactic, bringing the absolute worst in everybody to the surface, like raising a boil of egoic toxins. And, as with so many of Carlos' attacks on "self-importance," I didn't see much good result from it. But, as Muni observed, he was enjoying quite a show.

By the time of my reunion with Carlos, after my father's death, I had a small collection of jewelry I had bought myself, a few lovely gifts from my parents, and a cherished ring from my ex-husband, a deep-red ruby circled by tiny diamonds. The first time I met Claude she spotted it and snapped, "Who gave you that?"

"It's a happy stone," offered Muni, attempting to mediate the sudden bad moment.

"My ex-husband," I told them, smiling at the fond memory.

Claude's mouth contorted as if she'd eaten something rotten. "Husband! Disgusting! Get rid of it!"

I inquired of Florinda and Carlos what to do. Old jewelry, *especially* jewels given in so-called "love" by a man (since "people," according to Carlos, weren't capable of the real thing), was *verboten*.

And since there were “no rules in our sorcery world,” as I was daily being reminded, there were strong *suggestions* instead. Carlos told me to sell the ring. Items of my own purchase should be donated to him for cleansing, and be passed on to other women without a mythic tale of their origin.

Florinda was intensely cautionary. “If you ever see one of your things on someone, never say a word. NEVER.” I promised, and slowly gave up my treasures, immediately selling the noxious ring.

Pearls were my favorite stones, and my first novel was based on their romantic lore. My mother had given me a lovely strand; I had bought a precious Tahitian necklace when I sold the novel. Each time I yielded up something I loved to Carlos (I handed the jewels to Florinda, *per* his request), I hoped I was making points. When at last I showed Florinda the pearls, she stared at them for a moment, then shook her head “no.”

“Don’t give these up, Ellis. They’re far too lovely. Just put them away for a few years.”

Living without adornment was meant to be a potent sorcery “not-doing” for someone who was raised wealthy, who enjoyed femininity. However, this Amish look dragged on for three years, the holes in my ears closed, and all around me new arrivals were given emeralds, diamonds, pearls, and rubies, a fortune in precious antiques and Tiffany baubles. Sometimes Carlos gave out items *en masse*, such as amber necklaces, to perhaps fifteen women, pointedly excluding me. For some girls, the day of their arrival was marked by gifts of jewelry. Carlos offered one fresh disciple an empty, paid-for apartment with no phone, containing only a box of jewels. She fled when Carlos tried to seduce her.

A special club was comprised of “the green beings”—they alone wore green amber. Regarding the green creatures, Carlos said that in all don Juan’s hundred-plus years, he had only seen one person with “green energy,” and that was Taisha. Her presence had magnetically attracted others, and now we had many green beings: Guido, Ramon, Nancy, Sonia, and a few also-rans who came and went. No one was quite sure what it meant to be green. Sometimes Carlos hinted that “the greens” were more sensitive than “the

ambers,” or were social misfits—his definitions of “greenness” were hazy and changeable. The green men received cufflinks or tie tacks of green amber.

For the men there were also watches and knives, given at Christmas or other special occasions. A lesser-ranking male would receive a shirt or a cashmere sweater. One day Guido wistfully pulled a rubber band onto his finger and plucked at it, saying, “These are the rings the men get.”

In Carlos’ mythical world, of course, this was not mere jewelry. It was magic. Most pieces came with a legend attached—a necklace or a ring had belonged to the witches in Carlos’ books, or some never-before-heard-of witch. Muni told me she hated “the name game”—but she too succumbed to its allure, telling me a yarn about the *magical* Julian designing one of her rings. She changed the story the following week—a fabulous witch, “the one who loved to shop,” had owned it before her. I recalled Florinda’s lament, “I tell so many lies I mix myself up!”

Some of the jewelry was said to have been don Juan’s, or to have been teleported from the Second Attention. Carlos kept a cigar box full of jewels behind the toilet in the “guest” bathroom with the magical bathtub. Better yet, he claimed to have buried a huge cache of jewels in the backyard. When he wanted to give me something special, he fished in the earth with a stick, without looking. Whatever came up was energetically mine.

Once, as reward for being a kind hostess to a fallen disciple, he presented me with an especially striking ring. Florinda watched as I tried it on, saying ominously, “It *has* to fit!” If it did not, this terrible omen meant the ring would be taken back. It looked hopelessly large, but fit perfectly on the one finger I had broken.



The author wearing the “inner silence ring” on her left hand, and one of Carlos’ final gifts, a ring “huge with chi!” on her right.

Carlos exulted, “I went to the backyard last night with my pole, fishing in the dark. When I saw what was on the end of the stick, *ay!* I told myself, ‘This ring could be dangerous, it belonged to a witch who was *huge with chi!* It takes enormous energy to wear this ring!’ But then I decided, ‘Fuck it, Ellis can handle it—Ellis is a peach!’ ”

During the women’s workshop, Carlos and I were having especially romantic evenings. He presented me with a stunning Victorian ring of black onyx, pierced through the center by a diamond. Florinda called it “the ring of inner silence.” I wore it happily to the last day of the seminar.

When Beulah saw it she dove for my hand, actually smiling.

“At last,” I thought, “she’s going to drop this relentless competition.” I was amazingly naïve.

Photo by Gerard Barbier



The author wearing the necklace Carlos said represented the “crack between the worlds,” as described in his early books.

“That’s awesome,” she cooed.

“It’s splendid, I love it. The sorcery collection is *superb*,” I joked. She suddenly turned harried, thrust her hands around my neck, mock-strangling me, shaking my head back and forth forcefully. “Uuughh, I could *kill* you,” she shrieked.

“*Beulah!*” I exclaimed, much shaken. I touched my neck, trying to recover. “That was a joke. If you lose your sense of humor, you have nothing, truly *nothing*. Why are you so upset?”

She scowled and strode away, disgust smearing her features. It was more than disdain and bad manners—it was hatred. I could never understand what motivated it. What was I to this sad woman? In a world where open communication would mean almost certain expulsion, I could only speculate. Somehow, I must have replaced her. Or perhaps Carlos had set her against me, and made her venomously jealous by praising me. Or the opposite.

The “inner silence” ring had produced an awful lot of noise—the noise of a cat howling in pain.

I gave the witches gifts of my best jewelry, including giving Florinda a beloved strand of pearls. She told me she loved me so much that she slept wearing it. And for all the witches’ pettiness, it was Muni who broke the mold and bought me a dainty moonstone necklace with earrings, when I had no jewelry at all. She had made a rare and bold gesture. I wore the stones gratefully for years.

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Claude and Her Friends Play Dolls

If you live with a cripple, you will learn to limp.

—Plutarch

Apart from my own intense confusion, I had only to observe Claude to see the thin line between father, guru, and lover at its most troubling.

One of Claude's most disturbing penchants, from my point of view, was her passion for playing dolls with her charmed circle of acolytes, though she was now a forty-year-old with gray hair. I was so obviously an unsuitable recruit for these games that I didn't even know they existed for some time. Besides, I had never regained Claude's favor. Her only act of *largesse* was to seat me beside Carlos at holiday dinners. Before each party, Carlos dictated speeches to me to gain her pity, and a good seat.

During the *naissance* of Claude's relationship with Zuna, she played with her as though she were a human doll. The story, with variations, was told to me like this: Shortly before my introduction to the group, an apartment complex was found in Westwood, three adjacent units merely a ten-minute drive from Carlos' house. Two of the apartments were lovely, looking out on a garden; the third was dark and shabby. Claude and Zuna were to be neighbors in the quality units, sharing a garden, cooking organic meals together, and taking tea outside, while a newcomer would be assigned the dreary flat. This attempt to pair Zuna with Claude during her induction was

Zuna's dream come true—the chance to live side-by-side with the mythic Scout. Zuna was leaping to the top of the sorcery hierarchy.

The story of Zuna's arrival in the group was in itself a mythic tale. She had purportedly lived in Los Angeles in a depressing middle-class home. Carlos referred to “the father, Mahoney,” as “a fat slob.” In spite of the family's limited appreciation of culture, Carlos told Zuna that she had been brainwashed by her parents into believing that she was “a genius.” He said that she had a grandiose belief in her artistic capabilities, dreaming of becoming a successful poet.

At an unnamed lecture, she had met one of the witches (I never knew which), and omens had told Carlos to plot her kidnapping from the family home. Supposedly Taisha and Astrid arrived with a moving van—while “the mother” was out and “the father” watched television. The witches systematically went through the house and removed every picture of Miss Mahoney from the walls, from family albums and desktop frames, even cutting her out of group pictures.

They piled her essential belongings into the van, and there was some chaff about how they even took the piano, while Mr. Mahoney, who had dozed off in front of the TV, slept through everything. According to myth, her parents never missed her or even noticed her absence, nor did they try to find her. The reality, Zuna and Astrid told me, was considerably different. Her parents searched frantically for their daughter, until somehow she cut them off. I imagined she wrote one of the famous “goodbye and I send you to Hell—I am no longer your child” letters that Carlos dictated for so many apprentices. At all events, she had left everything behind and was in the total care of Carlos and Co.—quite a different experience from my own story.

Now that she had left her parents, Carlos covered her expenses and took charge of selecting her lodgings. When the Scout took a liking to her, there was a brief honeymoon period between them, and thus the living arrangements were made.

The witches told me how Zuna was replaced without warning or explanation by the brassy and competitive Beulah. For years Beulah tagged behind Claude, accepting scraps of attention and reveling in her “celebrity” friendship. On bad days Carlos openly harangued

Beulah for her arrogance and snobbery; yet most of us would have been expelled for her ploys for attention.

For example, Claude would begin a class by clapping her hands together and announcing, “Beulah has something to show us tonight!” Beulah would then bark like a Chihuahua, to a round of applause. Or, she would demonstrate her ability to stand on her tiptoes without falling, again to a round of applause begun by Claude and seconded by Carlos. We all followed, clapping as if we were witnessing the *Cirque du Soleil*. It was so embarrassing that I asked Muni for an explanation.

Muni chortled. “Beulah keeps Claude out of our hair! It’s her only purpose, but it’s a big thing! Carlos is so grateful he rewards her handsomely; puts her through graduate school, pays her rent, and gives her an allowance and jewelry. Believe me, it’s worth every penny. And it’s still not enough! Claude is constantly snooping and interfering, but at least now she has a playmate. Personally, I’m thankful, even if Beulah is a hopeless bitch.”

“What’s she got against me?” I asked the witches. “I’ve been pulling knives out of my back since the day she laid eyes on me.”

“Pure jealousy,” Muni explained. Flo nodded her agreement. “She’s trying for her Master’s in German studies, and she’s doing well, but she despises you for being a successful, published writer. Ignore it—we all have to coddle her and hope Claude doesn’t get bored too fast. It always happens eventually. Beulah will be replaced, and so will the next one.”

I tried giving Beulah small gifts as peace offerings. She thanked me, but nothing changed. I put this puzzle to Muni—was she immovable?

“Absolutely immovable. But hey, why not throw a few bones to the peasant? The princess Claude gets everything. It’s a nice gesture, keep doing it. It’s good for you—and don’t expect anything in return. That alone will change you.”

This recalled a favorite remark of Carlos’ that had never appeared in his books, which I pinned to my wall: “When what you have is more than enough, you’re on the edge of impeccability.”

All our walls except for Claude's were blank. Carlos explained that it was "the not-doing of the social order" to not display images as we had in our family homes. I enjoyed the minimalist aesthetic, so different from my own cluttered family home, but I was curious as to why Claude had her own rules. "She never had all that, you see," Florinda explained. "If you ever go to her apartment, it will look like an apartment in the world. Because she was deprived."

I never saw the inside of Claude's home—we fell out too quickly for that—and according to the witches I would remain a source of threat and jealousy to the Scout. Carlos described her apartment to me as a pack-rat haven, full of high-end computer ware and useless, ugly junk. One observer was appalled to see ruffled, plaid bed shams, in contrast to the tasteful simplicity of Carlos' and the witches' home. Tales of Claude's background changed continuously, but she was usually said to have lived in orphanages until the age of seven, when she was rescued by don Juan, or alternatively, by Carlos. One apprentice was told that Claude had been adopted and raised as a strict Catholic.

Carlos' favorite story of her childhood—the one he told me again and again in the boudoir—was about her uninhibited seduction of him as a child. "She was seven years old when she first climbed into my bed! She climbed on top of me and—Boom! Boom! Boom! She wanted to *do it at seven years old*—and we did! What could I do? I couldn't resist—she attacked me in my sleep!" He scanned my face for signs of shock, but I only laughed. I didn't believe the story. He continued, "She crawled into my bed every night and boom-boom! And it's been that way ever since! You know, *amor*, I only make love to the two of you—*no one else*. Your *poto* is exactly like hers! I can't tell which one of you I'm with!

"She loves David Bowie—she climbed on top of her teacher's desk and sang a David Bowie song—'I love to fuck, I love drugs!' " Carlos extemporized. "The orphanage authorities called me and I had to remove her. So then she was raised by don Juan and his party. Whatever they did to her ... wowie Zimbowie! They did strange things to her. She's not a human being, *amor*. She is stuck

emotionally at the age of seven, but her spirit moves faster than lightning.”

The manifestations of her girlish tastes were considered magical. She took her loyal clan to Disneyland, purchasing tickets for the fastest rides, an event that Carlos alleged caused magical transformations.

I spent some years being jealous of these field trips, then at last I had an epiphany. I hated roller coasters, most TV comedy, and all large crowds. I had been spared. Muni and Taisha concurred. “Ugh,” Taisha said, in a rare moment of complaint. “We had to go to one of those horrible amusement parks recently because of Claude, and twirl around on rides until I almost vomited.”

Meanwhile, back at the new apartment complex, circa 1991, in Westwood Village, Los Angeles:

Zuna received a call telling her when to be at a certain address to see her new flat. She and the Scout were to be neighbors, sharing the fairytale, side-by-side apartments. Visions of tea parties spun in her head. As Zuna walked up the pathway to her new home, elated, Claude came skipping in her direction, chanting in a singsong voice:

“The *nagual* woman’s *double* is going to live next to me! The *nagual* woman’s double has been chosen!”

“That bitch,” Muni told me years later, recounting “to torture poor Zuna like that!” For it was Beulah who was given the favored locale, and Zuna was to occupy Cinderella’s dank cellar. Zuna was heartsick, using all the bluff she could muster to cover her pain. She described to me sitting in her dark room, watching the two chosen “creatures” picnic on the sunny lawn, and her voice nearly broke. She was never invited, and she saw them frolicking daily from her window. Shortly two new girls arrived, and a readjustment occurred in the playground. The Scout adopted them, naming them Patsy and Nancy. Both Beulah and Zuna had to share the Scout with new competitors.

Carlos and Claude decided that Muni was “mother” to all the girls, a role she despised. With disgust she showed me “Blackie,” a

stuffed bear wearing a cardigan knitted by one of the women, which Muni was expected to treat as a living creature along with a menagerie of stuffed animals. The dolls attended tea parties, wore sweaters and booties, and were spoken to in baby talk. The dolls even had their own toys.

Emptying my Berkeley home, I parted with exquisite Murano glass I had bought in Italy, since collecting was forbidden to sorcerers (except for Claude). Carlos had his cane (supposedly don Juan's) and knife collection, and that was all. I gave Claude glass swizzle sticks and other Venetian objects in an effort to win her favor in my early years.

One day I saw Patsy carrying a stuffed animal to class, dressed in frilly clothes, a crown, and a cape, bearing a Murano swizzle stick as a magic wand.

"What a pretty doll!" I exclaimed, admiring the ingenuity with which the glass ornament was used. Patsy flew into a tantrum. "This is not a DOLL!!!!" she screamed, stomping away in a high dudgeon.

The girls (who were in their thirties and forties) had reified the animals to a frightening extent, something I later learned was commonplace in cult-like groups. Muni had a sense of proportion on the subject. When my mother had a serious stroke, she wisely counseled me to bring her a stuffed toy—a nice, big, comforting one—to hold close and cuddle in the hospital. My mother loved it, and I was grateful to Muni for reminding me that "she needs something she can hug, and hold on to."

All Carlos' women (except for me) had cut off their families, friends, and all old ties. In some cases they had renounced their country and their culture—and they were of course forbidden to have sex except for periodic visits to Carlos. And Carlos was mercurial about touch, sometimes wanting to cuddle for hours and lazily nap the afternoon away; other times barely touching at all during sex. Steady, loving, physical companionship was denied us as long as we chose to remain in the group, and with their dolls the girls were filling their needs as small children would. We all had our own ways of not going crazy—if they were stuck at age seven, well,

where were Guido and I, holding hands furtively in movie theatres? Junior high school, if I recall correctly.

Also, there was Florinda and Carlos' edict against touching. I have described Carlos' sudden shifts from cuddly to cold, and Florinda loved a quick hug but despised being held for more than a second. And she *greatly* despised people who desired anything more. She hated to sleep with anyone, she told me, hated foreplay above all else, and didn't like her nipples to be touched, as she told me with her usual disarming frankness, calling it "a bad habit of American men." Most intolerable to her was anything resembling a prolonged embrace or a lingering caress. Muni was the opposite—she liked to loll for hours with a lover or a friend, massaging, caressing, and napping in close embrace.

Carlos regularly disparaged "the pathetic need of human beings to be touched." For once I admired Claude greatly when she stood up to him in front of the class and spoke of the well-known primate studies wherein baby monkeys, separated from their mothers, found comfort and survived when given a mere cloth substitute to hold onto. When given a wire stick figure, they died. Touch, she insisted, was essential to survival. And Carlos, ever deferential to "his daughter," backed down and submitted, turning away and changing the subject.

However, Carlos often reminded me that I was "middle-aged." It was exhausting to carry out his dual commands successfully—to be a little girl, in body and in bed, to be excitingly wanton, yet stoically bear reprimands for being a grown woman. He often told me to "stop acting cute," saying, "You're too old for that!"

For this reason I was forbidden hats. I tend to get cold—maybe it's my native California blood. During winter I wore a beret when it rained. Carlos always ripped the hats from my head, throwing them to the ground. "Don't play the little girl with me!" he yelled. But in bed I was eternally his "little daughter."

The observations in *The Guru Papers* eventually helped me understand what it meant to be Carlos' "daughter": "Rewarding women for their sexuality taps into and reinforces deep lines of conditionings. Traditionally women's power has been related to sex.

So women, especially the good-looking ones gurus seem to choose, generally have deep patterns that link their power and self-worth into their sexuality. Gurus, like fathers, are in a context that gives them enormous power because of their disciples' needs, trust, and dependency. One reason incest is a betrayal of trust is: what a daughter needs from her father is a sense of self-worth not specifically linked to her sexuality. Sex with a guru is similarly incestuous because a guru ostensibly functions as a spiritual father to whom one's growth is entrusted. Having sex with a parental figure reinforces using sex for power. This is not what young women (or men) need for their development. When the guru drops them, which eventually he does, feelings of shame and betrayal usually result that leave deep scars." Little did I know that one day, these few words would change my life.

Like Claude, some were so consistently rewarded for remaining childlike (Carlos nicknamed Patsy "the Gerber baby") that they continued their regressive games. When Claude tired of old toys she threw them away. People were toys to her, as shown by the casual manner in which she eventually replaced Beulah with a new sidekick, Susan, whose name would change to Fifi. These two treated one of the men in the group as a doll, dressing him in pantyhose and a tutu for Sorcery Theatre. Carlos laughingly told us that while being dressed he had shamefully gotten an erection and ejaculated backstage.

Florinda had the crowning story, a favorite memory of her colorful childhood in Caracas. "I had a toy farm, Ellis, and I made all the dolls mate and breed, not only the cows and pigs. I controlled them all, and *I loved it!* That was my dream, my delight! I *always* knew I wanted to grow up and run my own human farm, with *living* people, who I could pair and mate, and whose lives I could play with just like my toy farm dolls!"

A Peek Behind Oz' Curtain and The Shroud of Turin

There are maladies that we must not seek to cure because they protect us from others that are more serious.

—Marcel Proust, *Recherche du Temps Perdu* (Remembrance of Things Past)

In the midst of the inner circle's hierarchical battles, daily clawing our way to favor, however meager, with what tactics we possessed, it was usually impossible for me to separate Carlos' genius from his madness.

When I realized the brilliance of one of his primary “maneuvers,” I saw that it was perfectly simple and maximally deadly:

He picked two very attractive women, both bright, both malleable, and both *unaccomplished*—as opposed to the *relatively* successful Taisha and Florinda, who had published books—and made them into his largest living myths outside of don Juan. He proclaimed one his “*nagual* wife” and the other their magical daughter.

Muni saw her own trap. She told me that by setting up women—first by the dozens and later, with the workshops, by the hundreds and finally the thousands—to compete for him, Carlos kept himself entertained for decades. At the same time, I believe, he thought he was doing his utmost to impart his teachings by taking a machete to his lovers' self-importance.

His two attractive, near-mediocrities were Muni and Claude. Muni was the one witch who certainly couldn't tap out a book; nor was

she an M.D., as Carlos insisted. In reality, she was a bright, upper-middle-class girl named Kathleen whose physician father died young in an auto accident. Muni met Castaneda at nineteen. After a probable falling-out with him she married a fellow acupuncture student, passing her exams in Santa Monica—a difficult but not especially magical feat. For a decade she lived with her mother or husband, spent some years in Berkeley, and was finally readmitted to Castaneda’s favor. She had not disappeared physically into another world as Carlos swore. She had been alive and well and ordinary in three-dimensional California.

I spent hours trying to bolster Muni’s battered self-esteem, a classic co-dependent, pointing out that she played the invaluable role of confidante and “manager” to all of us. When we were stranded by Carlos or the impatient Florinda or the distant Taisha, she frequently came to our aid. She certainly saved my skin more than once.

On a particularly memorable occasion, Florinda rang my cell phone (she alone among the group had the number, and vice versa) as I was driving with Muni to a clothing sale. Florinda tore into me, reporting that Carlos had called me “an envious asshole” over a new girl whom I had pimped for him, and that he was in a savage rage. Once off the phone, I began to cry. Muni said, “That’s a ridiculous accusation, Ellis. *I just don’t see it!* You’re just *not* envious of this new girl! Now, what are you going to do? Enjoy your day shopping with me, or go into a depression and get fat over what some *man—because that’s all Carlos is—tells you?*”

This speech had a profound effect on me. At last she had admitted that he was just a man and that she and I had a choice—to enjoy one another’s company rather than fall to pieces over the dictator’s rage. All the same, Muni’s self-esteem was fragile. She insisted that she was “just a garbage dump,” and “a teat that everyone sucks on.” My pep talks, which I obstinately continued, were met with equally obstinate resistance.

This, then, was the creature Carlos Castaneda, “the godfather of the New Age,” chose to make his “other half,” his “cyclic being,” his “sister” and his “wife”—the exalted one and only “*Nagual* Woman.” And *then* he did his myth one better. He dubbed her the embodiment of the most exotic of all his mystical creations—the “host” body and final resting place of the Death Defier.

Once I confronted Carlos about his ill treatment of Muni. This was when he had told me the story about casting her out of bed into the street for “not controlling her energy body.” I checked this story out with Muni the next day, and she hung her head and nodded sadly, averting her eyes in shame. I concluded this tale was true.

I asked Carlos if his constant terrorizing had to do with her containing the Death Defier. Was she like a jack-in-the-box, I asked, a schizophrenic who contained hundreds of personalities? When Muni wasn’t present, he often praised her extravagantly, calling her “this big cat, *this huge beast*, who could eat me in a bite—I’m nothing next to her!” A psychologist, I mused, could have a field day with this one.

But why would the *nagual* be this cruel to an egoless being?

He replied avidly, “Yes, yes, of course—that’s exactly it! She needs me to *control* her. She keeps me here—she gives me a reason to stay! If I were gone, ooofah! Who knows what would happen to her? She’d go to hell! Yes, I stuff those personalities inside.”

Claude “The Blue Scout” Alexander was an attractive woman. Like Muni, she had a lovely figure; though Carlos had cruelly told Muni, and all of us, how much he preferred their “daughter’s” lanky and boyish body.

Claude possessed many talents—she had a gift for graphic design, a discipline she turned to strong advantage in school, and she was a capable computer artist. She had some comedic acting ability and was a superb dancer. Yet, when push came to shove, what *had* Claudine done with her life? Like most of us, I greatly admired her dancing ability, her Tensegrity technique, her agility, and her physique. Yet her acting was hit and miss. Sometimes her theatre

scripts were hilarious, and sometimes abysmal—one of the latter was childishly homophobic, in which she wrote a part for herself as a gay male pirate who begged, “Oooh, whip me harder!”

But no one dared draw a critical breath, lest they be accused of “envy” and “trying to compete with the Scout—which is simply impossible, she moves too fast,” as Carlos constantly drilled into us. Claude also produced Escheresque paper sculptures. Origami meets fifteen espressos, I thought, the first time I saw one—but I did not find them brilliant. Carlos considered her selfishness “adorably neurotic.”

When she produced a Cleargreen T-shirt design or a piece of cover art for a Tensegrity video, the work ranged from impressive to adequate, yet it was tacitly accepted by the group that these were works of genius, that any image birthed on her drafting table reeked of “blue magic.” Such was her allure as The Inhuman Creature From Another World that the curtain of Oz was wrapped firmly around her, and she nestled within it, cozy as a babe in swaddling clothes, Armani suits, and diamonds. At one party she arrived in a dazzling Chanel, a fabulous beaded sheath dress.

“Now Muni,” I teased, “she looks like a million in that frock! It must have cost a small fortune! Stop your nonsense about her frugal thrift-store finds!”

“No!” Muni replied with vehemence, “It’s all from Pic ‘N’ Save! *That’s the magic!*”

During a seminar I was busily running the bookshop and hadn’t stopped for a meal. The dinner break arrived, and the Scout and Beulah were going out to dinner with Nancy and Patsy.

I looked at them wistfully as they giggled and skipped in my direction—I would have loved to be invited to a nice dinner. I felt a wave of self-pity, pushed it aside, and felt a sudden optimism. Maybe after so many years of playing cliques, they would invite a friendly girl from another class. I suddenly felt quite hopeful about this, and waved cheerfully as they approached. I would invite my co-worker Daphne along, and we’d all break bread.

“We’re going out!” Claude gleefully announced.

“Where to?” I asked. “Anything in the neighborhood you like?”

Beulah frowned. She didn't like the direction I was heading in. "Someplace Chinese," replied Claude. I was about to offer to host, when Claude asked if they could pick up some take-out for me. I was satisfied with this gesture, reached for my wallet, and placed an order, asking her to please pick up something similar for Daphne if it wasn't too much trouble.

I returned to my work, when Beulah made an excuse to leave Claude for a moment. She came after me, guiding me into a corner and scowling. "Don't EVER do that! NEVER! I can't believe you! Didn't you see me shaking my head 'NO'?"

"I didn't have a clue what you were doing, Beulah. What on earth's the problem?"

"How can you be so stupid?! You never accept the Scout's offers—she'll try to do a good job, bring you a perfect meal, and then you'll distract her."

"From what? It's only take-out. And besides, how would I know all these weird rules?"

"They're not rules!... And adding another order for Daphne! Incredible! Go tell Claude you're super-sorry, you've made a mistake, and you're already covered for dinner." I did. Claude was polite, and looked confused and slightly rejected.

In less than an hour I got a furious phone call from Florinda. Beulah had run straight to Mommy without passing Go, in her effort to remove me from her path. And Mommy was *mad*. "How could you be so stupid! Never accept her offers! She tries to please, and, and—you asshole! She's the *Scout*! And adding Daphne, of all things!"

Just what were we, Daphne and I, the peons who were never invited out, who worked for free and couldn't be brought a hot meal? How exactly would this tax Claudine's brain? Was it that small? She did not appear to be stupid, or in the least overburdened.

So this was Carlos Castaneda at work. After this I steered clear, having finally realized with whom I was trying to curry favor: a spoiled, ungrateful narcissist with an ever-changing team of sycophants.

By choosing two mediocrities, attractive and moderately talented, and imbuing them with magical heritages, he had permanently pitted the whole group against ... nothing. Cardboard cutouts for us to project on. He'd even pitted them against each other! Nothing was wasted. Claude was the more potent of his weapons. Nothing she said was ever wrong, and anything she liked set a fad.

I pondered all of this, sitting over my cold hamburger with Daphne. A good Samaritan had bought them at McDonald's *en masse*, and a memory came to me as I watched the corners of our dried American cheese squares curling up like over-licked stamps. It wasn't a Madeleine, but still....

I remembered Zuna's attack on me because I hadn't seen *The Princess Bride*.

"Well, Zuna, I heard it was a stinker, so I gave it a pass. It didn't sound like my type of movie."

"But the Scout loved it!"

"So?"

Zuna actually sputtered. Finally her amazement gave way to anger. "Don't you KNOW that *Princess Bride* is the Scout's story?"

"No. How so?"

"She was an orphan! And then don Juan found her and—oh. You really don't know." Zuna looked at me with pity and a trace of shame.

"Maybe I'll check it out," I lied.

My understanding climaxed after a dramatic scene at a Thanksgiving dinner in 1995. Carlos' health was visibly declining; he had recently revealed to the Sunday class that he had diabetes. His mood swings, always ominous, were worsening. I could smell him spoiling for a fight.

It was our first large party at the Cleargreen office instead of his house, which created a more awkward atmosphere than usual. By Carlos' instruction, Simon had elegantly arranged the catering, so there was no kitchen to hover in and no cooking to attend to. When we ate at the house, we arrived bearing steaming dishes, and busied ourselves in the kitchen. Now, wardrobe-watch was keener than

ever, there being nothing else to comment on as each arrival nervously opened the door.

The men were serving, a charming turn-around, so at least they had tasks to occupy them, such as carving the turkey and filling our water glasses. They had surprised us with stylish, restrained, seasonal table decorations: I sensed Guido and Simon's work.

Guido, Florinda, and I snuck off for a shot of vodka from my ubiquitous flask, and Beulah invited herself along for a swig. It was a *cognoscenti* thing to know of Ellis' spirits, but it was bad form to hog in—the flask had to be small enough to remain invisible in my suit jacket.

As the aimless pre-dinner hour progressed, Carlos was pointedly ignoring me. Actually, he had not even said hello, and I was angry, a fish still caught on the hook of his disdain. Anger gave way to hurt as I watched him pet and fondle his favorites. Disgusted with myself for having such human feeling, I wandered away from the group, looking for something to read in the office.

Since Buddy was currently handling advertising and public relations, his desk contained an ever-changing stack of metaphysical manuscripts, magazines, and small-press books written by New Agers hoping to catch Castaneda's eye.

At the top of the pile I found a corker, a book of tips and homilies for catching a man—*The Rules* for New Agers, larded with metaphysical quotes beside each sexist piece of advice. I thought it would be the perfect party icebreaker for this sub-zero evening.

Delighted to be able to put on a show, I rejoined the group in the hall, made sure no one was holding forth, and said, "Listen to this one! I found it on Buddy's desk—" and proceeded to read out a list of wacky pointers for '90s-style mating.

The laughter was so muted, the anxiety in the atmosphere so palpable, that I looked up in surprise. Everyone was watching the *nagual* (and trying to be discreet)—and he wasn't smiling. On the contrary.

Puzzled, I read a few more lines. Looking up, I followed Florinda's gaze. She and Carlos were exchanging black looks and shaking their heads, expressions corrosive with disgust. She turned to me, lips tight with rage, shaking her head in disbelief at my latest *faux pas*. I couldn't figure it out, unless it was my usual inability to remain invisible—but the clouds were too dark, it appeared, even for that tired old sin. This book seemed like the perfect fodder for Carlos ... what on earth was going wrong?

At last the *nagual* spoke. He was nearly purple with rage.

"Don't ever take things from someone else's desk! Those are *never* to be touched. A desk is sacred. Cleargreen is a temple, sacred! Those are not yours to touch, you piece of shit! How dare you, *hija de puta, pendeja!* Everything here is sacred, a temple to inner silence, you cannot—*pucha!*—you cannot just touch something on Buddy's desk! *Mierda, qué puta, coño, idiota! NO JODAS, CARAJO!*"

"I'm sorry," I said, and turned to put it back. I didn't want anyone to see my tears. But it was too late, for as I walked out I met Guido's gaze. His eyes, I thought, held a rainbow of sorrows—pity, fear, and the tired resignation that we would face yet more separation, yet more loss.

The air was acrid with fear. This was serious. Perhaps I would be expelled instantly, sent away forever. At that precise moment a careful of people arrived, and I heard their kisses and "*Hola!s*" from the back of the office. I returned to the outskirts of the circle, where I stood, sick with shame and terror.

Claude came in with Candice in tow. There was much fussing, kissing, and endless wardrobe talk, until Claude flitted off to use the bathroom. The conversation was renewed, people were chattering in small groups.

I stood just on the edge, watching.

Then all heads turned, as we heard Claude's high-pitched, girlish laugh. She was prancing down the hall waving a book above her head. "Look at what I found! It was on Buddy's desk! Can you actually believe what's in here? Listen to this, it's the *best!*"

It was The Book.

She was delighted to have found it, and began to intone her favorite man-catching hints, flipping through the pages just as I had.

The *nagual* chuckled. Florinda was less moveable—her face remained tight. But *he* was the one who counted, and he was doing a passable imitation of enjoying her reading. Relief was flooding faces, deep breaths were taken and released. Buddy sent me a tiny smile. Maybe there was no Death Defier or Dreaming Emissary, but surely some cloven-footed imp by the name of Irony was slam-dancing somewhere in the Second Attention.

Claude warmed to her task. Now everyone but Florinda was laughing, and amongst the faces I sought Guido's. He was staring at me. I looked back at him, keeping my face inscrutable. He smiled and raised his eyebrows, and when no one was watching, gave the faintest, sweetest shrug, as if his shoulders were champagne and he was toasting Everything Unsaid.

Claude was still going strong when Carlos called for dinner. "*Gracias, mi amor!* Very funny! And now I'm hungry!"

As we walked toward our name-tagged places, Claude could be heard saying, "Buddy, where do you hide this stuff? It's the greatest! I couldn't believe it when I saw it right there on your desk—you've got to let me know when you get this stuff! I'll come on over and raid your desk, no kidding!"

Carlos took his revenge by lowering my status in the Sunday class. I still made the phone calls and collected the few dollars at the door. But now he bestowed upon Sonia the honor of presiding over the class. He rarely addressed me from the moment he arrived until he left. I was heartbroken to be marginalized after my two years with the class.

One afternoon Carlos asked me to put on his microphone, although I had never done it before. When I did not pin it on correctly the first try, he flew into a terrible rage, swearing in Spanish and English, calling me a whore and an asshole, while the students standing nearby flushed with embarrassment. Our

unofficial sound man came running to fix this apparent disaster, although Carlos would not stop cursing.

“I’m sorry,” I said, fighting back tears. “I was trying, I didn’t know how to do it.”

“That’s Ellis,” he sneered to the group at large. “She’s *trying*—what is *trying*?! You have to *just do it*. And she’s ‘sorry’! Wow! I’m impressed!”

“*Nagual*,” I said, “I *am* sorry I disappointed you.”

“Disappointed? How can I be disappointed when I’ve never been appointed?!”

The critical symbol of the changing of the guard was the disposition of Carlos’ leather jacket. Carlos looked snazzy in it—it was a brown bomber style—with his dark sunglasses and blue jeans, his lush, gray hair fetchingly rumpled as if he’d just gotten out of bed, which he probably had.

It was his custom to look up at me as he climbed the stairs, then greet me as I sat behind a rickety desk collecting the room rental fee. In my glory days, I had helped him out of his jacket, and then helped him back into it at the end of class.

Now he began to remove it with the aid of others, usually Sonia, and then hand it to me. *Then*, he began to hand it directly to Sonia. During the two-hour lecture it lay draped over a chair, his sunglasses nearby. Patsy fussed frantically over the glasses every week, certain I’d misplace them. At the *nagual*’s departure, I handed him these items. He now refused to allow me to help him into the coat.

Competition for the jacket grew. Patsy fought aggressively for the holy object, making a lot of noise in the process.

“Does he have it?” She was frantic. “Where is it? Where is the *nagual*’s jacket?”

Sonia fought more fiercely, lunging for the garment. I competed by draping it over my arm well in advance of the lecture’s end. This increased Patsy’s panic and Sonia’s determination. Sonia, the president of Cleargreen, took to yanking the jacket out of my hands.

One day I had an epiphany: We were creating the Shroud of Turin. I handed Sonia the jacket, saying gently, “Perhaps you’d like to help him into this?”

Her shock was so great that she stood frozen, the jacket held out before her.

Sonia’s shame fixed her mouth in a contorted half-smile, while a purple blush spread like a bruise from her cheeks to her ears. Too dumbstruck to speak, she lowered her florid face and took the coat. All the while Patsy flapped about in the hall, yelling, “His jacket! Where is it?! His jacket! *Where is the nagual’s jacket?*”

After that it was easy. I went about my business, no longer waited for Carlos’ greeting or goodbye, and attended class like any other student. I skipped the receiving line outside, since he hadn’t so much as nodded goodbye to me in six months, and I headed straight to my car. I was now making another break with tradition by not watching him be driven away, like the Pope, before taking my leave.

I told Muni about the event. “Ellis, do you realize what a *ball he must have had, watching you women fight over him? Over his jacket!* He’s probably been pissing himself for months, laughing himself pink! He *loves* to watch the show!”

Carlos Sends a Witch to Move Me

The very intensity of longing will guide you; you need no other guide.

—Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*

After a year in Los Angeles, I was ready to sell my Berkeley house. I didn't want Carlos to have a place to send me back to. My luck was excellent; the house sold immediately. Now came the daunting task of unloading years of junk and beautiful antiques. I'd been progressively selling things and giving them away, but I was a packrat who had nested in one home for fifteen years.

Carlos sent Taisha to help me. I rounded up my closest friends to assist, and we made the move on two successive weekends.

At first Taisha was disturbed to see my friends—*people*. But she soon learned that they had been to seminars, and were superb helpers and delightful company. The group was made up of my oldest Berkeley pals, Bob, Jeannie, and Bill, with two friends driving up from L.A. to transport my belongings in a van.

Taisha warmed and grew expansive as we worked our way through my very small but very precious wine cellar. We wound up toasting in dusty overalls with an amazingly good bottle of 1945 Margaux. Taisha was worried that Carlos would want me to sell my cellar—he had instructed her to stay on me about getting good prices for my things. To my annoyance, she insisted on calling Carlos about the wine. While she was on the phone, I was busily hiding bottles. Happily, Carlos gave us the green light to drink.

And I needed the wine to numb the blows that came with the move, as I disposed of virtually everything I owned. The most painful moment came when Taisha insisted I get rid of all the copies of my father's books that he had lovingly inscribed to me. She stood beside me to make sure I really did it, saying the books were "soaked in personal history." I snuck a few volumes out behind her back, the ones I loved the best, so I would always have these tokens of my father's love.

The financial blow was terrible as well. There were so many things, from an old glass and wood chandelier discovered in a dusty shop in Italy, to an Irish all-weather Macintosh, to the '30s teapot found at a garage sale—even the Irish linen sheets I'd saved up for—these were the sort of things I could only imagine being lucky enough to buy once in a lifetime. I gave most of my possessions to my friends rather than take the relative pittance I could get in selling them so quickly.

There were stray pennies, nickels, and dimes hidden in crevices all around the house. Coins were in fireplaces, behind the kitchen stove, fallen behind bookcases.

"The only good thing about this house," Taisha decided, "is that there's so much money in it—all this change brings good luck."

Carlos called this "magic money." The sorcerers had a constant, amiable competition about finding change on the street and jumping to get it first. This money was considered so important that we often walked to the movies with our eyes fixed on the pavement. Magic Money was to be kept in its own jar or piggy bank. The find of paper money was a powerful omen. All of this money was to be saved for years, Carlos instructed me, even decades, then spent on something special, in order to imbue that thing with magical properties. Taisha put the coins in a woven basket, telling me to keep it in my garage for good luck, and never to let anyone else touch it.

When evening came Taisha entertained us with sorcery secrets she'd never revealed, which she told us were described in her two unpublished manuscripts.

First she talked about *intent*. I asked her why practices like Buddhist chanting worked for some people. She explained that, as with the I Ching, doing such a practice linked one to an already existing “line of intent”—she made motions with her hands in the air as if she were grabbing onto a rope.

The evening reminded me of the New Year’s Eve I’d spent with Taisha the year before. I parked a block from her house, and she snuck into the car. I was waiting with a bottle of Cristal on ice and two chilled champagne glasses. As we polished off the bottle she told me, “There’s a meditation *they* taught me, that I’ve never told anyone. It’s a trick for making your wishes come true. You think of the thing you want and you picture your seven chakras. Then you sing your wish to your chakras, like this—” She chanted in a singsong voice, “ ‘I want a beautiful garden of flowers ...’ or ‘I want my investment to double....’ ”

At midnight she sent everyone home to sleep. I could barely move and was preparing for bed when she said, “Not a chance, Ellis! Let’s tackle another room.”

We cracked a bottle of Tattinger and worked until dawn. Taisha, I observed, could really drink. On the second night she was inebriated enough to tell me a disturbing secret.

Part of the Taisha Abelar myth, as told by Carlos and Taisha, was that when she recapitulated her childhood and saw “what her parents had done to her” she was moved to physically assault her mother, punching her and slapping her in the face. Carlos told the story repeatedly at workshops, or instructed Taisha to tell it.

Carlos said that Florinda’s path was different. After cutting off ties for a decade with her family, she reappeared and acted the dutiful daughter, calling, visiting, and sending gifts. Previously, Florinda and Carlos had cooked-up a hilarious prank to excuse her disappearance. She told her parents that she was going to marry a traditionally minded Japanese millionaire who not only refused to allow her out of his sight, but demanded that she end communication with her family. She cut out a picture of Toshiro

Mifune and created a Xeroxed collage with her photograph, displaying the happy couple at a regal dinner. When Florinda visited her parents ten years later to announce her impending divorce, she saw the photo framed on their mantle.

Carlos told audiences, “Taisha was so angry she was moved to hit her mother, but Florinda’s way is better—she babies them.”

On a tipsy predawn Saturday, as we packed platters in bubble wrap, Taisha made a tearful confession. “CARLOS made me hit my mother.”

I couldn’t find a word to say. I was busy controlling my face. I had never suspected, not for a second, that she had acted under orders.

Taisha wasn’t the kind of person, I felt, that one could reach over and hug. I made a sympathetic sound. A revelation of this magnitude had to be treated with dignity, and I had to follow her cues. She quickly changed the subject and the mood.

At dawn we slept briefly. At 9 A.M. she was cheerfully awake, ready for a serious breakfast of eggs, hash browns, and double-cappuccinos. I never referred to last night’s disturbing story.

Taisha so liked my friends that she invited them to free seminars ever after, telling the men that they were “no different from the men in our group, the Elements. The door is wide open you all,” she said, waving her arm and leaving the rest to interpretation.

Both Jeannie and Bob later told me that they had considered leaving their lives and running away with the circus. I believe Bill was worried that his wife would leave him and their four children and six grandchildren. Bob was uncertain how he would make a living in Los Angeles, and what exactly he was being invited to do, and he well knew from my stories that he couldn’t ask questions. After he hinted, with the utmost delicacy, Taisha advised him to stay in Berkeley and acquire the degree he was working towards.

On the final night we toasted gaily and repeatedly. Bill raised his glass to me and said, “Ellis has left the building!”

We had one bad scene. My housesitter was grudging about losing his free lodging and hovered disapprovingly, his young daughter in tow. Taisha didn't like him. "I *know* he takes baths with his little girl, and she's too old for that. I just *know* it!"

When we went into his quarters to clean, I tackled a bookshelf, separating his tomes from mine. There were books in every room in the house. Taisha shocked me by throwing a terrible fit.

"How can you be with *us* for all these years and still be *so stupid?! How* can you not know that mixing *your* books with *his* books is as bad as *sleeping* with that revolting man! You're *unbelievable!*"

"Taisha, it honestly didn't occur to me. I never thought about it."

She looked angry enough to walk out. Instead, she apologized the next day for her severity. I was still mortified.

Thankfully, we ended our job with a heartfelt reconciliation. We had little time before our flight back to Los Angeles. I told Taisha that I wanted to say goodbye to my secret special place, a ten-minute walk from my house to a sunlit path in the woods. The pathway ended at a small waterfall. It was the place I'd gone to for years to release my tears when Carlos cut me off, when I wanted to die, when I didn't know what I could do to be a better warrior. Both Taisha and Florinda had written of letting the earth absorb our pain, and this was the place I came for solace. I had to say goodbye to it. Taisha understood.

She chose to wait as I took my last walk down the path toward the waterfall. I touched the earth and thanked it, the water, the rocks, and the trees. Ever since reading Carlos' first books, I had been talking to plants as he suggested, thanking flowers when I cut them.

Back on the street Taisha was waiting. She took me in her arms as I broke down, comforting me as I wept against her shoulder.

"Ellis, my darling ... *my wonderful elf*. You've been through *so much* to be with us. And at last, you *truly* are."

Carlos never spoke to me about the move. He was distant when I returned. After a week he turned to me in the middle of class, his eyes wide and luminous. He stopped the group's practice.

“Ellis has just moved from a mansion full of stuff into a single room. I’m afraid to ask her what she feels.” He looked genuinely afraid. Class resumed.

That night Carlos called me, angry. He said, “You’re *proud* of something you should have done years ago—don’t think I’m impressed.”

The postscript to my move came when Muni stopped by my apartment. There were wall-to-wall boxes of clothes everywhere.

“Good God! Ellis! What is all this?”

“I’m still not done.... I’m still going through a few boxes here.”

“Christ.”

She departed and the phone rang. It was Florinda. “Ellis, Muni told me what’s there. Do you want my help?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously? Do you know what you’re asking for?”

“Seriously.”

She arrived with a knife and a pair of scissors. We spent three hours cutting up my clothes, the magical procedure for breaking one’s ties with the past. Florinda saved the very best items to give to Carlos to pass on to other women. I promised not to say a word if I recognized my clothes.

It was considered dangerous to wear secondhand clothing—it might contain bad energy (except for Claude, who could wear anything); it was also considered dangerous for another person to wear one’s things. Goodwill giving was forbidden.

I proceeded with abandon, even humor. I was in shock.

Florinda was impressed. “I did this with the Italian girl and it was a living HELL! She lingered over every damned sock! You’re doing great, Ellis.”

Two hours later the phone rang. Florinda spoke in hushed, hysterical tones. “I have something to tell you—*I don’t think you’re going to be able to take it.*”

“Okay, what?” What had I possibly done now? I was going to be kicked out; her voice left no doubt.

“It’s the red chair! IT MUST GO. I know you—you’ll sit in it and relax.” I had selected a single armchair to bring to Los Angeles.

“The chair? That’s it? That’s okay.”

“We’ll give it to Ridley.”

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A Magic Table

The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that from our very own prison we should draw, from our own selves, images powerful enough to deny our nothingness.

—André Malraux, *Man's Fate*

Having sold my place in Berkeley, I stumbled upon a wonderful house only minutes away from Carlos. I dove into extensive remodeling. I wanted the house stripped back to its original 1920s Spanish beauty. It was such a big job, I stayed in an apartment as I renovated.

I had never remodeled a house, and I was unprepared. I hired a contractor and spent all my time selecting grout, light switches, and showerheads, trying to stay within my budget. Carlos was turning against me yet again, and it was a lonely time. Before moving, I was given Carlos' old refrigerator. The leaky machine symbolized all my dreams of forgiveness. During this period the witches rarely called or visited, and I led a solitary life.

A comedic but hair-raising sorcery test occurred as the stairway cement was being laid. Finishing the stairs had become the most nagging task of the remodel. After much argument and delay, I helped blend the cement, which replicated the look of tile at a lower cost. I became fascinated by tile, which had played such an important role in Carlos' fifth book, *The Second Ring of Power*. It was critical that the cement not be stepped on for twelve hours, minimum—preferably twenty-four.

I was visiting downstairs with my loyal friend Richard Jennings when Florinda phoned in a frenzy. “The *nagual* has a little table for the house. It’s nothing fancy, but ... *come to my back door immediately*. Put it beside your bed now—you can’t waste an instant or the power will evaporate! *COME NOW*.”

I put the phone down and stared at Richard, infected with her hysteria.

“Wait for me,” I said. “Five minutes.”

I sped the four blocks to her door. She was peering from a window, watching anxiously for onlookers. Claude might explode with rage and jealousy if she saw me. Florinda emerged carrying a small oak bedside table, which looked surprisingly familiar.

“I oiled it myself,” she proudly announced. “It was the *nagual*’s, he built it.”

Of course. I had seen it for years, covered with pennies, index cards, women’s phone numbers, pill bottles of diabetic medication, knives, reading glasses, strings of moonstones, amber, and pearls.

The table bore the elegant, functional look of all Carlos’ creations; he was a superb carpenter. I asked Florinda to give him my thanks, for now I was afraid to call, fearing he would lash out at me since his behavior had become even more erratic. And, the witches told me, he was becoming increasingly ill with diabetes, along with another mysterious illness (Florinda called it “a virus he caught in Mexico”). I didn’t want to disturb him.

“Hurry,” Florinda said, as she helped me set the table in the car. “Go, now. Remember—by the bed, immediately.” I sped home.

Breathlessly, I told Richard the table’s provenance. He examined it with a practiced eye, pronouncing, “Excellent craftsmanship. Look at those joints.”

And then I remembered the wet stairway. It had only been seven hours. Richard and I poked the cement with our fingers. Nobly, he offered to climb up an outside wall, to enter by an upstairs window. We studied the possibilities, but it was hopeless. There were no safe footholds, there was no way up.

Photo by Gerard Barbier



The magic table.

“The hell with it,” I decided. “If I leave footprints, big deal. This is magic—how could anything be more important?”

Richard waited at the foot of the stairway, tense and quiet. I was sick with nerves. I darted up the stairs on tiptoe, clutching the precious power table, jumping steps two at a time. Without looking back I dashed into the bedroom and tucked the table neatly into place.

I stood at the top of the stairs and saw Richard grinning below. There wasn’t a trace of a footprint. I pattered back down and we embraced, drunk with victory.

When the house was finished, the witches came to view the results. Only Florinda had seen it in its original state, and she was gratifyingly amazed by the transformation.

For years, it had been Taisha—“channeling” her alter ego, Anna-Marie Carter—who had borne the endless burden of their own home

repairs. Carlos made sudden, detailed demands for changes, inevitably altering plans mid-stream. Taisha spent hundreds of hours fighting to meet nearly impossible budgets and struggling to explain bizarre requests to carpenters. An electrician, puzzled by the white walls, spartan interior, and population of grim, short-haired women, asked if this was home to a cult. The only decorations were the framed jackets of every Castaneda book.

Months after the witches' first visit to my home, Taisha and I sat in the sun eating strawberries, dangling our toes in the *verboden* pool that had come with the house. Carlos disapproved of swimming, saying that immersion in water saps vital energy. When he heard about the pool, he ordered me to have it filled in. But I love to swim—and in any case, after taking estimates, I told Florinda that I couldn't possibly afford the cost of filling and landscaping a huge patch of earth. The subject was dropped, and the witches began to secretly come over to swim.

Taisha smiled at the cheerful patio. "When you were kicked out, and all alone, you did all this work—by yourself! You found the strength, Ellis, I don't know where. You carried on, day after day, drawing on *something*." She gestured upwards, as if pulling on a line of etheric energy that only she could see.

I was receiving another compliment on my fighting spirit, and from the witch who was said to be the hardest to please. But at the time, the praise didn't really penetrate. Now, I understand why. I was numb. I was so deep in shock that my emotions would be deadened for years to come. In this condition I assumed that I would be taken back again, that it was only a matter of persistence. Therefore, why not carry on? Eventually, I assumed, Carlos would visit my beloved home. I was unable to read the clues that pointed to the gravity of my situation; and when I did, I shoved them deep down, where the repressed emotions and the struggle to maintain denial would eventually result in illness and mental collapse.

But our bodies and minds do whatever is necessary to survive. A near-zombie, I focused on paint chips and grout. I didn't realize it at the time, but it was an immense relief not to go to class, not to be humiliated and scapegoated, not to work fiercely at keeping my

emotions masked, never letting actual feelings show. It was a relief not to hide in the bathroom and cry, emerging with the faked smile Florinda had taught me.

I was not suicidal. That would come much later, when the numbness wore off. Now, a new chapter in my sorcery adventures was about to begin with the witches, as they acted under Carlos' orders, and in defiance of him.

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The *Nagual* Fails at Seduction

Women have two weapons—cosmetics and tears.

—Napoleon I

Carlos had mercurially decided to let me back “in,” as symbolized by the gift of the table. After a fabulously successful Women’s Workshop in 1996, he asked me to select participants for “a women’s group.” I picked a number of recruits, but the class didn’t last long. Many of the women were overweight by Carlos’ standards, or married, or too old.

I pressed him continuously to notice one girl I liked—Susan Johnson, a skinny blonde who appeared to have a refreshingly irreverent attitude. She had the *hubris* to roll her eyes at Carlos’ lechery when she caught him eyeballing our behinds during a particularly suggestive Magical Pass. “Puh-leeze!” she snickered, as he adjusted a roomful of rear-ends.

I drew her into conversation and was impressed when she said, “I’m not going to promise to be celibate forever, but I am going to think about sex seriously. I’ve been using it for meaningless recreation.” This wasn’t the usual cultish babble. Further, she said that her mother and niece were extremely important to her, and she would *not* cut them off. I was intrigued. In my loneliness, surrounded by worshipful disciples, I found Susan refreshing—she appeared to question authority. On the down side, she had embarrassing habits such as peppering her speech with Valley Girl phrases, including “*whatever*” and “*like, totally.*” She worked for a

hip “ ‘zine” that I found execrably stupid, and she had occasional jobs as a costume consultant for music videos.

It took me weeks to get Carlos to notice her.

When at last he followed my finger, pointing her out in the crowd, he grimaced, pronouncing, “Forget it, she’s a weakling, a wimpy asshole. *No chi.*”

For her costume work, Susan shopped at a mall the witches favored and told me she had seen them but was too shy to say hello. I urged her to introduce herself, knowing that the witches would take it as a good omen that they had run into her.

Carlos soon disbanded the women’s group, asking me to pluck a few girls for the Sunday class, which “needed more women.” I included Susan and her friend Myrna. They were inseparable, living together hand-to-mouth, clinging together nervously and tittering as they struggled to find a place in the group. Their post-punk cool was grating, but I understood that it was born of pure anxiety. I certainly knew the feeling, and I supposed Susan would shed her mannerisms in time. Myrna seemed far less interesting, but at least she had the drive to publish a magazine, even if it was always at a loss, using up her inheritance.

I selected the girls to assist in the seminar bookstore and praised their hard work to Carlos. Grudgingly, he began to accept them. The three of us developed a cautious camaraderie, since “friendship” was forbidden among warriors. Desperate for company, I looked on the bright side: they displayed no fake prudishness, and Susan showed signs of nascent sophistication. Maybe I wouldn’t have to be a loner anymore if these women were accepted.

It took continuous pushing on my part to get Carlos and Florinda to speak to them. Florinda wrote Susan off as “a weak, self-important piece of shit,” and she found Myrna “fat, giggly, and irritating.” Carlos finally considered that the three of us might share my new, spacious home, which in a few months would be ready for habitation. Then events took a dark turn.

The first strange thing happened one afternoon when the two girls came to my apartment to use my computer. They were working on a book derived from their 'zine, and Susan suggested we take in *Le Samurai*, an Alain Delon classic, when they had finished.

An hour into the afternoon, my phone rang. It was Taisha—was I free for a sudden getaway? Of course. As always, I didn't say where I was going, but said I expected to be back in time for the film. Taisha and I had lunch and ran errands; I returned in time for the movie.

Myrna looked as she often did at such movies—confused and bored (she didn't like subtitles)—while Susan and I admired the *hauteur* of Alain Delon.

That evening Carlos telephoned, bilious. "Alain Delon! What crap! *French CRAP!* Why did you drag them to that shit?"

"I ... we ...," I stuttered. I just didn't have it in me to say, in third-grade style, "She did it!" He hung up.

Within a few days my Holocaust began.

Out of nowhere, Carlos accused me of taking Prozac. I was puzzled. I hadn't used Prozac for years, since the time when I had supposedly threatened his life. However, I kept a bottle in my medicine cabinet, along with other drugs. It was part of the suicide plan that Astrid and I had morbidly discussed over the years, never sharing precise details, but hinting at pills as our way out should we fail to "join the *nagual*." I knew Prozac wasn't in the classic Kevorkian cocktail, but I thought the more prepared, the better.

Carlos, relentless in his Prozac witch hunt, had seemingly become unhinged.

Only by jumping ahead in the story can I now guess at what was happening: Within a year of Carlos' death, I arrived at a possible, dark explanation. To shake off our sorrow, the group held a party at my house, during which Susan got falling-down drunk. When she emerged from a prolonged stay in my bathroom, having sex with her boyfriend, I found my medicine cabinets thrown open, and Valium and Vicodin—my migraine cocktail since my twenties (approved by Carlos)—with the bottles empty, tops strewn around. I never confronted Susan, and today I'm ashamed at my cowardice. It

wouldn't do to make a scene, I felt, and we were all acting out after our loss.

Then I thought back to the day, years before, when Susan and Myrna were alone in my apartment. What if Susan was a chronic medicine cabinet snoop and thief? Of course I'd never know, but might she have peeked and reported to Carlos the full bottle of Prozac? Could he have asked her to snoop? It made an educated guess, since by now I had learned that she had a tremendously big mouth.

But at the time *I simply could not imagine* what had come over Carlos. He wouldn't accept the truth. I wasn't on medication. Finally I got so angry I snapped, "Prozac! I'd *love* to be on Prozac—I *miss* Prozac!" He decided that I was "in denial." How, I asked him, could a person be in denial about taking a pill?

"Are you SURE you're not in *denial*?" he persisted. Had he gone round the bend after all those psychedelic drugs? It was the eeriest gaslighting I'd ever experienced in my life.

In the week before the demented accusations began, I had hoped Susan would become my roommate with Myrna—a plan Carlos was cooking up. He had grown fond of the two girls. One afternoon while I was in my apartment writing, the phone rang. It was Susan, her voice choked with tears.

"I'm in my car, and I'm—I'm right outside your place—I don't know how I wound up here! It's a miracle! *Please* can I come in? I need to see you—*now*. Oh, Ellis, *please*."

"Yes. Of course. Where are you? At my door? Come in right away. What's wrong? What happened?"

Susan was heaving sobs, tears were flowing, her nose was red from crying. I hugged her, and she collapsed into my arms. I sat her down on my bed, where she cried wretchedly, hacking and choking.

"The most horrible thing just happened to me, Ellis! Carlos ... he asked me to come over, didn't say why, I thought we were going to talk, like always, and—"

Susan coughed and grimaced. She had experienced a collapsed lung, and laughter and tears both caused her sharp pain.

“Ellis, he just *reached under my shirt—like THAT*—and grabbed me *here!* [She squeezed her breast.] It was so totally gross, he was *disgusting!* He tried to kiss me and groped, pawed me, and tried to rip off my blouse—and those revolting, slobbering kisses! He’s so *old* and repulsive ... I really *believed* he was different from all those gurus!

“I pushed him away and thank God the doorbell rang and it was Claude, so he shoved me out the other door. He was, like, *totally* flipped out she would see! I pulled down my shirt and just started driving—I had no idea where I was—” Fresh sobs brought on more tears; she had begun to hyperventilate.

I got Kleenex and held her until she stopped shaking. Her eyes darted, she shivered, mascara ran down her cheeks. After an alarming fit of coughing, she spoke. “I looked up and there I was on your street, *and you’re home*, it’s incredible.... Ellis, it was so, so ... *I can’t believe I found you. Thank God.*”

I was sick with guilt, and horribly confused. How could I whitewash her sense of betrayal? Her guru, her teacher, had yanked on her breasts—he sounded like a classic slobbering lecher. I was guilty, very guilty—I was so obviously the pimp. I had never imagined his seduction plan would be crude, *violating*, in contrast to the way I was approached. I had been *courted*, not pawed! I knew I was in danger if I consoled her. A true blue warrior would have sent her packing.

But I was no Sonia, no Muni, no Beulah. I tried to comfort Susan, this hunched-over, weepy child who felt she had escaped a near-rape.

“You don’t *know*,” she gasped. “I’ve been the mistress of so many men! I can’t be another one of *‘the mistresses of’*—never again! To *grab* under my blouse like that! Ellis, he was REPULSIVE!”

“Susan, I think I understand. I have an idea. When I slept with him, I was acting wild and careless, so he made it a little bit special, by dressing up, making a date for the evening, picking me up at my mother’s. It’s true he took me to a cheap motel, but ... if he had grabbed for my breasts, I would have laughed. Do you see? He *surprised* me. He did the opposite of what I expected.

“And you expect to be treated delicately, so he shocked you with *your* opposite. Perhaps he does this with everyone—I wouldn’t know—but doesn’t it make a kind of sorceric sense? I think you have to talk to Florinda. Tell her everything. You can trust her, she’ll help you.”

Susan was immovable. We had a long talk, during which we began to speak truthfully about our respective fears. Susan swore once again that she wouldn’t be parted from her relatives—her family came before any so-called sorcery. If she moved in to the new house could her niece use the pool? Of course, I said. “But really it’s Florinda that you need to talk to about this.” (I knew they would demand she break with her family, and I wasn’t willing to tell her.)

I dearly wanted to have a girlfriend who didn’t play games—I too wanted to confide. I described Guido’s and my infatuation, with its attendant sufferings and sex games, his stopping short of true intimacy without explaining why. She hinted at stories of a sexual nature that she too wanted to share, but she seemed frightened. When I invited her further confidences, her face froze in a mask of fear.

“What! Tell you about myself? And have you tell everybody *everything*?”

“Susan! When have I ever done that?”

I was shocked. I didn’t betray people. Why had she said such a crude thing? If only I had understood that she was speaking of *herself*, my entire life might have turned out differently. This childlike, blatant fear of betrayal revealed her own mode of behavior. If I had only understood, I might have escaped a shattering, life-altering blow. Or maybe things sometimes turn out for the best—I would have written a book, but I wouldn’t have found the courage to write this one, the book that freed me from a life of lies.

I promised Susan that her sexual secrets would remain with me. And so she told me some of them, and indeed, they remain with me.

At last Susan thanked me, certain that magic had brought her to my door. I urged her again to speak to Florinda. We exchanged

embraces and promises of friendship, and vowed that the secrets we'd shared would be honored.

I called Florinda and told her the story, leaving out Susan's and my respective confidences.

"You'd better not have told her ANYTHING about our world, Ellis, *did you?*"

"No. I told her to talk to you."

"That fragile piece of shit! What does she think she's made of, porcelain? We should have started with the other one, the fatso. I'll talk to you later. *You'd better not have opened your mouth.* Do you hear me? Or you're REALLY going to get it!"

That night Susan and Myrna were absent from class. Carlos placed me in the front row, winking and laughing as if we shared a terrific secret, causing a ripple of jealousy to run through the group. Behind me, Ramon was squirming with curiosity, pecking at me with questions during breaks.

Carlos couldn't stop chuckling. "Well, we lost her! Another one bites the dust!"

"Little Miss Precious," Florinda growled.

Everyone else looked puzzled, while I had the rare pleasure of sharing a secret with Daddy, sadly combined with my feeling of loss about Susan. My idea made so much sense to me: of course Carlos was being sorceric. Still, people came and went. Carlos told me to call Susan and tell her it had all been my idea, tell her I'd been the pimp who thought he should sleep with her and Myrna, and ask her for forgiveness. Despite the absurdity of the directive, I did it. To her credit, Susan replied, "Oh, *right!* Like, I so believe that!"

The next morning Susan called me to report that she'd been hasty, taken things too seriously. She wasn't about to sleep with the old leech, but she needn't have gotten so upset. She'd spoken to Florinda, and all was once more right with the world.

I was pleased; and once again I pondered a curious fact. Others had changed their minds overnight, but it had been too late—why was Susan forgiven and promptly returned to class without punishment? Florinda continued to snarl for several days, but now she was snarling at *me*. She suspected me of having had girl talk with Susan. She pried. I refused to gossip. Had Susan broken our vows? Why was Flo so suspicious? I couldn't figure it out. Soon, Carlos was praising Susan to the group for “jumping as high as a flea,” for changing course overnight and cutting off her *entire family*, a spectacular feat equaled only by Simon.

“When Simon cut off his family with the recapitulation, they died like *that!* First the mother, then the father.” Carlos pinched his thumb and fingernail together, to demonstrate the proper method of cutting off our parents' lives. “Susan cut everyone off, just like that! When you *really do it*, don Juan told me, they die instantly, as if you were squashing a flea—and that's all they are, fleas.”

Within days, Susan had her sorcery name—Fifi LaRue—and Myrna was Raven McCloud.

That week, Florinda called to invite me over to the house and garden, not to Carlos' room—an unusual invitation for me. She told me to dress down, because we were going to pick fruit, and I mustn't be overdressed. Ever since Tula, I had become a paragon of style, and Florinda sometimes snapped at me for overdoing it. I wore Levis and a silk polka-dot blouse. My hair, which Carlos had refused to cut for months, had grown into an uncontrollable mop that I tried to force into shape with gel.

When I arrived, I found Raven there, dressed in black jeans and a black T-shirt—her conservative punk attire. Then Fifi arrived wearing hip-huggers with a bare midriff, a sexy halter top, and high heels. She was fully made up with bright red lipstick, her long hair wrapped in a bright silk scarf, perfectly *coiffed*. Hadn't Florinda told her that we were going to climb ladders, picking fruit in the sun? Why had she worn high heels? I knew that bare midriffs usually

spelled immediate and permanent expulsion, and I wondered why Florinda hadn't warned her.

We didn't pick fruit. We didn't come *close* to picking fruit. We stood on the pavement and Carlos handed us a few kumquats, then led us indoors. As we sat side-by-side on a living room bench, Carlos told us that the wall behind us had a magical opening to another dimension, and if we leaned back, we might be sucked into an alien world.

We listened to a brief lecture about alien worlds, and then we were dismissed. As we left, Carlos looked me over and said, "I like your outfit, Ellis!" I was relieved not to have overdressed—he had never seen me in jeans. I was utterly oblivious to the fact that he had spoken with vicious sarcasm.

That night he called to tell me that I was ugly and frumpy beside Fifi. He insisted that I was violently jealous of her! Florinda had tried to defend me. "You invited Ellis to work in the garden! And her hair—you won't cut it, and you expect her to look groomed? It's been months!"

Carlos was swollen with rage. This had been a test to see if we three women were "an energetic unit." Undecided, he sent Fifi over to see me the next day to continue discussing plans for living in my house. Carlos ordered me to tell her that I was renting, not buying. How, I asked him, would I then explain the massive reconstruction, the contractor, the workers? He ignored my questions.

Once at the house, Fifi told me that Carlos wanted a complete overhaul of part of the downstairs just for her, since she was a "special being" who had to have her own entrance. Walls had to be built, others knocked down. I silently marveled at the way Fifi was spending my money. Who knew what Carlos had told her? That I had deep pockets, and they were all hers? Meanwhile, Raven made plans for the installation of two phone lines.

Within a week the entire plan was cancelled without explanation. Raven called me, saying vaguely, "It doesn't feel right—maybe

later,” and stuck me with all of her phone bills. Her speech was clumsily delivered, and I was certain she had been given dictation.

Florinda called and told me not to utter a word to Fifi should we meet. The next day, at Sunday class, Fifi approached and told me the *nagual* had said the energy wasn’t right and she wouldn’t be moving in.

“Oh! Are you okay?” I asked.

She shrugged. “At first it was weird ... but yeah, I’m okay.”

Within hours I received a violent call from Carlos, mimicking me with the utmost cruelty. “Are you *okay*? Are you *okay*? What do you think? You’re so *wonderful*, so *special*, that they’re *dying* to live with you? ‘Are you *okay*?’ They despise you! They HATE you! ‘Are you okay? Are you okay?’ ”

Florinda called to shriek, “Didn’t I tell you NOT TO SAY *ANYTHING*?! Didn’t I?!?”

In a sudden vision, I saw the group of us as we had been in grammar and high school. I was always in trouble for insubordination and on the verge of expulsion, usually by an authoritarian male principal or headmaster. I was invariably saved by my female teachers, who pleaded my case by saying I was the most brilliant literary student they had ever taught. My French teachers also begged the top brass to keep me, saying more than once that I was the best student they’d ever had. Socially, I was friends with the In Group, but I loved the underdogs. I had friends throughout every strata of whatever school I was in. I didn’t belong to any one clique, not wanting to be pinned down. Instead I moved between them.

Fifi, I supposed, was the classic tattletale, repeating every word she was told back to Teacher. Guido was another type, a mama’s boy, who didn’t run to daddy but instead asked Mommy Florinda if he could take me out to a private screening of a Cronenberg movie. Florinda spat, “Leave Ellis alone!” He lacked the courage to take me out without parental permission. Why couldn’t Guido take me to the movies by himself? It was nobody’s business, and surely he’d noticed by now that Carlos Castaneda couldn’t read minds. Had he

been one of those kids who had to ask permission for *everything*? A Good Boy who got a tattoo to look Bad?

After Fifi tattled and told Carlos exactly what I had said, having just sworn to keep our confidences private, Carlos proceeded to expel me from everything. From my job at Cleargreen, my position as bookstore manager, from Sunday class, evening class, *everything*.

Almost no one called me. They must have been forbidden, and they were good soldiers. The only people who spoke to me or visited were an old friend who had joined the Sunday class, Karen Williams, brave and loving as always, and also my dear and loyal friend Richard Jennings. Karen took the unprecedented step of writing Carlos a letter of protest, saying that I had never done the many things he was now accusing me of, thus risking her own position for the truth. This was an action unprecedented in my experience of Carlos' sycophantic disciples. Without these people, and the few old friends I had secretly kept from my "old life," I might indeed have finally committed suicide. I was giving up.

Carlos' *grand guignol* Theatre of Paranoia expanded until the crimes he accused me of were contradictory. He savaged me for "giving advice" to the Sunday members, alternately raging that I was withholding their confidences from *Carlos Castaneda, the nagual!* This accusation was true. I had no interest in stabbing people in the back to get ahead.

Once I asked Simon why he thought Carlos not only permitted, but *aggressively encouraged* what he referred to as "rattage." One of Simon's few virtues, in my eyes, was that he did not participate in this lowly form of pettiness.

"Why aren't these people punished," I exclaimed, "for their fawning behavior, for constant acts of betrayal?" His reply was grim. "Their information is too valuable."

I admired Simon intensely for taking this stand, but he compensated for his virtue by breaking our agreement of reciprocity. He was chronically terrified in his need to know more, to have one up on everyone, to hold a position of power. Consequently, his own relationships remained stale due to his desperate hoarding and withholding of information. He was

painfully needy, as we all were, and one way to feel power in a castrating cult was to possess Information.

Poona, who had been so close to me before my expulsion, called me once to suggest that I pay and enroll myself in an upcoming Mexico seminar, where Fifi would appear on stage as the newest Tracker. I told Poona her suggestion was in the worst possible taste. “I thought *the energy* would do you good,” she urged. Fifi was now Claude’s companion, dethroning Beulah.

Meanwhile, Guido appeared for a stilted visit. I gathered that Florinda had granted him permission. He was refreshingly jealous when he saw flowers in my room, quizzing me about their donor. I was touched that he even visited. In keeping with the code under which we lived, and to which he so earnestly adhered, we spoke of nothing in the least important. However, he arranged for me to participate with him at a local book festival, reading a classic. This tender gesture went an enormously long way.

Florinda, too, came over, and exclaimed with disgust that I was “bloated.” It was right before my period, which due to the extraordinary stress I was under was late, thus making me more bloated than usual. She was convinced that I was on drugs, and she left quickly. It was ironic.... I hadn’t touched so much as an aspirin in months, vomiting my way through three-day migraines, afraid to take any medication whatsoever, a debilitating choice born of stark fear. Couldn’t Carlos or Florinda see magically ... ever? Meanwhile, Astrid and Florinda were suffering through extensive dental work, taking the Vicodin and Advil that is customarily prescribed, continuing to have sex with Carlos or to prepare his meals. I alone was poison.

Sundays, Very Bloody Sundays

*Now hatred is by far the longest pleasure;
Men love in haste but they detest at leisure ...*

—Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

Over the course of two years, Carlos spoke about me regularly to the Sunday class, and usually I was there listening. Though I blocked it out, many people have reminded me of a powerful moment, shocking to them, when he pointed to me and told the group, “She thinks she’s having a love affair with me! She’s insane!”

A favorite topic was my childhood love of ice cream. Carlos claimed that I was “soft” energetically because I was raised on ice cream. He told the class, “We think we need sugar, chocolate, ice cream. We need love. We’re so needy.”

Before the Fifi debacle, he talked about how much I had changed. “She is ‘Elf’—Ellis Laura Finnegan. People who knew her ten years ago don’t recognize her, they say she ‘reminds them of someone they knew.’ She tells them, ‘Oh, that’s not possible, I lived in Berkeley then.’

“She used to be a ‘goddess’ in Berkeley. She was much heavier, and she would go to goddess events and paint her tits. Then she would come back and God would fuck her. She was so attached to her boyfriend Jason ’cause he was there for her when her Daddy died. She really did not care that much when her Daddy died, but it was a good story. She is a professional screamer.

“Ellis had a big fancy house. She looked out her window and saw a naked man with a big penis practicing Tai Chi outside. She goes out and timidly speaks to him; the man acts very embarrassed, like he is looking for something to cover himself with. He explains to her it is ‘such a beautiful house’ and that he thought it was empty. While looking at his penis the whole time, Ellis finally offers him a towel. Then she asks if he wants to ‘come in for tea.’ He tells her that he is a carpenter who reads Heidegger. Next thing you know they’re ‘doing it.’ [Carlos mimicked me having sex.] After staying with her for a while and screwing a lot, the guy tells her he has to leave. She asks why and he says he needs \$68,000 but says, ‘I can’t ask you for it, so I must go.’ Ellis says, ‘Well, maybe I can help you.’ She ends up giving him the \$68,000 and he still leaves to go back to his wife. This is a scam the guy had played many times before. The social order sets us up for this kind of thing.”

This story was concocted out of a few sentences I had once told Carlos about a carpenter friend who was a philosophy major. He and I never had sex, nor was he married, and he had never borrowed money from me.

“You gave me one of my best stories!” Carlos told me one day after regaling an audience with the tale.

During 1996 Carlos called me and had me read him a list of all the people in the Sunday group. He cut half of them out of the class and told me to call them and say, “We’re not having sessions anymore.” Some members were so devastated they became suicidal. In the words of one ex-member, “I wanted to die. I knew that the Spirit had chewed me up and spit me out. Somehow, I managed to not kill myself.” The remaining members of the class lived in constant fear of being ejected. Carlos told the group, “I didn’t exclude anybody—that was Ellis. Take it up with her.”

That day he further scared them by saying, “Don Juan used to tell me that we’re all gargoyles in this river of shit. We climb on each other and piss and shit all over each other. Some grapple each other and climb to the top, and the others sink in the river. They don’t

fight, and you just occasionally see bubbles coming up; they hardly even breathe. Occasionally one gets pushed to the shore, to the side. That's when sorcerers try to hose them down. But it's too uncomfortable, a lot of people can't take it, it's too cold outside, and they jump back in. But if they can get hosed off they can find that it's infinitely more interesting to be out, and they can then go wherever they want. This was a horrendous image for me. I went back to UCLA and saw the Anthropology Department as being full of gargoyles." He added a comment that startled me with its weird narcissism: "I feel that something indescribable owes me, or why would I have been born into this chicken-shit place?"

He concluded by saying, "So, when you realize how we are stuck here, that the worst has already happened—you need the hotline to me: call me!" No one knew how to cope with this instruction. They only had my number, and they had just been told that I held the hatchet.

In April of 1996 Carlos disclosed to the group that he had diabetes. He was optimistic and dismissive of his increasingly serious condition. "In changing grooves," he explained, "you can jump into an earlier version of yourself, or an earlier time. So even with a genetic health problem, it won't show up until much later if you've jumped to an earlier time. Like in my case, with my glucose problem, by jumping back to 1975, I won't have the problem again for twenty years." In two years exactly he would be dead.

It was during this period that the ghastly Fifi situation unfolded. On April 27, 1997, he told the Sunday class the following:

"I thought it was important to let you know why Ellis isn't going to be with us. She was taking Prozac. She denies it, but I pulled her aside during class. I could tell she was bloated and had 'that voice.' So I asked her what was going on."

The "bloating" Carlos referred to was due to a hormonal imbalance that manifested before each of my periods. When I discussed these and other alarming menstrual problems with Muni, she replied, "Oh, welcome to the club! Everyone here has them, due

to stress—the adrenals become overloaded. When I first met the *nagual*, I stopped bleeding for four years ... now Sonia bleeds for fourteen days at a time. Ignore it.”

Subsequently, I read an interview with Dr. Winifred Cutler, whose scientific field of study is hormones and sexuality. She discovered that “women who engaged in sporadic sex (they’ll have a hot weekend and then ten days without sex) showed estrogen levels like that of an old woman when they were young. It disrupted the endocrine systems of their bodies ... they were young and aging rapidly. Our bodies appear to be designed for regular, steady loving, not for feast and famine.” Dr. Cutler described exactly the frequency with which I had sex with Carlos. At last I knew why I, and other women in our group, had suffered tremendous upset to our reproductive systems, the very wombs that he claimed to be healing. Either celibacy or a more regular sex life was healthy, but this amount of contact with male hormones was severely detrimental.

Carlos continued on his Prozac theme, “It was something that was going on for a few weeks. I’m sure you could tell it too, if you think back. Ellis told me that all of the calls she had to make every week was overwhelming for her. [This conversation never occurred.] I asked her, ‘Why is that so difficult?’ She answered, ‘People are confiding in me.’ [Also fiction.]

“She had begun to give people advice and psychic counseling. Why are you confiding in Ellis? Why do you tell Ellis that you masturbate?”

Then Carlos complained that I was withholding information. “She never tells me what you’ve been saying, she keeps it to herself. Raven gave her a book of ‘Sayings of the Fliers’ that she had put together herself to give to the *nagual*, and Ellis never gave it to me. Raven only made one copy of it, but I never saw it.”

The real story is that Raven did give me this booklet, and I tried to give it to Carlos after class, but he waved me away. Later in the day I called Carlos and asked him if I should bring it over. He said, “Leave me alone!” and hung up the phone. I called him about the book the next day, and the next, but he refused to see it. Finally, I

asked him if he would like me to bring it to him at Sunday class, and he said, “Keep the fucking book. Raven is an asshole.”

He continued, “I sense Prozac among you as well. By using that, Ellis is into immediate gratification. That’s what she is all about. Last night I looked in Taisha’s mirror and was shocked because my body looked so young. I went into the fetal position and sucked my thumb. Suck the left thumb, that’s for purposefulness. Move the top of the thumb back and forth to massage the palate—masturbate the palate—that’s a substitute for Prozac.

“We’re going to take a week and devote it to Ellis—we’ll send her a big blast of energy to help her on her way. I’m her only shot at freedom, but she doesn’t seem to care. She ‘falls’ and walks away from it. I don’t leave her—*she* leaves me. What have I ever done to her, except help her? It’s like a knife in my chest. I’m bleeding.”

My friend Karen told me that Carlos appeared to be on the edge of tears. Some members of the class were crying, naturally believing all that was said about me; others were perturbed by Carlos’ strange ramblings.

The Sunday meetings ended in the late summer of 1997, when Carlos was so sick that he fell down in front of the class. His glaucoma, the result of his diabetes, had grown worse. Muni had spoken to me about the “reeling” spells he’d been having, how terrifying it was to watch him teeter and have to be held up. Thankfully, I was not present for that class. The sight of Carlos losing his balance would have broken my heart and flooded me with painful memories of my father’s last months. The fact that Carlos had told the group I didn’t really care about my father when he was dying hurt me more than all the stories he had ever made up about me, rolled into one. It was cruelty, and it was madness.

Shortly afterwards, Florinda spoke about the Sunday group before a crowd of 850 at a week-long intensive at the L.A. Convention Center. In one breath she revealed that Carlos had sex, thereby stunning the audience. She then declared that “the Sunday group was imbecilic, a monumental error in judgment. They made him into their guru. It was one of the stupidest mistakes of his life.” The members of the Sunday class reeled with shame and horror. And

only two weeks before, Zuna had chastised me for not realizing that “he *lives* for the Sunday group—it’s the only thing keeping him alive, it’s all he stays here for.”

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The Halfway House for Losers

I know how men in exile fed on dreams of hope.

—Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*

As I was preparing to move into my house, Florinda called. “Tildy has been kicked out.” Formerly Bonny, she was a wealthy Italian who bankrolled her own Castaneda cult, believing herself to be a *nagual* woman. She was taken briefly into our group, having saved her virginity for Carlos. He enjoyed it, then tired of her slavish devotion.

“Ellis, I have another *big* favor to ask. Can Tildy stay there for a while? You’ve already done so much—”

“Of course. There’s room, Flo. When will she arrive?”

“In ten minutes.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. No problem, my pleasure.”

“Thank you, Ellis—I can always count on you.”

I gave her the spare bedroom.

Florinda called the next day to tell me that they too were beginning a massive remodel. She asked tentatively, “Ellis, when we do the floors, can Taisha and I stay with you? We’ll sleep on the floor, I promise we won’t be in the way....”

“Of course! And you don’t have to sleep on the floor, silly.”

“No, no, we can’t put you out so much! We’ll bring mats. The *nagual* will stay in the house; he won’t let workmen touch his quarters.” In the end they were afraid to leave Carlos alone. How ill *was* he? No one would say.

Tildy and I did Tensegrity, and sometimes we were joined in our practice by Nancy, a Sunday member. She and her husband Jim had dedicated their lives to Castaneda's teachings, traveling the world for two decades in quest of their hero, meeting him at last at a seminar. Nancy had refused to sleep with Carlos, telling us, "I love my husband, even though because of sorcery he won't have sex anymore."

In fact, Jim was having an affair with a woman he met at a seminar. He lied to his wife, while accepting her financial support. Nancy learned the truth, and she was desperate for Carlos' opinion. Was she a weakling or had she been cruelly betrayed? Carlos pronounced Jim a false warrior, deeply relieving Nancy.

Carlos often told us, "Our word is all we have, it's our pact with It, the bidding we make. If we break that word Infinity will close Its door forever. Apology means nothing—that's for humans. If you break your word, you must remake yourself from nothing and *pay your debts*. I'm not speaking only of money! You can only pay your debt by giving everything to the one you've wronged. *This alone is the blank check of a warrior's affection.*

"Sure, it's easy to give a blank check when you're 'in loooove,' or you've just made a new 'frieennnd,' but how about when it's difficult, when you share a life? Or a bathroom, *carajo!* How about when someone needs you, and it's *inconvenient* for you to give love back? *Pucha*, how we hate to be inconvenienced! That's how we are. *But a sorcerer always keeps his word—and believe me, if he breaks it, there is no solace in death.*"

Two years after Carlos' death a person on the group's outer fringe lamented to me that he couldn't envision a relationship outside the circle of practitioners. It stung his conscience to select groupies from seminar crowds. I asked why he didn't seek a partner beyond this small group.

"Absolutely not! Why, *those people out there—they're human!* They're not on our level!"

I was aghast. "You mean to say there's no one in this *whole world* worth having a life with outside this little pool?"

“But everyone wants courtship!” he insisted. “They’re trapped, while we alone reach for sorcerer’s affection.” Why not, I dryly suggested, do a Pygmalion? Bring a partner to “his level”? He brightened. “Yes, I could do that!”

I puzzled continuously over this question: *Why* were these devoted people, who traveled thousands of miles, performed hundreds of hours of Tensegrity, and spent all their money on workshops so unchanged? Did the sorcery world draw these damaged, torn souls—myself a perfect example (after all, I chose and fought for this life)—or did it bring out the worst in inconstancy and arrogance? Or, as the authors of *The Guru Papers* wrote, were many apparently well-adjusted people susceptible to a genius of Castaneda’s caliber?

When Tildy was banished to Rome, Carlos sent me jewels *via* Florinda, “to thank you for your kindness, *amor*. She was a difficult being.”

Meanwhile, Raven had decided to live in my house after all, and it was an unworkable situation for me. The witches had come to despise Raven for her neediness but couldn’t decide what to do about her. Without telling them, I took matters into my own hands. I employed the most pragmatic sorcery trick Carlos had given me: Should I ever want anyone to depart, he instructed me to sprinkle a little of my own urine in corners of rooms or in doorways. The urine trick had worked miracles for Simon at a famous Hollywood studio. Carlos claimed it caused the company to fail, allowing him to start his own business; Simon said he went into the building nightly for months with a spray bottle. I have used this method to good effect several times; indeed it has never failed. Nor had it brought anyone bad luck. It just induced ... *change*.

I spritzed Raven’s room only once, telling no one. Florinda called the next day, saying, “Just tell her, it’s time to go.”

Once Raven and Tildy were gone, the witches came to visit frequently. I was outside of the larger group, but inside of something else, something that kept me running from the minute I

woke up until I fell asleep exhausted. And it was a far better life than the one spent with the prim boys and girls. This new life included champagne, swimming and sunning, kicking off one's shoes and letting down one's hair, short as it was.

And as for the magic spray bottle? I had witnessed the inexplicable.

Later, I found out the details of Raven's transgression. She had asked Carlos if she could skip an upcoming Sorcery Theatre for her New York promotion. He replied, "Of course!" Returning, she found herself outcast. She was supposed to have known that nothing in her life took precedence over a Theatre. Many of us had suffered similarly, learning that there was no way to tell the difference between a real "yes," an indifferent "yes," and a fatal "yes." It was best to be conservative, engaging in few outside activities.

I sympathized, and wished I could tell her so. Favorites *did* get time off; we all knew it. I was allowed to attend my mother's eightieth birthday party; Guido was permitted promotional trips for his books; and Claude got time off if she stubbed her toe.

But even favorites (Claude excepted) walked on eggshells. Guido was invited to a star-studded party in Italy by a famous actress who footed the bill for her celebrity pals—flights, hotel, *everything*. At the last moment Guido balked and canceled.

Carlos was proud. "If Guido had gone, *he would have never found us again*. NEVER! We would disappear *forever*, we'd leave for Infinity without him. What do they want him for, to be a court jester? *No jodas!*"

Florinda disagreed, telling me, "It's part of his career, *carajo!* He has to mingle with those big celebrities; keep his connections going. It's part of his job!"

Tarina, the so-called Orange Scout, had once held such a powerful position within the group that her disdain kept me out of classes and parties for years. (She was one of the snobs I first met at Gaia Books in Berkeley.) She was directly in the line of succession behind Claude. She received full financial support, a huge Westside

apartment, UCLA tuition, allowance, clothes, and jewels. Florinda was “mommy” and Carlos “papa.” Tarina was a favored sex partner, and even had leave to call Muni “fatso.”

Tarina’s “fall” was, like mine and Astrid’s, akin to an avalanche. Beginning with a fictional sin, it gathered the momentum of Carlos’ rage. Carlos said Tarina had committed half a dozen crimes against him. She had become a disgrace to the cosmos.

Rumors varied. Her sins included taking too many college units, thus becoming “human” by mixing with people, and having two car accidents that were viewed as bad omens. The absurd list of “human” failings went on and on.

A year later Tarina was hospitalized for the first of four operations to her intestines, eventually requiring a full colostomy. She had gone from glowing health to near-death in a matter of months after being exiled. She concealed her story from her doctors, trying to be sorceric. Her physicians believed that her dramatic decline was stress-related, and they suspected her of lying about her life. Because Tarina had cut off her relatives on Carlos’ orders, he, and later Muni, felt obliged to pay for her medical care, but only up to a point. Muni told me with a shrug, “We’ll just send her the \$10,000 Carlos paid people off with when he wanted to get rid of them forever. That was the buy-off price.” I didn’t realize the price of faith was so cheap.

During my last expulsion Carlos told a Sunday group member, “Watch out for Ellis! She’s the Dark Horse and I see her, coming around the bend! Here she comes—gaining, gaining—she’s the one who’ll beat us all!” He often told Florinda that I was “the greatest fighter he’d ever seen”; and Flo implored me to understand that his respect, rarely given, was worth much more than his love. He admired a woman who could “take it,” who could always kick open the door.

To my surprise, after hearing this compliment second-hand, I was visited by a furious Florinda.

“You haven’t changed at all! You’re falling too far behind! I mean, it’s not a *competition*, like in the world, but.... You’re way behind! You’ll have to learn to get rid of that stiff smile. What’s wrong with

you? Why are you so *slow*? Now, let's practice smiling—come on, do it."

With these soothing and encouraging words from Florinda, I smiled. She grimaced.

"Can't you do any better than that? You're stiff! Like *this*—" she demonstrated, flashing a grotesque grin. "Do it again."

And so we passed the next fifteen minutes. Florinda shook her head in disgust.

"I don't know what to do with you. I'm teaching you don Juan's 'sorceric cloak of confidence.' And by the way, don't say anything if Taisha asks—you did *not* pick me up for a movie last night."

"But she saw us! She *waved* to me!"

"You were *not* there."

"That's absurd. I can't lie to her in this egregious way—it's an insult to her sanity!"

"It's not lying! It's the 'cloak of confidence'! Stick to your story, and you'll always win!"

My efforts were rewarded in December of 1997. Carlos and Florinda surprised me by inviting me to be Florinda's companion at her last public appearance in Mexico City.

She was to speak to the crowd, then Beulah and Dexter would appear as the first male-female team: the "Team of Awareness Through Harmony," representing the possibility of asexual love between the sexes. They would demonstrate a new, arduous form called "the Code," supposedly kept secret for generations. Muni howled with laughter at the lavish publicity profile Carlos wrote for them, praising their freedom from ego.

"They're the two biggest egomaniacs in the place—and they actually bought their own advertising! The *nagual's* trick worked! It's brilliant! They believe that crap, and it shuts Beulah up—superb!"

Muni explained to me that Dexter was "a bone Carlos has thrown Beulah, to keep her distracted and self-important so she won't whine," since Claude had transferred her fickle affections to Fifi.

I was honored to receive Florinda's invitation. She had possibly fought hard for my company, or perhaps Carlos was feeling warmly toward me for being a gracious hostess to the group's rejects, and for offering companionship to the witches.

Flo and I arrived at the airport first, where we would meet "the team." When they arrived, Dexter quickly recovered from his surprise at seeing me, the outcast, in a position of honor. He smiled and gave a friendly hug. Beulah refused to greet me, as always, hugging Florinda and pretending that I wasn't present. When we boarded the plane, Beulah shared some food with the others and not me, until Dexter reddened and offered me a few nuts from a baggie. I wondered how long she would keep up this kindergarten act.

We checked into an attractive hotel, retiring early. Florinda had a bad cold, and I worried that she would not be able to give the opening lecture. Our plan was to return to L.A. together immediately after her speech, leaving the workout to "the team."

When we met in the lobby the next morning to head for the auditorium, Beulah smiled as if seeing me for the first time and said, "Oh, hello, Amy!"

It was an extraordinary moment. No one in the group had addressed me as "Amy" for at least six years.

"Oh, sorry!" she suddenly chirped. "Good morning, *Ellis*! Sorry!"

"That's okay, Dorothy," I replied.

She stiffened as if she'd been struck.

I later learned that the sharp-eyed Florinda had seen and heard everything.

A mortified Beulah retreated into silence. We went to the lecture hall, where Florinda, in spite of being ill (which she artfully hid from her public), gave a rousing speech. She, like Carlos, introduced basic sorcery concepts with a verve that recalled my father, whether he spoke on national television or faced a single listener. He could speak of a bestselling novel—or of his thirty-year struggle to become a novelist—for the five-hundredth time and make it sound like the first. I was full of admiration, for when Florinda stepped off the podium she was shivering and sneezing.

She was snappish at the airport. She yelled at me for bumbling with our tickets, reminding me of the all-too-obvious truth that I was not an organized assistant like Sonia. She threatened never to travel with me again. Nonetheless, I was more *simpática* and amusing than Sonia, and she forgave me the following day, revealing the following: “Ellis, I saw Beulah ignore you and insult you—I saw it all. Do you think I don’t notice? I heard everything that bitch said; I watched how she treated you at the airport and on the plane. She’s always been crude. You know we only keep her around for Claude’s amusement.

“When she actually addressed you as ‘Amy’—*carajo! No jodas!* That arrogant bitch! I pulled her outside the building just before she went onstage.

“ ‘Beulah, why do you treat Ellis like this? You’re living in the past, you’re so petty, so *envious of her!* If you don’t shape up *right this minute*, and start behaving like an adult, I’m putting you right *on the next flight BACK TO LOS ANGELES*. If you act like a baby, believe me, I’ll treat you like one. Dexter will teach the entire workshop without you. And I assure you, it would be my pleasure to do it.’ ”

Looking back, I recalled Beulah’s abrupt change from snobbery to hysterical niceness; her rictus mask of frightened, frozen smiles. I knew the force of Florinda’s wrath.

And someone had spoken up for me. I said a quiet “thank you”—Florinda wouldn’t have liked effusiveness. Despite our rocky trip home, a corner had been turned. I was the witches’ secret, overseen by Carlos. My life again had a focus and meaning within yet outside of the group.

It was then that Muni said, “Ellis, you’re my time bomb.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know too much.”

Sorceric Sex and Sorceric Love

Sex is not only a divine and beautiful activity; it's a murderous activity. People kill each other in bed. Some of the greatest crimes ever committed were committed in bed. And no weapons were used.

—Norman Mailer

Carlos explained his colorful sexual theories in great detail during our “close encounters.” The primary premise of his sexual magic was that it produced a Zen-like internal silence. On occasion, I felt it did—I felt lulled and pleasantly sleepy after making love. Of course, I suppose this happens to quite ordinary people, but Carlos insisted that a *nagual*’s sperm was “heavy,” and that if a disciple was not ready, it could be dangerous, making the acolyte agitated and sick.

Sex magic, he said, was the fastest way to bring a disciple along. The heavy sperm was corrosive to humanity—an acid that burned away human nature, transforming the recipient into a witch. When Carlos was having an orgasm, he repeated his command to “pull the sperm” to my brain, and thereby alter my mind’s composition. He said that I was already a witch, having made love to him, and that any man who had sex with me henceforth would receive magical benefits—a sort of free pass to Infinity and freedom. I called it “the Mileage Plus Program,” but Carlos didn’t laugh. In the case of male disciples, he explained that the *nagual* woman “could bring them to inner silence via intercourse.”

Carlos spoke of the sexual theories in Taisha’s book, stating that ordinary men left filaments of energy in a woman’s womb with each

ejaculation. (Florinda rudely informed me that he made this up to keep her busy, and because she was prudish.) Carlos called these filaments “worms,” which drained women for a lifetime while the men fed off them vampirically to the end of their days.

Each new ejaculation automatically “lit up” a woman’s old filaments, thus feeding all of her previous partners, leaving her vitiated. This, he explained, was the reason for “women’s general indifference.” Even with all the power of their two brains—the womb being the second brain—we women were so tired that we “let the men rule the world.” The only cure was seven years of celibacy and the recapitulation exercise, or sex with the *nagual*. Either course was to be followed by a lifetime of celibacy if one wished to garner one’s energy for the sorcerer’s path of life and “death.”

Carlos was capable of repeated ejaculations, as many as three or four in quick succession. He explained to me—and eventually to audiences during his public appearances—that before meeting don Juan he had been “an average one-orgasm man—nothing! Just a little squirt and it was over!” He told me that one day don Juan had wrapped his penis in herb-soaked cloths, changing the dressing daily for three days. Carlos felt his genitals expanding hugely, “down to my toes!” When the wrapping was removed he looked as normal as ever, but now had multiple ejaculatory powers.

He was derisive about the clitoral orgasm, which he considered weak and insipid, although he did not completely ignore it. He believed that nearly all women and men were frigid—that we all possessed a “bar of energy” that had been broken by alien beings and the damaging effects of ordinary human sex. This “broken bar” prevented a woman from experiencing deep, vaginal orgasms, and likewise kept men from their birthright—multiple orgasms. Women’s energy bars looked simple to his *seer’s* eyes—a straight bar several inches across in the womb. Men’s bars, however, were complex and delicate, shaped to resemble a swan’s neck and beak. These structures were more easily broken than women’s and more difficult to repair. An acquaintance of Carlos during his UCLA days, who prefers to remain anonymous, told me that during the ’70s his seduction line varied slightly—instead of “repairing the energy bar,”

he would offer to “implant the *nagual*.” (Another term was “shamanic penetration.”)

“He was good at perceiving what the person yearned to hear,” recalled this acquaintance. “His unpredictable behavior, unavailability, etc., triggered in some an avid wish to pursue him—intermittent reinforcement always shapes and controls behavior better than consistent rewards. His moves were actually conventional—just a variation on hand kissing and bouquets and serenades, followed by neglect, followed by a return appearance complete with high-beam attention. This behavior was extended to giving out baubles, rings, and wedding licenses in order to keep the ladies from giving him too hard a time. He really did want to be liked, to monologue, and when he was not ‘terrified’ about something or someone (usually a person whose knowledge he planned to capitalize on) he was very funny, a wicked mimic. He desperately needed attention, and to justify whatever he was doing ... his need for adulation was tremendous.”

When Carlos spoke of sexual matters in his lectures, Castaneda readers wondered why this vital information was not in his books. Florinda told me, “If we admitted having sex, that’s all people would have talked about!” Ironically, I observed, the lack of address enhanced the very curiosity the sorcerers sought to avoid.

By preaching celibacy publicly, the *nagual* put the men in a hopeless Catch-22. He mercilessly teased those who resisted attractive women, passing up chances for sex in order to be “a good warrior.” This conundrum must have been devastating. A favorite figure of fun was his long-dead grandfather, who had taught him as a boy, “You can’t fuck *all* the women in the world, but you can try!” Carlos claimed to find this philosophy abhorrent and pathetic, but by the end of his life it was clear that he had emulated it. It was Muni’s conviction that Carlos had seduced more women than anyone in history.

“Even Wilt Chamberlain?” I asked, skeptical.

“Ha!” she laughed, “Wilt had nothing on him!”

Men and women were consistently kicked out of lecture groups—and *always* out of the inner circle—if it was discovered that they had sex. One apprentice told Castaneda he frequented prostitutes and was apparently allowed this activity, since emotional ties were allegedly absent. Was all this contradiction born of a perverse *Jekyll/Hyde* contrariness in Carlos, or was it a teacher's technique? Or was it Carlos' greed and narcissism that allowed him to rationalize his own neediness and addiction to conquest, and to maintain power by preventing couples from forming? Florinda fed the fires of confusion (mine, in any case) by joking with me about the group's half dozen men. "What kind of real man would accept these conditions?" she sneered. "*Coño!* No balls!" Privately, guiltily, I never ceased to love the joys of courtship and wooing, while pretending to agree with my teachers, who insisted it was the scourge of humanity.

After some months as the *nagual's* lover it was impossible to deny that I was receiving a huge mixed message. On the one hand, Carlos had me vow never to allow a poisonous human male to enter my body. At the same time, he assured me that I was now a full-fledged witch who could heal men energetically with my "powerful *poto*," taking them to alternative realities. I felt alternately diminished and all-powerful, and mostly confused. Most difficult of all was the absolute ban on questions. I had to content myself with Carlos' admiring exclamations: "That, *mamita*, is a powerful *poto*. You have no conception of what you have become!"

More often than not, Carlos and I made love with such ardor that we wore one another out. These were the happiest moments in my nine years in the sorcerers' world. In spite of our personality conflicts, and the fact that I increasingly irritated him with my irreverence toward his cult-like rules and whims, we were marvelously matched sexually, and this formed a powerful bond between us. Perhaps nothing is more mysterious than sexual chemistry. Muni said that for four years she felt nothing as his lover. At last something shifted, and she felt a long-awaited pleasure. And then—her shoulders sagged with the painful memory—his passion for her declined. Florinda, however, claimed to have always been

perfectly content. Later I heard that some of his partners tried to close their eyes and think of Infinity, though other women were excited and amorous.

“*Qué bestia*, you *are* a beast! We’re going to kill each other!” Carlos would laugh as we collapsed into each other’s arms. He frequently carried on about our marrying in Las Vegas, “in one of those awful suites with a heart-shaped bathtub.” Later, when that seemed too much trouble, he suggested the Santa Monica Courthouse, but the ceremony never came to pass.

On one occasion he pulled me outside of the Sunday class, leaving Astrid to instruct the students in the magical movements. He addressed me with even more than his usual intensity. “*Ellicita*, I *saw stars*. Not just that silly expression—I *actually saw stars*.” His brown eyes shone. “I’m reeling! And something *happened* that *has never occurred before*, not in my whole life! Do you know how sturgeon lay eggs? They lay their roe in rows.... Well, that’s what I did—I laid eggs inside your womb, line after line of energetic eggs. They’re going to hatch for the rest of your life, releasing bursts of energy, of pure awareness—and your womb accepted the energy! I never knew this was possible! Now, you *are* my right hand, closer to me than anyone. I can barely stand up today! You knocked the hell out of me!” He buried his face in my hair. “I’ve never felt this close to anyone, *amor*. I am your husband, your *man*.”

Carlos disallowed me any sexual assertiveness. He attempted to maintain total control in his bedroom, as he did in every part of his life. (Muni told me that one of his closest students was almost expelled “for trying to get on top.” It wasn’t that Carlos didn’t enjoy a variety of positions, on the contrary—but they weren’t up to his partners to choose.) Once I had adjusted to his need for control, I delighted in his countless moods, never knowing which Carlos I would find when I entered his bedroom. There was the tender, quiet one, almost shy, who whispered Spanish endearments; the ardent lover who bit my neck and lips; the impatient *macho* who barely kissed me ... and the Carlos who stared into my eyes, the languid

hedonist who caressed me for hours, playful and fierce by turns, at last falling asleep in my arms.

After I had lived some months in Los Angeles, Carlos began to cut my hair, a sign of the deepest intimacy, because hair held a profound and special meaning for the sorcerers. Once he began cutting a disciple's hair, she was not permitted to have it cut elsewhere, or to *ever* ask him for a haircut. Carlos told me that hair contained our personal history, trapping it and "holding us back from flight." To trim it was to restore lightness and freedom. Each hair on my head was an antenna for perception and was more acute when short.

He claimed to have been a professional barber, and I believed it; his haircuts were superb. Sometimes women stopped me on the street and said, "Who does your hair? I've got to know!" Hardly a question I could answer.

The *nagual* had old-fashioned equipment—a vintage electric razor and a beloved pair of scissors. He would place a high stool in his small, rectangular bathroom. During the cut I stared at the stool and bucket he kept in his bathtub, wondering if he bathed other lovers in rosemary water, as he occasionally did me. Or, I gazed at the door-less shower, in which he stored his shoes in neat rows. There was an incense burner on the windowsill, and though I never smelled incense I always saw ashes.

Beside it was a big bowl of matchbooks. These, I assumed, were for practicing the match technique. This was a secret meditation taught to the inner circle. The practitioner lights a match and stares at the flame, imagining its light drawn into the third eye. Then, letting the flame burn up the match—this should not be practiced with wooden matches, which grow too hot—the very tip is swiftly dipped into a saucer of cold water and then taken between the fingers. As the flame flares its way up, the remaining energy is drawn in—again to the third eye—until the match burns out. The first flame was said to brighten the mind, the second to cleanse the heart. The greater goal was to bring inner silence.

During the haircut conversation was minimal; Carlos was concentrating intensely. It was marvelous to watch Carlos

concentrate—whether he cut hair, made love, or watched a movie, his attention was total.

Carlos changed my haircuts all the time. My favorite was practically a buzz cut, it was so short; but it made the most of my features. Once, however, when Carlos knew I had a business meeting to attend, he first gave me an antique pair of filigreed sapphire earrings—“to guard me during all business matters”—then barely trimmed my hair. His theory was that I would look professional, yet not threatening to men. I appreciated his strategy but was greatly disappointed—I would need a new haircut in a week, but now I was back at the end of the line.

Florinda was my mediator. She prodded, begged, and nagged for Carlos to cut my hair. Sometimes it grew so long and wild that it looked awful, and I slicked it down with handfuls of gel or tied it in a ponytail. Carlos would look at me appraisingly in class and say, “We’ve got to cut your hair, *chola*.” Months would pass. The shorter the cut, the happier I was, because it bought me months of freedom from anxiety about my wild mop of curls. “I’d love to get my hands on your hair!” Florinda lamented, “but he’d *know*, he’d *see*, even if it was just a tiny trim, and he’d never forgive me.” Once, desperate, I snuck off to a Sunday class member who was a hairdresser, pleading with him to give me the most innocuous possible trim. No one noticed. Finally I asked Astrid if I could slip out and get it cut. She was scandalized.

“*Don’t do it*—it would affect your energy! I would *never* let anyone but the *nagual* cut my hair! Besides, if he found out, he’d *never* cut it again!”

Carlos did not allow me to sweep up when he was done. There was something inexpressibly touching about watching him fastidiously sweeping my curls into a dustpan, refusing all my offers of help.

“Let me do it!” I smiled, reaching for the broom. “No, no, no, *preciosa*, you relax!” Carlos fussed with my shorn curls until the floor was perfectly neat. He examined his work with great pride, standing me in front of a mirror and holding up another to show the back.

“There, now you look like a real *duende*! Your hair grows so *fast, chica*! You look beautiful—now go home and rest, my baby.” He always saw me to the door, kissed me an ardent goodbye, and told me to call him the instant I got home, so he would know I was safe in my bed. He liked me to rest after making love and getting a haircut, since both of these events “take a lot of energy—being with the *nagual* is *very tiring*.”

Carlos spoke of *his* giving *me* energy, but he spoke just as often of *me* giving *him* energy, much in the Taoist tradition, wherein a woman’s fluids are thought to be rejuvenating to a man. Muni agreed that he was refueling with our energy, saying, “A million Taoists can’t be wrong!”

Sometimes after we had made love and slept, he fed me “magic food” to replenish me—a few bites of a roast he had cooked, some figs from his garden, a glass of vintage port. Sometimes he played me recordings of his favorite childhood “*canciones*,” or exquisite pieces of jazz from the ’30s and ’40s which he adored, saxophone pieces in particular.

Unrelated to my involvement with Carlos’ group, I once appeared on *The Phil Donahue Show* with two other biographers to discuss the morality of writing about the sex lives of the famous. I got lost in the crowd’s rage at another guest. My book, co-authored with my family, briefly described the *amours* of hundreds of deceased notables. The lynch mob was far too busy with the smarmy author who had written about Elvis; the Bing Crosby biographer also fell by the wayside.

But Carlos Castaneda as a sexual being is a subject entirely different from these others. He made sex an active part of his philosophy, writings, speeches, and interviews by actively preaching celibacy and writing about sex as a magical act. A meaningful discussion of the life, work, and impact of Castaneda is incomplete without an open discussion of his beliefs on the subject and his actions—if you believe, as he claimed to, that the only admirable people are those who walk their talk.

What influential twentieth-century figures stand in a similar historical position? Ayn Rand comes to mind, as does that king of

eccentrics, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (one of the inner circle, I later found out, had come from his harem). And perhaps Simone de Beauvoir, Brigham Young, and other sexual Utopians.

By closing off the doorway to sexual release—since masturbation was as forbidden as intercourse in the sorcerers' world—Carlos could observe, and presumably direct, the build-up of energy brought on by the practices of sublimation, recapitulation, and the Tensegrity passes.

I had no interest in this experiment, and for all our conflicts and increasing incompatibility, Carlos and I continued to have an intense, powerful attraction to one another. This lasted until my expulsion from the classes, which coincided with his physical deterioration. His diabetic condition was showing its telltale side effects on his virility. Once, unable to get an erection, a side effect of advanced diabetes, he raged, "It's your fault!"

The frequency of our conjugal visits varied wildly over the years, from gaps of months to several times a day, but it had settled in the final years to an average of once every ten days. It was difficult to pick up information about the other women's activities, but I was curious. Some women had stopped having sex with Carlos entirely. Claude appeared to be the favorite consort, the one he never tired of. Others were rumored to have had a brief initiation period, involving four "close encounters" (but wasn't three the magic number for Carlos and me?), and then sex was left alone. One woman and I chuckled over how much we enjoyed him. She had been in the group, drawn in by the books, for over a year without a clue that Carlos had sex. One day he called her over for a haircut, and instead plopped her in the rosemary bath and initiated sex. She was surprised, but willing.

Florinda told me not to be eager, not to care. Once she claimed he had stopped having sex with her for two years. I was greatly alarmed. "Why? What happened?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? I didn't care. Then one day he wanted to start doing it again."

She told me repeatedly that Carlos hadn't touched Taisha for over a decade. I was appalled. Only once did I see him embrace her

romantically, slipping his arms around her waist.

One of the qualities I most admired in Florinda was her ability speak frankly about her own flaws. (*Sometimes.*) Florinda told me that Taisha used to attempt to wheedle the truth out of her about her sexual relations with the *nagual*, asking, “So where did *you* do it? At UCLA?”

“Oh, yes,” Florinda lied. “He just threw me into the bushes.”

Flo shook her head sadly. “I was *mean*, Ellis—just plain mean. But one thing I am *not* is jealous.” (I had my doubts.) “Oh, I *used* to be! But I’m over all that now. I don’t care who else he’s with or how many—I just want my ten minutes! I’m greedy, that’s all.”

One group member told me that her childhood sexual abuse had been so extreme that she was frigid, a fact she stoically accepted. Evidently Castaneda had not “repaired her energy bar,” if orgasm—to say nothing of multiple orgasms—was the proof of cure. She cared more about his goodnight phone call than what they did in his bedroom, and she loved it most of all that he called her his daughter.

“Didn’t he call you his wife, too?” I asked. “That’s what he always calls me.”

“No, some of us are daughters, and some of us are wives,” she explained, as if reading text to a schoolchild.

“And sisters? He refers to the witches as sisters.”

“Yes. There are also sisters.”

In fact Carlos did love to call me his daughter, even though I was primarily one of the “wives”—evidently the roles ran together. He told me over and over, in a passionate whisper, “You’re *just* like my daughter, you’re interchangeable, I can’t tell your *poto* from hers. I *only* make love with two women—you and my little girl. I wouldn’t touch the rest of them!”

I reported this to Florinda in my early days of frantic confusion, believing every one of Carlos’ words with all the power my denial could muster. She rolled her eyes skyward with barely repressed disgust.

“Amy, these are just stories! That’s all they are! Stories for your delight. Just relax, *enjoy* yourself when you’re with him, and *ignore*

all the stories.”

“Well, if I’m like his daughter, at least I’m in the best club,” I said brightly, ignoring the gist of her remarks.

“Or the worst,” she scowled. Claude—the worst? What could she possibly mean?

When I was called to Carlos’ bed and he was cranky or nervous, I often broke the ice by murmuring, “Am I your daughter? Do you want to be with your daughter?”

That often cheered him, though sometimes any speech at all from me was forbidden. “Shut up,” he commanded, moving me into one position or another, whispering Spanish obscenities combined with sweet nothings, and telling me that I was soon to be impregnated with a Scout, who would “wash away everything human,” as Claude’s birth had done for Muni.

Other times he slyly commanded, “No one’s in the house—make all the noise you want to—make *lots* of noise!” And he would make curious animal noises and ask me to imitate them. On one occasion he stood and gyrated his hips in a circular fashion: this was a moment straight out of one of his books, in which the *nagual* Julian, one of don Juan’s two teachers, had erotically mesmerized a woman who was to become his apprentice by rotating his hips in this fashion. Carlos was fond of telling me that I had “the sensuality of the *nagual* Julian!” This was a considerable compliment, although deep inside I sensed that Carlos had a terrible Madonna/whore complex. He seemed to find my responsiveness irresistible, and yet it was grounds for punishment.

“You’re so sensual,” he said. “The worst thing I’ve ever seen! We’re going to kill each other at this rate, I swear it. You’re a terrible beast, *carajo*, you’re a little animal, a pixie, my *piernudas*!”

I would pull on my stockings, pretending to leave but intending to incite. Carlos would invariably caress my legs, saying, “Hey, don’t go! One more—your husband wants his wife again ... come here, *mi mujer*!”

I believe that our erotic passion, intellectual camaraderie, and our mutual psychological tendencies were the real glue between us. The aptly named force of animal magnetism linked us—Carlos often used to say, “The world should have followed Mesmer instead of Freud”—and without it I don’t think I would have weathered the sorcerers’ world at all. Later I investigated Mesmer’s life and learned that he had begun as a sincere teacher and ended as a corrupt guru. Carlos, I believe, was too literate not to have known this.

When Carlos wanted to play bust-the-ego between the sheets, he had a rich repertoire. The first big shocker for me was when he answered the telephone, shushed me, and talked while we were making love! The next stage was to talk on the phone *about* me at such a moment. On one memorable occasion he expatiated to Beulah about “Amy Wallace, the pornographer. Guido Manfred is another pornographer, they’re two peas in a pod, exactly alike, the pair of them!”

The third level was to pick up the telephone and get Claude—it was usually her, anyway—and extricate himself from my body, then drag the phone with its hundred-foot cord into the other room, where I could *just* hear him talking dirty to her. They stayed on the phone at least a quarter of an hour. The longest count I ever made, watching the illuminated clock face on his bedside table, was twenty-five minutes.

“That was my daughter,” he sometimes said, shuffling back in. Sometimes he lied and said, “That was my agent.” His agent Simon would have blushed to have known what I’d overheard.

Eventually he tired of these games with me; I suppose my shock level dropped off rapidly. He took to unplugging the phone and devoting himself completely to our pleasure. While exciting virgins and frigid women and lesbians delighted Carlos no end, he was ... *fluid*, to use his own magical word. My strong passion for him, a combination of tenderness and lust and eagerness and shyness, held his interest for a long time. It took countless trysts and years of building trust (such as trust was possible for him) to focus on pleasing himself.

The process of my discovery that I was part of a harem was, as I have remarked, very slow indeed. A piercing of my denial came when I called him from London, where I'd gone on a brief business trip. I heard a woman giggling in the background, and Carlos said, "Sssh! Sssh!" I thought I was going to be sick.

"What was *that*?" I angrily demanded.

"What was what?"

"I heard somebody."

"It's nothing. It's your ears." Another titter. I got off the phone and wept.

Later, Carlos grew more cruel. Once I called with something to discuss, and he said, "I can't talk now! I'm in the middle of *deep, very deep exploration!*" I heard a feminine giggle as he hung up the phone in my ear. One thing I never understood was his cruelty, and the women's laughter. I never made a peep when he took the phone. I didn't want to hurt them; I just wanted him to be a one-woman shaman.

For some readers, stories about Castaneda's sex life will be fascinating, for others offensive, for others titillating, and so on. I consider them essential to recount for several reasons. For one thing, I am often asked, "*Why did an intelligent woman like you stay in a situation that increasingly violated your sense of right and wrong?*"

There was the power of my passion for Carlos. Additionally, there was adventure, there were exotic magic rituals, there was the elated sense of being on the vanguard of evolution. There was the group pride in being "amoral"—morality was part of "the social order," and we were beyond that. Morality was for bored fucks. And though I didn't admit it to myself for years, there was a dark side to my upbringing which led me to expect bad treatment from a man. I grew up in a household of infidelity and dark secrets. And, as Kramer and Alstad explained, "Most often those who became involved ... could not conceive of themselves as subject to authoritarian manipulation. They saw themselves rather as true spiritual adventurers, unafraid to push against the boundaries of convention. For them, the very fact that they were capable of going beyond social constraints was a sign of liberation. (They were also

told this by the guru.) That many discontented and innovative people were unwittingly seduced into submission and conformity (visible only to others) indicates the depths of people's susceptibility to authoritarian control ... people who are being callously manipulated believe they are freer than anyone else ... the underlying message is that they are on the cutting edge of evolution."

Not until Carlos' final illness became grave, and our intimate meetings came to an end, was I willing to take an honest look at the world I'd so devoutly entered. Was there really "sex magic" in the strange, heavy feelings I experienced after our lovemaking? Were my momentary mental silences the proof of sex magic, and the hours of recapitulation—or a form of brainwashing and self-hypnosis? And why didn't these moments last? Was it a failure in my dedication, or had it to do with the techniques' inherent limitations? Or was "sex magic" quite simply passion itself? Is *any* sex magic greater than what two lovers, lost in one another, create, whether they be the *nagual* and his disciple, two teenagers in love, or a couple after fifty years of marriage? I sometimes find it remarkable that my deep feelings for Carlos persist so strongly. Despite what I've learned about the perversity of a sexual guru/disciple relationship, I love him still, and I continue to grieve him.

During Carlos' final weeks I listened to Muni taking a call from Florinda. Apparently someone luscious was serving as that day's bedwarmer, for Muni murmured, "Mmmm ... he deserves that flesh!"

I recalled the words of Kramer and Alstad: "Openly promiscuous gurus utilize their power to create what amounts to a harem for their pleasure ... sexual excursions are often masked by such words as teaching' or 'honoring' their disciples. 'Honoring' a disciple with sex is a form of unabashed dominance—how can a disciple refuse who is committed to serve and obey? One famous guru had a procurer. (This disciple, later sadly disillusioned, described herself as having been his pimp.) ... When asked how she justified this to herself, she said that at the time she thought of him as godlike and

‘God can do anything.... Also, he gave so much of himself he deserved whatever it took to make him happy.’ ”

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Projections of Betrayal

Man is quite insane. He wouldn't know how to create a maggot and he creates Gods by the dozen.

—Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*

I was on the phone with Flo chatting about movies and politics, when she abruptly asked, “Ellis, what’s wrong? I hear something in your voice.”

“What could be wrong? I don’t have a life, that’s all.”

The next day when she came over for her workout, she told me that she was upset. “I’m not enough for you? You ‘don’t have a life’? Ellis, how do you think that makes me feel?”

“Oh, Flo—no! That’s not it, not at all! I just meant a sex life. This has nothing to do with us.”

“Ooooooh ... oh, I see. Well, like I said before, masturbate. Believe me, darling, if I had a *pincho*, I’d fuck you myself.”

“Thanks for the offer. I hate masturbating.”

“Maybe Simon should move in!” She was puffing heavily on the Stairmaster. “Why not?” She managed a wicked grin between heavy breaths. “You would get along—a very nice pair.”

“Oh, nothing much would happen there.”

“And why not? A little pushy-pushy with Simon, mmm? Oh, I’ve trained him. He can be good. He was my experiment in taking a male and seeing what could be done. He would make a fine roommate. I wonder.... No. The *nagual* would never allow it.”

“At this stage in the game, Florinda, honestly—what are we waiting for? Why can’t any of us have sex?”

“Ellis, I’ve *told* you—these guys are *castrati*! What man with balls would join a group where they couldn’t have sex? It’s not manly! It takes a certain type of eunuch mentality. And look at the new one, Dexter! *Carajo*! You don’t want a wimp like that, do you? Find a man to fuck once in a while, some old friend in Berkeley, and *don’t ever talk about it*.”

This little speech really snapped my brain cells. She loved them with all that sorcerer’s affection, of course, but she didn’t respect them. I thought of her oft-repeated story of a favorite childhood game—playing with human figures in her toy farm, where she oversaw their mating and procreating, a goddess ruling their miniature destinies.

Florinda’s world of toys had grown to human proportions. Perverse, just a bit. But why not? The participants were willing; no one held them captive. But her suggestion was useless; I had no “fuck-buddies.” I was a romantic.

The following week Muni said, “So, I hear you’re feeling frustrated. How about Ridley? He has nice energy, and he won’t hurt you like those other mean guys. I’ve tried him, and he’s nice and normal and all the parts are in working order.”

Ridley was cute and smart and I considered him my friend. Once a month we snuck off for a secret curry dinner, trying all the Indian restaurants in town. Maybe now, I speculated, Muni hoped I would get off her back about Guido, and stop pestering her about my tortured libido—that would make her life easier.

I called Ridley that evening. He was watching TV and getting drunk with his roommate Joey.

“Evening, Ridley, it’s El. Want to come over and make love?”

“WHAT?”

“Muni’s idea. A sorcery plan, even better. You’re said to have healthy energy.”

“I’ll be right there.”

Who knew? Ridley was low on the totem pole in the alpha-male pecking order. Carlos and the witches and anyone else who felt like

kicking a handy dog made fun of him for not being manly. He turned out to be the first *macho* in the bunch.

I was swirling up margaritas in the blender when he knocked on the door. Ridley arrived charmingly dressed, and unabashedly romantic, pulling me to him for a delicious kiss. He kissed superbly. He helped me with the drinks, and we stood in the kitchen laughing over our bizarre encounter, arms around one another's waists.

The door burst open and Muni raced inside, her face a mask of panic. She must have forgotten the plan she had arranged; she seemed shocked to see us.

"You look like a tableau of *pure lust*," she said with Puritanical horror. It was an absurd observation. We looked like two friends playfully testing the waters of a budding attraction.

"What's wrong with you, Muni? Did something happen?"

"I just saw something ... horrible, horrible. I can't talk about it. I have to get in the pool and wash it off." She ran for the side door, pulling off her clothes on the way, grabbing for a towel, almost tripping in her haste.

I pushed Ridley into a chair in the dining room and put a cocktail in his hand. "Drink this. Stay here. I have to go find out what's going on."

I pulled off my clothes and ran outside, leaving Ridley looking slightly stunned.

Muni and I swam laps side by side, for perhaps ten minutes. At last she spoke. Her speech was disjointed, and I struggled to piece together her story.

"Tarina. Flo and I went to her apartment. That big, creepy place, those empty rooms.... It was the blood. We hadn't seen her in months. Florinda changed the bed. She ... she shits blood. Everywhere. The bed, it was—"

"Oh, Muni, my God. Is there anything I can do?"

"Florinda vomited in the car. She won't stop vomiting."

I'd had no idea Tarina was sick, and I didn't find out for many months what she had, or how she had nearly died after being expelled. Muni couldn't, or wouldn't, make sense. She lapsed back into a turbulent silence.

We climbed out of the pool, I wrapped her towel around her, and we went inside. Ridley looked scared, but the margarita had warmed the edges of his fear.

Muni became seductive. She sat on his lap, feeding him *hors d'oeuvres*. She let her towel slip, exposing a breast. I touched my toes to hers.

“Ellis!” she snapped, in a very angry rebuke. Evidently my playing footsie was not allowed. I had misunderstood her provocative behavior, forgotten that like Carlos, she needed to be completely in charge.

“Sorry, just playing.” I mumbled.

Ridley looked as if he’d gone to Mohammedan Heaven.

Muni restored her towel to her shoulder, removed herself from his lap, and went to dress. At the door, she said cheerfully, “Have a great night!”

I told Ridley she’d seen something upsetting, but that I could tell him the story later—perhaps it was time to retire to my *boudoir*?

Ridley was sweet and kind and passionate, and though he claimed to be inconceivably neurotic, he seemed eminently normal. He’d been celibate many years, except for a brief initiatory encounter with Muni, so this was something of an event. We opted for not spending the night together, and decided to repeat the happy experiment. We exchanged confidences—so often the result of sexual intimacy, trebled in our world of severe repression.

The next morning I received a raging tantrum of a telephone call from Muni. “Lust, pure *lust*! Disgusting! You decadent, greedy bitch!”

“Greedy about *Ridley*? What on earth are you talking about? This was your idea, remember? Yesterday, while I was giving you a massage?”

“Asshole! I didn’t say you could mention me!”

“WHAT? Are you kidding—I don’t believe I’m hearing this. He would never have come over if you hadn’t okayed it!”

“That’s what I mean! You used my name because you’re a greedy bitch!”

“I wouldn’t have done this if you hadn’t suggested it! What did you want me to do? Try to seduce him somehow? Whatever on earth for? He’s a terrific guy, but we never had romantic feelings for each other!”

“Your evil power pulled me to your house! And Carlos was sick, he might have died that night, and I was in your pool, all because your *lust* pulled me—you and I are joined, and you invoked my name! I’ve been at this for thirty years, and YOU don’t have a clue what you’re doing! You don’t know a thing, you’re dealing with forces you can’t even begin to understand, powerful *forces*.... I made it back just in time! The *nagual* could have died because of your lust! Now you have to wash all the sheets. Bathe in rosemary for three days. Energetically cleanse everything to remove me from what you’ve done! Never mention my name again in your ... *greedy lust*. You BETRAYED me—everybody betrays me! The betrayers are always the ones I let come the closest. We’re all betrayers—I should know—I’ve betrayed!”

“This is crazy. I would never have tried to seduce Ridley, much as I like him! What makes you think I would do that? ‘Greedy lust’? Hardly!”

“Because you’re impatient and GREEDY! GREEDY, GREEDY, GREEDY! You have to have everything you want, NOW. Instant gratification! And you sacrificed me, you used me, you don’t give a shit about ME! BETRAYER! You have no idea what a close call it was, how I was drawn to your house! And walking in on that scene of decadence, pure, unbridled lust, it was like something out of ... out of....” She sputtered for a metaphor.

“And Tarina?” I asked. “You wanted to jump in the pool!”

Efforts to make sense of her ramblings were useless. She ranted until she’d spent herself. This time I didn’t buy the sob story.

I considered believing the opposite of what I felt to be true. What if it was sorcery, a teaching lesson? Without Carlos at the helm, the “maneuver” was clumsy, leaving me unconvinced and unrepentant. Or maybe my very lack of remorse meant that I was making

“progress” and had finally graduated to the level that it ran off me like water off the proverbial duck’s back?

What did seem painfully true was Muni’s snapping. Her invocation of “powerful forces” was just the same old gibberish redux. When was she ever going to teach me about these forces, anyway? The carrot of the special teachings was forever out of reach. And why set me up to do sex magic in the first place, without full instruction? And if all this was merely to see if I would endure yet more insult—well, the timing was off. Carlos was dying, and I doubted that one more lesson in Ellis’ temper management could be front and center stage in Muni’s horrific daily life.

I dutifully washed the sheets and all the clothes I’d worn that night. I recapitulated the events of my sweet evening with Ridley, and took my three purgative rosemary baths. Lying in the fragrant water, I gave my first serious thought to Muni’s obsession with betrayal. It was an obsession. She appeared to live a paranoid life, with “betrayers” lurking in every corner. No one was to be trusted. She always amended her betrayal tirades with, “I should know, I’m a betrayer too.” But it seemed like a politically correct—a sorcerically correct—remark. Her focus was outward, on the treachery of everyone around her. I finally realized that this was an extreme projection. Surely she *had* been betrayed—she alluded to Carlos having betrayed her terribly, probably more terribly than I would ever know. But now I suspected that she too had done some serious betraying, because her flailing about blame was so wild and bizarre. I wondered what really happened between her and the nineteen-year-old Patty Parton, when the Blue Scout arrived and replaced her.

And what did it mean for the female *nagual* to have a confidante in a world where confidences were forbidden? What would happen when illness broke down the *nagual’s* authority?

A few times a week I snuck Chinese take-out to a dark alley behind Muni’s apartment. She insisted we hide lest Claude catch us and fly into a jealous fit. We sat in the dark car, steam from cartons of spring rolls misting the windows, joking and laughing.

“Why do you think Claude and Fifi are allowed such ill-manners?” I ventured.

“Oh, he loves their total selfishness and coldness—it excites him!”

She sounded depressingly like the author of *The Rules*. I pondered the mystery of Carlos’ tastes. My passion excited him, but their withholding did too. I was somewhere between the ice maidens and the drones. I put this puzzle to an friend outside the inner group, who was happy to have his freedom, yet close enough to have a ringside seat.

“Ah,” he laughed. “You’re always withholding *something* from Carlos, you just don’t seem to notice it. Didn’t you choose to buy your own house, instead of waiting for him to place you, as he did for *every one* of the other women? Didn’t you make him furious by taking your first apartment in L.A. without his permission, and without waiting for the roommate of his choice? Remember when you went to Europe when *you* decided to, and then he wouldn’t let you back into his bedroom until you’d searched for magical knives in England to ‘reopen the door’? And didn’t you tell me that you’ve refused to change your name legally to Ellis Finnegan?”

“You know that would be an idiotic move. ‘Amy Wallace’ has published thirteen books! Besides—”

“And how many times has Carlos told you to do it?”

“At least a dozen, but—”

“And you say ‘no.’ ”

“Of course. I told him it was out of the question.”

“I rest my case.”

Later in the week Ridley and I met again. We never spoke about Muni; we made love again and shared our stories, our doubts, our secret wounds and desires. Once more I saw the danger to Carlos’ authority if he allowed pairing within the group. Pairing inspires tenderness, and with pairing comes a potential strength to damage—even to topple—Carlos’ hierarchical structure.

Ridley and I shared a lovely, gentle evening, little guessing that our daily reality, tipsy as it was—but ours for all that—was about to come to a screaming end.

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Astrid Burns Her Past

*Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae farewell and then forever!*

—Robert Burns, “Ae Fond Kiss”

Muni’s and my roles were now fraying at the seams. Who was mother, who was daughter? Who was teacher, who was student? Were we friends, equals, witches? What did it mean for the female *nagual* to have a confidante in a world where confidantes were forbidden? What would happen when illness broke down the *nagual*’s authority?

The witches would never tell me exactly how sick Carlos was, but they now made frightening, ominous remarks, implying his impending death.

Florinda would say, “It’s *bad, Ellis, very bad*. It could be a year, or just a week.”

One day, leaving Carlos asleep, Muni made an anguished request. “Ellis, I don’t want to go with them. Only you and Guido are strong enough to hold me here, to be my anchors. You have the most life force, and I need your *chi*, I need *you*. You’re one of the pillars holding everything up. You keep me from going crazy, and if I don’t carry my end, everything will crash. So *you* have to keep acting as if they’re important! Keep giving everything to them—that protects me from going crazy, they’re sucking me dry.... Don’t let this all end up meaning nothing. Will you *intend* me to stay?”

I agreed, setting my *intent* as Carlos had taught me. Alone, I spoke out loud to the Spirit, telling it to keep the *nagual* woman on Earth, to add my weight to her choice. I knew I was defying Florinda's wishes, and this frightened me—I would be unable to please my warring parents. Florinda Donner was fickle, and I was risking losing her love. Yet she hadn't chosen to take me with her, into life or death, and my survival instincts prevailed. Muni was here, alone, and not going to abandon me. As Zuna put it, "If Muni goes, it will really be head-in-the-oven time." Days after Muni's plea, Florinda called, more intense and harried than ever.

"Can Astrid come over and burn her papers in your fireplace?"

"Of course."

This was ominous. My fears were confirmed when Astrid arrived in minutes. "It takes so long with the shredder," she explained. "Thank you so much." She had a wistful look in her eyes I'd never seen in them before, her grim sense of duty replaced by a dreamy nostalgia.

When I saw that she had only one bag, I took her to the small fireplace in my bedroom. As I helped her toss the papers into the flames, I saw galleys for Carlos' books being burned, and Astrid's personal papers—poetry, drawings, and a diary.

"These were for my recapitulation," she explained. I saw the words burning.... "I'm pregnant again, how could I let this happen? What will I do? I want to kill myself ... another abortion?"

"Astrid, how do you feel about what's happening now?"

"I know exactly what to do." She was looking at me with her clear, open gaze. "If I don't go with him, I'll do what I have to do. It's too late for you and me to remain in the world—I think you know exactly what I mean. It's been too late for both of us for a long time."

"Well ... Muni asked Guido and me to help her stay. I gave my word, Astrid."

She nodded, understanding. "Yes, I heard something about that. The *nagual* doesn't care one way or another, and Taisha is fine about it. But Florinda is upset. She's not taking it well, she wants Muni to leave."

Astrid watched the subsiding flames. “I don’t mind,” she said. “But I’m worried that there will be suicides, you know? Among us, maybe even out there, among them.... We told the *nagual* we were all very disturbed about that. He said ‘What?!’ As if he didn’t know what we were talking about!”

Our eyes met in mutual disbelief. “So, we asked him if he wanted the seminars to continue.... He said, ‘I don’t give a shit—if they want to have them, fine; otherwise, forget about it. It doesn’t make any difference to me.’ ” Astrid shook her head.

“We convinced him that he should give them something to do. Otherwise ... they actually might.... So he dictated directions—he gave tasks to Nancy and Patsy, Zuna and Poona, telling them to keep the seminars going. But he doesn’t care about Cleargreen or the seminars. So Muni chose Poona to be president of Cleargreen. Sonia is going to tell her.”

“That’s good, I suppose.”

Astrid’s bag of papers was empty.

“What else would they all do? I’m surprised he didn’t foresee how big a risk this is. Well, I have to go—thank you *so, so much*, Ellis. My elf! I love you.”

“I love you, Astrid.”

I saw her to the door. She wrapped her muscular arms around me and lifted me up like a little girl, as she had done so many times over the years. I was tiny in her embrace, gaily airborne. “My little elf!” she laughed, radiant. Astrid’s hugs were famous among us for their joy and vitality. My body memorized her exuberant embrace, her clean, fresh scent. I knew it was our last hug. So did she. As she walked out the door, smiling, our eyes met for a long, long time.

The *Nagual*'s Final Months

*The cradle rocks above an abyss, and
sense tells us that our existence is but
a brief crack of light between two
eternities of darkness.*

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*

“Ellis, where are you?” Muni called out, following me around the house wrapped in a dripping towel.

“Where *are* you?!” she called plaintively. “I’m getting just as bad as the *nagual*. He can’t be alone for a minute.”

It reminded me of a crack Florinda had recently made about Carlos. “He’s ‘Little Raven!’” she had snapped.

“What does that mean?”

“He needs constant attention, he can’t stand it when I leave, he’s driving me crazy with his neediness! He won’t *ever* be alone—that’s ‘Little Raven!’ ”

It was as I suspected—Carlos was dying as he had lived, confused by a double standard. As he had told us daily, we die alone—and though he rejected the notion of cushioning the anguish and fright of death with the company of those we love, he chose companionship. His beautiful writings about a solo death have given courage to many, but even the *nagual* wanted his “family” by his side when at last he faced “the distinguished thing.” I tried not to

dwell on what his thoughts must be, knowing that he wouldn't fulfill his dream and would die like a human being.

His doctor told me that at one stage that she suggested a liver transplant. As she spoke of his cancer he began to sing opera, stopping only to exhort her, "Don't *name* it; don't call it something! That pins it down!" Muni insisted that he didn't have cancer, and I didn't believe her. When she told me he had been prescribed Flagyl, I thought of AIDS, of course—all those decades of unprotected sex. Apparently he had thrown the bottle of Flagyl across the room after one day. When I pressed her about whether he had hepatitis as well as cancer, she said, "I can't tell you much now; maybe someday. But my first thought was ... of others. I *assure* you he died of a noncommunicable liver disease." Filling out the death certificate, she performed her medical duties precisely; and in a moment of wistful homage gave Castaneda's profession as "high school teacher," because he once had told her that was what he'd truly longed to be.

There was conflict over his treatment. Muni used acupuncture until he became too sensitive for the needles, then she blew on the points. The doctor prescribed Western treatment. Frustrated and impotent, Florinda blamed Muni for not curing him. The doctor told me she blamed herself—if only she'd stayed in Los Angeles when he'd first asked her to.... I told her such self-blame was absurd. She couldn't possibly have saved him, especially if he wouldn't adhere to her treatment plan. Slowly, he became intolerant to most foods. It was discovered that he could tolerate goat broth, and Simon purchased a freezer full of organic goat meat, preparing the broth.

During his final months, the household adhered to a morning newspaper ritual, which was described to me by both Florinda and Muni. They said the tension of the event was nearly intolerable.

Carlos gathered around him the three witches, as well as Astrid and Sonia. Florinda read headline stories from the *L.A. Times* and *The New York Times*. That didn't sound so bad ... if that had been all of it. Speaking was not permitted. The women were required to sit

absolutely still (which hurt Muni's back); and Carlos began the day by going around the circle, giving a crushing critique to each person, often reducing them to tears they fought to hold back.

During this period the house was being watched on weekends by a pair of harmless stalkers, a couple who had been expelled from night classes without explanation. They had become obsessed with learning if Carlos Castaneda practiced what he preached. If he was going to sorcerically burn, they intended to capture the human firecracker on film. They had lived according to his principles, and their need to know was great. They videotaped Carlos and many of us from their car; absconded with the weekend garbage from house and office, and methodically arrived at the conclusion that the books were myth, and their author was lying about his adherence to much of the system he preached.

They knew all about Carlos' cappuccinos, hypodermic needles, and empty insulin bottles. The angry scenes Muni described each morning are typical of severe diabetes, especially when sugar and coffee continue to be dietary staples. Anger is also a symptom of liver cancer. But who could begrudge someone that ill his pleasures?

When he could muster the energy, Carlos dictated to Zuna. Muni told me of notes for an "appalling" novel about his supposed stint as an assassin for the CIA in Spain. She found these ravings horrific. "They're completely *repellant*, Ellis—he was deranged by then, out of his mind when he dictated those sick stories ... they're so sick they'll *NEVER* see the light of day, I'll see to that. I'm going to destroy the pages."

I asked her about it months later, quoting her remarks, wondering what she had done. She was startled, her face frozen in the ambushed animal look I now knew so well. She had completely forgotten her words.

"What are you talking about? It's a great book, it's *brilliant*."

And that was the last I heard of it.

Before full dementia sent in, Carlos set most of the group, myself excepted (and as usual, I found out) on the biggest scavenger hunt to date. He decided to buy an enormous boat to carry a huge group to sea, where they would live for an unnamed period. Taisha and

Sonia traveled to Florida to examine a potential purchase. Nearly everyone was engaged in this grandiose plan. When Muni stored her books in my garage, then told me to take any I wanted, I found pamphlets with such riveting titles as “The Ocean—Nature’s Untapped Eden,” “Surviving At Sea,” and the irresistible “Farming Shark Cartilage—A Cure For Cancer?” Infinitely more shocking to me were the stacks of books teaching the reader how to hypnotize crowds. She had used these techniques on stage and in Tula as “the Death Defier,” mesmerizing the chosen with “the Eye.”

As for the boat caper, I felt both excluded and relieved. It was more than a little Jim Jones-ish. Perhaps Carlos had wished to die in international waters, to leave his mystique intact. Without a body, after all, true believers could cling to the dream that he had burned.

Between sleeping and dictating, and eating when he could, Carlos watched TV or videos. He had long adored war movies, and now demanded them exclusively. It was becoming difficult for his aides to find videos he hadn’t seen. Muni was frequently sent on the war movie search. It was a tough detail, and she eased the pressure by occasionally bringing her new, young lover along, so they could kiss and play in the aisles.

She was desperate to find some cheer, some relief from the pain all around her. Joey was *fun*. He was Latin-born, and totally California-ized—he liked girls and pop music and Castaneda books and the beach. He was Guido’s opposite, to say nothing of the *nagual*. Once Joey had asked her, ingenuously, “Why does everything always have to be so *heavy* around here all the time? Why can’t we just have more fun?”

Not everyone in the group knew that Carlos had cancer. Some knew, some suspected, others found out three months after his death when obituaries finally appeared. Carlos’ obsession with “the Big C,” his insistence that its victims were at fault, had upset me for years. I did not think my father was to blame for his terrible suffering. In Carlos’ case the irony was tragic. While despising his association with everything New Age, Carlos embraced one of its most odious beliefs.

Castaneda attributed all cancer to tension. Convinced that Tensegrity was the cure, he lamented not having instructed my father; I believe he spoke in all sincerity. Carlos swore that should he ever contract “the Big C” he would blow out his brains. Perhaps he discovered how hard it must be to pull the trigger when a breath of life remains.

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Last Visits with My Husband

For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

—Matthew, 10:35-37

During the end of Carlos' life I was with the witches daily, but rarely saw him. Our smattered visits were pattern-less and surreal. The last time we made love was more than a year before he died. I remember it as especially passionate and frenzied, one of those occasions in which we swore we were going to kill each other. Our long-standing joke had me yanking on clothes and pretending to run, lest we make love again. Usually he caught me, lovingly pulling me into his arms. That night I said, "I'm getting out of here! We've really done it this time!" He laughed wearily and struggled out of bed. We were both teetering. He saw me to the door as always, insisting on our goodnight phone call. By the time I called five minutes later he was asleep, answering dreamily, "Is that you, *nena*? Go to sleep ... right now...."

One night, a few weeks previous, I had irritated the increasingly fragile Carlos. I believe I spoke before having been spoken to, or showed too much amorous enthusiasm at the wrong moment, which occasionally sent the *nagual* on a downward spiral into prudishness. Carlos flew into a rage and ordered me to leave his bedroom. I did something unprecedented. I folded my arms and refused to leave. I

knew I was taking a terrible risk—even the *nagual* woman had left when he threw her out at 3 A.M., for not being in control of her sleep!

But I knew that if I left now, months might go by before he allowed me to return—months I would spend in the back corner of class, crying; months with my wild mop of curls as a constant reminder of Coventry, as I replayed the scene of my disgrace and made repeated attempts to be invited back. Months of new punishments ... the thought of it made me want to curl up and die.

One particularly vitriolic attack concerned my noxious similarity to Guido Manfred, a rant conducted point by point, for example, “You both think you’re so hip, but you’re middle-aged! Worst of all you’re *pornographers, pornographers!*”

As he continued, I sat there and took it, mute, my arms still crossed, showing no sign of either leaving or arguing. When Carlos’ rage was spent, he said, “See, am I right?”

I nodded. He proceeded to kiss me as if nothing had happened, we made love, and the matter was dropped. It was one of the infrequent occasions when Carlos asked me to spend the night curled up in his arms. Years later I had a profound realization: point by point. Carlos might have been describing himself.

One night after making love Carlos invited me to listen to some of his favorite love songs by *Boule de Nève* (Snowball), a beloved Argentinean songwriter, singer, and pianist. (Another favorite was Javier Solis.) He translated one heartbreaking song for me—for Carlos loved heartbreaking songs. The only words I now remember are, “Take me to the edge of pain ... you have taken me, at last, to the edge of pain.” I cried openly; the man’s music and voice were as haunting as his lyrics. Carlos too was crying. He took me by the hand and led me back into his bedroom.

Another of our last meetings was inexplicably bizarre, even in the context of Castaneda’s surreal life. This time, after making love, Carlos put on a video. It was cued-up to someplace in the middle, and immediately revealed itself to be a ’40s drama. Carlos being Carlos, and the rules being the rules, I knew that I couldn’t ask what

the title was, or who the actors and actresses were, since I didn't recognize them. Only "the cad" looked vaguely familiar—a better-looking Jimmy Cagney type. Guido procured many of Carlos' arcane videos, but he wouldn't have told me what they were.

There is a peculiar prelude to this story: At a number of seminars, Carlos and Muni had spoken of "spinning in and out of other worlds together." Apparently they were living double lives on another plane, and were not in full control of their arrivals and departures. In this altered life (it always made me think of the Bizarro World of Superman Comics), Muni was married to the '40s actor Gerald Mohr, and they had a daughter. Castaneda was "Shorty," her lover who hid in the closet. *Dreaming* together, they repeatedly found themselves in Gerald Mohr-world (Mohr played a gangster in a large number of radio plays and B-movies.) In order to escape detection by the husband—who would boom out at Carol, "Is *SHORTY* still here?"—or worse still, become permanently stuck in this B-movie universe, Carlos would whisper, "Spin, Tiggs, spin!! Spin!!! Spin as fast as you can!!" and they would find themselves awake and naked in Carlos' bed in Westwood.

To return to the night of Carlos' video screening: We sat on the couch—Carlos' living room was furnished only with a couch, a chair, a TV, a CD player and an immaculately kept drawer of CDs—and began to watch the following scene unfold: An upstanding young man was saying goodbye to his slim, glamorous, high-strung fiancée. She bore a great resemblance to Claude, and I had never seen her or any of the players before.

Alone in her apartment, the young woman appears distraught—within seconds there is a knock on the door. A young, fast-talking gangster-type, clearly her illicit lover, enters and grabs her. She weeps, she protests, she's so *very* bad—and he tells her, "You're a tramp, and you know it; you'll never be any good—you're rotten to the core, just like me!"

He pummels her for a time with this talk, until their overheated nerves drive them onto the bed, where she struggles with her purity, but loses it again. (Of course, this being the 1940s, we don't *witness* her tragic submission, which is far more exciting.) The bad boy

buttons up his shirt, puts on jacket and hat, straightens his tie, and heads for the door. One foot outside the threshold of his mistress' room, he says in a throaty whisper, "Say, baby, wouldn't it be something if *we actually fell in love?*" With a taunting grin, he leaves.

I asked to see it again. Carlos replayed it, but wouldn't let me watch any more of the movie, promising to show me the rest another time. Carlos turned to me, tears in his eyes, and whispered, "How about that, *amor*—'*Wouldn't it be something, baby—if WE actually fell in love?*' "

I couldn't decipher what it meant to Carlos. Perhaps it was the obvious, painful and poignant at the end of his life—the cynical seducer who at last discovers his heart and its longings—and this is his only way of giving it voice?

I remained quiet, until Carlos queried aggressively, "What did you think of the girl? What did you *see?*"

"She looks astonishingly like Claude."

"No, no, no! She doesn't *look* like my daughter, she *is* her!" He was getting angry. "She **IS** CLAUDINE!"

"Yes, she is. She's Claude. That's incredible. Incredible!"

He seemed satisfied by this, and the next evening in class, he provoked the group by informing them, "Ellis and I saw something together, didn't we? Something *you would never believe.*" He gave me a prolonged, conspiratorial look.

After the Fake Prozac Accusation, we never made love again. By this time, however, Carlos' health was rapidly declining. His diabetes had long been showing its telltale signs on his virility. Florinda hinted that between the advancing diabetes and his developing liver cancer (although she never said "cancer"), he was no longer having sex.

We had several lunches, the last with Florinda. Carlos appeared to be experiencing dementia. He wanted me to write on my napkin a series of insulting things to say to my brother, "to break my last family ties." He called later that evening to repeat his demands, and knowing that I would never do it but would lie to please him, he

demanded I bring a witness. He had me over a barrel. Strangest of all, he'd always been very fond of David. Was he seeking an ironclad reason to banish me?

After the phone call I burst into tears, huddled up in a ball in the bathroom. Collecting myself, I called Florinda for help, explaining the absurdity and calculated destructiveness of the *nagual's* demand. She understood immediately, saying, "Wait! Wait right there! I'll call you back in five minutes!"

I sat there sniffing; I remember how like a child I felt—completely helpless, with my fate in the hands of these two married adults. It was an inversion of my childhood: now I ran to my "good mother" to save me from my bad father.

In precisely five minutes (sometimes I loved the German in Florinda) the phone rang. "He understands. He called it off. I told him you two had to manage an estate together for the rest of your lives. He didn't understand how entwined your business was." I thanked her and wiped away my tears. Not understand? Carlos was clearly losing his memory, and his rages were worse than ever before.

Years later I ran into Bill Thompson, a quiet and mild-mannered man who had attended the evening classes periodically for some years. He and his deceased wife were Florinda's friends, and he was one of a few people who weren't "in" the group, but whom she loyally invited. It appeared that I was one of the few classmates who chatted with Bill. When I encountered him at a martial arts class a year after Carlos' death, I asked him why he had stopped attending toward the end.

"Carlos was changing," Bill said. "He'd always been hard on the women, but it was turning into something else, something *terribly* abusive. I couldn't stand to watch it. I believe it was his illness."

Two more visits to Carlos' house stand out in my memory. On the first occasion, perhaps eight months before Carlos' death, Florinda invited me over to do Tensegrity. A new series was ongoing, performed lying down. Some were strenuous movements of the legs

and abdomen. I was given a mat and placed next to Florinda. We were in a circle: Carlos was beside her, then Nancy, and finally Candice. Nancy was shyly welcoming, Candice standoffish, a typical twelve-year-old.

Carlos announced, “Normally we do these movements in the nude, but since Ellis is our guest today, we won’t make you take your clothes off.” He nodded at me. I shrugged, as if to say I would have been happy enough to disrobe. We began.

Ten minutes into the exercise, I let out a tiny fart. Florinda stage-whispered, “No farting! That will cost you the chance to come back!”

We proceeded in silence for ten minutes more, when Carlos unzipped his pants and took out his penis.

“This is for excitement!” he said, wiggling it around and looking at me.

I laughed, Florinda laughed and rolled her eyes, Nancy gave a maidenly giggle, and Candice giggled, covering her mouth. Evidently I passed whatever the test was, for Carlos placed his member back into his pants, zipped up, and we continued for another quarter of an hour. Carlos announced we were finished and said, “Okay then, tomorrow same time?”

Everyone nodded. I didn’t know what to do. Carlos then remembered my presence and looked sincerely embarrassed. He made a fuss of rolling up his mat and ignoring me.

I later found out that these meetings occurred regularly, sometimes in the nude. I was never invited back. I asked Florinda, “So was it the fart?”

“Oh Ellis! Don’t be ridiculous!”

I never found out why I wasn’t invited back. And I was left to speculate about the propriety—it seemed an odd word in the sorcerers’ world—the *appropriateness*, then, of Carlos waving his penis about in front of a twelve-year-old girl whom he regularly kissed and cuddled as if she were a favorite daughter. Had we all been exercising in the nude, like a bunch of Swedes, it would still have been odd, but probably less so. Something felt wrong. I

thought Carlos was taking his “Freud Family” fantasy just a little too far, and I hoped it went no farther than that.

My final visit was entirely different. Carlos called to invite me over for one of his special desserts, made from a recipe don Juan had given him. The apparent ingredients were yogurt, honey, and fruit. Taisha and Florinda let me into Carlos’ living room (this was next to his bedroom and had a compact, immaculate kitchen). There was a sepulchral silence in the air. Carlos did not emerge. Finally Astrid entered from the house, bearing a platter with four small glass bowls. We sat on the floor to eat. There was a distinct religiosity to the event; and it was obvious we were not to speak. The women wore deeply reverent expressions.

I took a spoonful of the creamy pudding swirled with fruit. It was superb, ambrosial, entirely unlike any yogurt I had tasted. Its texture was sensuous with a rich vanilla undertone; sweet, elusive, tropical tastes, and the faintest suggestion of honey.

I broke the silence. “This is *incredible*. I thought it would be a mere yogurt and honey custard!”

“*Nothing* is *mere* in this house,” Taisha rebuked. We finished in silence. Astrid was all smiles when I asked for a second bowl, but said there was no more to be had.

The moment I got home, I called Carlos to rave about the dessert. He sounded every bit the proud chef. “Ah, *mi corazón*, you liked it! Isn’t it something *exquisite*? I’m going to make all kinds of desserts for you, to make you adorably plump—there’s a special recipe for strawberries with cream, from don Juan—with the *subtlest* spices—and a custard just for you.... I’ll have you over every night for a new magical dessert!”

I never again went inside the house on Pandora while Carlos was alive. All the world’s evils escaped the mythic box, but if memory serves, Hope remained. Either I was a complete moron or, as Carlos fondly said, the most ruthless fighter he had ever known. Hope always remained.

A Hummingbird's Goodbye

I can't hear your voice. I can smell you and taste your breath.

I can feel you. You're brushing against me.

You're gone and I want more of you.

—James Ellroy, *My Dark Places*

One day Simon casually mentioned that Florinda had asked him to “join them.” He spoke as though it were a dinner invitation. Simon and I had made a pact to confide, and to support one another during these agonizing weeks. I pressed him to tell me exactly what he thought this invitation meant.

“I’m frightened, Simon—am I going to lose you?”

“I don’t know. And I couldn’t ask. I’m just ... waiting.”

I pushed harder, but he swore they never discussed the “invitation” again. He said it “was somehow dropped” and he was afraid to bring it up.

I told him that Muni claimed that Florinda, Taisha, Astrid and Sonia had all acquired guns. Typically, she refused to give any details.

Simon was first astounded, then furiously sputtered: “I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT!”

He was clearly fragile; I gingerly tried to break the news. “I talked to Astrid, Simon—you know what she’s always said—she even said it in front of crowds. I think they’re going away to commit suicide. Florinda keeps talking to me about ‘the Trigger Effect,’ and I’ve heard Sonia talk about ‘the Trigger Event.’ I even heard from Muni

that the phrase is going into the *nagual's* will—‘should the Triggering Event take place, the following monies will go to so-and-so.’ And he’s cut Beulah out of the will completely, and—”

“WHAT? GUNS!?” He was having none of my awkward attempts to sugarcoat the horror. “That’s unbelievable, it’s impossible! Suicide? Suicide, Ellis? I CANNOT accept that. I refuse to believe that—THAT IS NOT POSSIBLE!”

“But Simon—she’s asked you to go! What do you think that means? Would you do it, would you kill yourself? I’m scared, please tell me the truth—I want to know if you’d commit suicide if they asked you to.”

“I don’t know, I ... just can’t imagine it. El, if they go poof! in front of me, and burn like they’ve always said, that’s one thing—but *guns*—I don’t know.”

I brought it up with him the next day, frantic, asking him again to tell me if he would join a suicide pact. He was evasive, finally refusing to discuss it.

Meanwhile, Florinda was directing him as he worked with the rest of the Elements—except Guido, who was deeply immersed in the production of his new film.

All the other men were building, remodeling, pulling up nearly everything the *nagual* had created, the tiles he had laid, the trees he had planted. Claude and Fifi arrived to plant moss, infuriating Florinda.

“Moss! At a time like this? Who’s going to take care of it?! I’ll wind up watering that shit—Claude always starts these stupid projects and never finishes them! MOSS!”

She increasingly took out her temper on Simon. Not only was she worn out in every way, but she had hit full menopause. No doubt the severity of the stress she was under and her poor diet made it worse. I baked her a flaxseed cereal daily, which helped control her estrogen balance, but it wasn’t enough to stop the hot flashes and the rages.

One day she pulled down her pants and showed me an estrogen patch, since the pills prescribed by Carlos’ doctor Angelica hadn’t worked.

In this time of crisis, the doctor, who had been in and out of the group, was now taken back into the fold. I had grown quite fond of her, when she was expelled for owning a double bed. But now the sorcerers needed her, and they were willing to overlook this affront to their principles.

I remembered the women's workshop when Florinda told the crowd that witches didn't experience menopause, and Tensegrity practice would banish all symptoms. The attendees were advised never to use hormones. To need them was a sign that a woman was *not* a diligent sorceress. I thought they owed the audience a public apology, but I kept my mouth shut. As the days passed, Florinda ate less and less. She only wanted her cereal, her morning egg, her chocolate, and her Coca-Cola. Sometimes I stuffed a few slices of prosciutto down her. When I could afford it I bought her caviar, her favorite treat—"all these little eggs have so much *chi!*" she exclaimed. Her totem animals were the frog and the hummingbird—and now the hummingbird was racing so fast it was frightening.

One day she blew up at Simon with a terrible ferocity as he worked in her garden. Apparently she took directions from Carlos, now so ill he no longer left his room, and relayed them to Simon. On this grim day, Simon appeared with an avocado tree that Carlos had suddenly requested. It had taken days of labor and stress to find the proper tree. I knew the day for the planting had arrived, and I waited anxiously to hear the results.

When Simon finally called he was devastated, near tears.

"Ellis, he wanted it near a certain wall—but the wall *does not exist*. I mean, I couldn't see it! Florinda told me I was an asshole, that it *was there*, but ... it *wasn't* there, Ellis! I swear to you—*there was no wall*."

I hurried to Simon, and found him numb with hurt and exhaustion. Florinda had called him overbearing, abusing him for his bossiness toward the other men—and *worst of all*, his dense inability to see the wall. He seemed completely crushed. I tried with everything I had to comfort him—but when I touched his shoulders to massage him, he froze. I had never felt such tension. He was so racked with grief and self-blame that I was genuinely frightened.

Throughout the chaos, Florinda and I continued our daily ritual. I read to her from *The New Yorker* while she worked out on my Stairmaster. I gave her fresh-baked cereal and listened as she dropped mysterious bits of information.

“It’s bad, Ellis,” she would say, “really bad. He could go any time now. I think it has something to do with the Death Defier.” Or, “He’s never been the same since you poisoned him, Ellis.” Or, “I think it’s a virus he picked up in Mexico.”

All the while, I was finishing my second novel, with Florinda’s steady encouragement. It was a thoroughly disguised love letter to Carlos, and had taken me years to complete. I was stung by Carlos repeatedly calling me “a pornographer,” and I censored my love scenes. For all that, it contained writing that I was truly proud of—my best, I believed—and I wished that Florinda, with her refined literary eye, would read it. But I couldn’t ask her to, not now. Extending a loving hand to me, she insisted upon reading the completed manuscript.

“Flo, I can’t bother you with it now, it’s too much to ask!”

“No, no, Ellis! I *want* to read it, I *have to*. Besides, it will help me take my mind off ... *this*. Please!”

I gave her the book. She devoured it then and called, vibrant with excitement. “Ellis, some sections need work, but you have *It*. You do! I know! Put it away for a little while, then do a rewrite.” She proceeded to give me a cogent critique. I was hugely honored—if I trusted anyone’s literary taste in the group, it was Flo’s. It seemed her pleasure and excitement put a corner of her mind at rest, as if finally she knew she could leave a beloved child to survive safely, alone.



A parting gift from Florinda—a Cloisonné jar that had been passed from nagual to nagual, and a jade frog, one of Florinda's totem animals.

She then brought me a beautiful Cloisonné jar, which she said had belonged to don Juan's partner, her mentor Big Florinda. She described herself wondering aloud who to give it to, and Carlos had said, "Why Ellis, of course!"

I called to thank him. He sounded proud, full of delight. "If there ever was an heirloom from the sorcerers, *this* is it!"

Next Florinda produced an exquisite, miniature china bowl, "for keeping a pair of earrings." She said it had belonged to the *nagual* Lujan, the sorcerer from China who had brought Tensegrity to the lineage, and had been with them for generations. The cup's outside was Delft, while the inside bore Chinese characters, "symbolizing the meeting of East and West." She returned a custom-made filing cabinet I had ordered for her, a copy of mine she had admired. She insisted on paying for it, and said, avoiding my eyes, "This will serve as an anchor for me to you, wherever I am—to you, and to this house."

Photo by Gerard Barbier



A gift from Florinda— an amethyst pendant set in gold.

One day, after a quarrel on the phone that left both of us edgy and frayed, she arrived with one of her most precious possessions. It was an extraordinary pendant that she joked was “shaped like a cowbell.” It held an enormous amethyst set in gold. “Look, it’s a beautiful eye,” she said, pointing to three oval pieces of jade set into triangular sides. Strange, rune-like lines were engraved in the gold.

“Don’t wear it or you’ll look like a cow—besides, it’s too big for you.”

“Flo, I’ve seen you wear it, and you’re smaller than—”

“But you can’t. I don’t want Fifi or Claude to see you have it—they’ll get jealous. I don’t want *anyone* to see that you have it; they’ll be so jealous! Everyone already knows you’re my favorite. Just enjoy it.”

She opened the refrigerator door to rummage for a drink. I blocked her way, shaking from the built-up strain. “Florinda, you’re leaving—and you haven’t fucking asked me to go with you!”

“There is no ‘asking to go’—there’s a pull, and either it comes or it doesn’t.”

“Bullshit. You asked Simon.”

She ignored me, grabbed a Coke, and turned brusquely to the door.

“Why do you think I gave you that amulet? To keep us connected—after all—*I know who made it!*”

When she was gone I studied the pendant. I knew that despite all Carlos’ wild tales, his real father was a jeweler in Peru, and Carlos hadn’t left home until he was twenty-five. Had he made it for his beloved hummingbird? I stared into its gleaming eye, then put it on beneath my clothes to keep Florinda beside my heart.

I don’t remember exactly the last time I saw her; it was the next day, or the one after. We were talking about sex in our usual *risqué* manner, while she vigorously exercised. Then I read aloud, and fed her a bit of smoked salmon.

My last memory of her is seeing her to the patio gate, as I did every day. She was so Germanic she had trained me to sweep up fallen leaves before her arrival; my patio was pristine under her regime. We kissed and waved goodbye, but when I suddenly turned to look back at her—something I never did—she was standing still and watching me, a hummingbird pausing, her bright eyes sparkling, as if to memorize me forever.

Taisha's Farewell

Truth is rarely pure, and rarely simple.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The weeks before Carlos' death brought Taisha and me together in a series of bizarre coincidences. We kept running into each other, at grocery stores, restaurants, even on the street. In a world ruled by omens, we were both struck by the frequency of our accidental encounters. Their climax occurred a week before Carlos' death.

Muni was renting videos for the *nagual* daily; he lay on his couch and watched his war movies, surrounded by the women he felt closest to. One day Muni asked me to return one to a local video store I'd never been to. It was in a small, run-down strip mall, and as I stepped out of the shop I saw Taisha in an adjacent coffee shop, bleak and depressing. I peeked in, not certain if I would be welcome.

She waved and beckoned me in.

"Ellis! It's incredible that we're meeting *again!* Would you like a cappuccino and a pastry? I just got mine."

I joined her, and the talk swiftly grew serious. "Ellis, how much do you know?"

"Um ... I don't know *everything*, but I know *a lot*. A lot about the money."

She nodded, tears filling her eyes, and said, "I'd like to make a confession about something."

“Taisha, I would too. There’s something I want to get off my chest. Go ahead.”

Taisha lowered her eyes, and the tears spilled over. Even in this tawdry mall she looked like a Renaissance beauty, her delicate features carved in ivory. “I ... I was trying to park the van, and I was waiting for a long time. Just as I was about to pull in, a guy stole my spot. I leaned out and said, ‘Excuse me, sir, but I’ve been waiting, I was here first.’ He just *laughed* at me and said, ‘Too bad, you lost!’ Ellis, I can’t believe what I did next! I waited for him to leave, and I *scratched his car* with my keys! I’ve never done such a thing in my whole life! To think I’m facing my death—*NOW*, and I’m still fighting my three brothers! *That* was it—I *still* hate them!”

“Oh, Taisha, I’m sorry—don’t feel bad—that’s not so terrible, it really isn’t.”

She was wiping her eyes with her napkin. “I’m glad I could tell you—thank you, honestly. I just—needed to tell someone. Ellis, what is it you want to say?”

“That Florinda makes me *really* mad sometimes—she had me swear to call *whenever* I went out, to let her know my every move, in case she could get out with me. And today, when I did, she hung up on me! It really hurt.”

Taisha nodded soberly. “I know, *believe me*. I know how you feel. Ellis, you’re so with us now—so *completely* with us. Before you were in the group, then kicked out, back and forth—but *now, now*—” She burst into full-blown tears, sobbing and shaking her head like a little girl, as if to force away the grief. I had never seen such urgency in her eyes, her tone.

“Ellis, this is not the death of a *nagual*! He’s *not supposed to die this way*! It isn’t right, Ellis, *something has gone wrong*. It must be ... be—his karma. He’s paying for the bad things he did, I know it! There’s *no other explanation!*” We stared at one another, stunned and afraid, depleted by grief. “Ellis, I have to close down some bank accounts. Will you come with me? Can you handle it?”

“Of course—we’ll go together.”

We spent the day going to banks, closing accounts and P.O. boxes. We decided to go to the movies the following night.

When I arrived the next evening she was shuddering as she entered the car. I waited for her to speak. She remained silent, quivering. We drove a short distance to the theatre, and as we pulled into the parking lot Taisha broke down.

“They’re trying to take his money, Ellis! That bitch Sonia—that cunt! She’s a merchant, A MERCHANT! I HATE HER! She only thinks of herself—that awful, fucking bitch! FUCK HER! It’s *HIS* money, *Ellis—I’m trying to protect it for when he gets better!* Do you understand? For when he gets better! And they want to take it all away from him. They won’t make Bob Jones [Cleargreen’s accountant] the executor of the estate—they want to give control to his lawyer! I’ve got to talk to the *nagual*, Ellis! Should I call? He might be asleep, I can’t wake him, but someone’s got to tell him!”

Taisha wailed and pounded her fists on the dashboard, sobbing and cursing. I was numb. As far as anyone knew, Taisha had never used bad language in her life—not once. Even Florinda had never heard her say “fuck.”

I stuffed tissues in her hands. “Taisha, why don’t you call Flo and ask if he’s asleep? Okay? You need to find out—go ahead and call Flo.”

Shaking, she dialed the number. I could hear the entire conversation. Florinda spoke in a firm, comforting voice. “Taisha, please understand—the money is *not* being taken away! It’s been put in the Eagle’s Trust; *it’s safe there. Please*, Taisha, you’re going to make yourself sick like this!” She spoke for a long while, until Taisha’s tears dried. Calmed, like a reassured child, Taisha got off the phone. We looked at each other.

“I don’t want to go to the movie, Ellis. Besides, we’ve missed it. Can we just go to the mall and eat, and see something else?” I made sure to find a place serving wine.

In the previous three weeks, we had met repeatedly to burn the sorcerers’ records and tax documents. As I fed papers to the hearth, Taisha watched me carefully. I saw sheets of handwritten, itemized expenses, with such entries as: “Airfare to Mexico City to meet don Juan: \$473.82” and “Trip to caves with don Genaro—\$12.00.” We burned so many crates of papers that it took hours, days, weekends.

Taisha had to get drunk to do it. Sorrowfully she burned photographs of Argentina, saying in a whisper that she would never see it again. I pretended to keep up my drinking, pouring wine down the sink when I went to the bathroom. I couldn't drink like Taisha, or I would get a migraine. During the most exhausting of these bonfires I ran out of wine and opened a bottle of vodka, mixing it with grapefruit ice cubes she'd made from the fruit in her magic garden. It was a hot Los Angeles day, and we were sitting for six hours straight in front of an enormous fire. The vodka went to her head. At last we took our ritual swim, to clean the ashes out of hair and pores.

Taisha announced, "Ellis, I'm not in any danger of becoming an alcoholic now, am I? This is okay, right? Because I'm *leaving*, so—it's too late for me to become a drunk!"

I told her it was okay. She was telling me, in her way, that she planned to die. I couldn't absorb it, and I couldn't think how to talk to her about it. Even though she was drunk and we were both *in extremis*, the feeling prevailed that I would break a terrible rule by saying the wrong thing.

When she got home she passed out in her bed. Florinda called, amazed and delighted. She liked Taisha best when she was tipsy, but this was well beyond tipsy. "Ellis, she could barely walk! I have to hide this from the *nagual*! I've never *seen* her like this, she's going to have one hell of a hangover!"

Flo told me Taisha spent the next day in bed with "food poisoning," and Carlos never knew the truth. After that, I made sure we stuck to wine.

Back at the mall, Taisha was restored by a single glass of wine. After our dinner, she took my hand and placed in it a small silk bag. Inside were a ring and two pairs of earrings. Only a few weeks before she had given me one of her loveliest rings. I began to cry. This too meant she was leaving. I had to face it.

"Don't cry, Ellis. It doesn't mean anything—I'm not going anywhere. I was only ... cleaning out my things."

I wiped my eyes and saw her fighting back her emotions. We found a light-spirited movie and said nothing more.

Out of respect for Taisha, I felt it best not to call the next day. She was the type of person who would call when she was ready. The following day she rang briefly to thank me and say she was feeling much better. She was sorry she didn't have time to talk—we would speak soon.

Two days later she called again. “Ellis,” she began, in her sweet voice, “I was putting some things out for you last night. I want to give you a necklace that’s just costume but—it makes me think of you—it sparkles like you do, you’re such a little pixie, you really *are* my little elf. You’ve meant so much to me, you’ve given so much to me ... I don’t know how to say ... *how much I truly do love you*. You’re in my heart all the time. I’ve loved you ever since the day we met—and you are my precious, my darling elf. Do you mind if I ask you another favor? You’re not too busy? No? You know how harried I’ve been cleaning the garage—would you give me a call at 3:30 tomorrow? There’s a hardware store I’d like you to go to, to pick up a window. That’s fine? It’s the very last thing to be done—a window. I love you.”

I called at 3:30 the following day. Both her lines were dead. I called Florinda, worried—both her house phones were dead, and her cell phone told me she was “out of range.”

I called Carlos—his phone was dead.

I called Muni—again, and again, and again. Her phone was off the hook.

Taisha had found her window, and left one for me.

He's Gone

I saw this thing turn, like a flower, once picked, turning petals into bright knives in your hand. And it was so much desired, so lovely, that your fingers will not loosen, and you have only disbelief that this, of all you have ever known, should have the possibility of pain.

—Nadine Gordimer, *The Lying Days*

Exactly when the phones were turned off, there was a one-day Los Angeles seminar. Muni spoke briefly in a flat tone, her voice breaking once when she described “Big Florinda staying behind to take care of us.” Many attendees sensed that something was wrong. Astrid was saying goodbye to longtime practitioners in a way they found suspicious—her bear hugs were more intense than ever.

Muni told me to “take care of Simon,” sounding genuinely worried. He told me that he had “destroyed the *nagual*’s suits” and was too devastated to say more. I and others continued to worry that he might take his life. A successful businessman, he appeared to have no great passion in his life outside of Carlos’ world. I had my books, Guido his books and films, the others had Cleargreen. Simon’s one love, Florinda, had abandoned him.

Florinda had married him (and Carlos) in Las Vegas, and because he had none of a husband’s rights and shared her with others, he was as bereft as I was. Perhaps it was worse to know she might be alive.

After the seminar, Muni called me, her voice weary and toneless.

“He’s gone. He left with Claude. They left in pairs, Flo and Taisha, then Astrid and Sonia. I’ll stop by later—I have some things for you. I still have to tell Daphne and Alice and some of the others ... I’m tired ... maybe I’ll do them tomorrow. Don’t tell anybody.”

“Alright. Thank you.”

I was frozen, standing numb in the center of my hurricane. The turbulence outside was made of shock, grief, questions—and relief. His suffering was over. The pain, the mania, the failure to die like a *nagual* ... at last it was over. Stray images from the seminar wafted through: Patsy wore a fake, frozen smile; Simon was stupefied—he certainly knew, and had broken our bond by not telling me. Guido was manic and sexual, telling me how “hot” I was. Ramon, showing his sorrow, assuming I knew, was the only face besides Astrid’s that looked to me as if it weren’t wearing a mask, a phony smile for the crowd. Dexter’s plastered-on grin was frightful.

I approached Ramon, saying, “It’s good to see you—you look ... *real*.”

“Well, under the circumstances....” he shook his head. I nodded and clasped his hand.

Taisha’s last words floated by—“the window is there, waiting for you.”

And Carlos—his last words were clear as if he had just spoken them. Perhaps three weeks ago, perhaps two, he had Florinda call me to her door. Sneaking outside she pressed a magnificent amber necklace into my hands, emphasizing its symbolic meaning of inclusion. It was my second amber necklace from Carlos, and this one was the more ancient, the more magical to my eyes. I called to thank him.

“*That necklace is so very powerful, mi amor—I’ll tell you all about it when I get better! Remember, preciosa, you are a fighter—such a fighter! And today is such a splendid day! You are a macha, mi amor—you are a real macha. The real thing, my love!*”

The phone rang. It was Guido. I knew the drill—Muni had instructed him to call me.

“Is it Black Nike time yet?” His darkly comic reference to a recent cult group suicide (in which they died wearing matching sneakers)

actually made me laugh. We had a ridiculously conventional conversation. Of course we were in shock. But the night was young.

Ridley called in tears. "Can I come over?"

"Of course. Whenever you want."

"I can't leave yet. Can you talk a moment?"

Ridley's crying reached through my shock. He proceeded to recount a bizarre fairytale. "I just came from the house. Fifi gave me a tour of ... all the rooms. Taisha wore all the jewelry to charge it energetically before she burned—she burned with Florinda. First the *nagual* burned with Claude. And then ...," his voice choked, "then Astrid burned with Sonia. She showed me all the rooms where they burned."

I thought, "Why did they do this to such a sweet boy? When he finds out, then what will he feel? Maybe he'll be grateful for the fairytale, or whatever it's supposed to be...."

I remembered Carlos' voice on the telephone nine years before, as the bat flew around the rafters: "Only *you* will understand the metaphor."

But Ridley appeared to *believe* this story. I was too eroded, too far inside their lives to consider it possible. And I *wanted* to believe it. If they *had* burned, it would all be true—and maybe all the cruelty would have been worth something, and we'd all wander together in NeverNeverLand.

I remembered asking Muni in my initiatory days, "Weren't your ten years in the Second Attention freedom? You don't sound happy about such magic!"

"It was hell."

"Hell! I don't—"

"Hell is when you're not with your friends."

So hell had been expulsion, acupuncture school, marriage, and divorce. From being the *nagual* woman, Castaneda's magical wife, to being a person once more must have been crushing. A human, the lowest rung of hell.

Ridley was exhausted at the story's end. He needed sleep; we planned to meet soon.

The next phone call was from an entirely different Guido. He was several steps ahead of me—he had begun to have feelings.

And he was enraged.

"I've had enough of this BULLSHIT!" he yelled. "NO MORE SECRETS! NO MORE LIES! I'm *through* with secrets and lies—*forever*. IT'S OVER."

I was incredibly relieved to hear those words. I was profoundly impressed with Guido. This man was showing guts and courage. I lacked his vigor, I wasn't ready to shout, but I could say, "Yes."

Softly, in a voice heavy with melancholy, he added, "I feel like the circus just packed up and left town. And *you* ... I don't know how you stood it. You don't have to stand in the back of the room with the dunce cap anymore. I could never have put up with what you went through, Ellis. How, how did you stand it?"

"I didn't feel I had any place else to go."

We sat in silence, as we had so often. This time our silence was quiet, asexual, funereal.

Daphne called. I could hardly make out her words through her tears. She had just been told, and had received her packages of jewelry from the witches. Ridley and Simon were sent to see her through it. She was wearing all the jewelry, and they convinced her to throw away the empty envelopes with her name on them in the witches' different hands. I kept mine for a year—I still have Florinda's. Carlos had "forgiven" Daphne as he was dying, a relatively happy ending for her. I felt the worst for those who had been summarily dismissed before Carlos' death. There were many tragedies of this kind.

Muni told me his last words to her before passing into a coma. At a loss to find the *nagual* a new war video, she chose *Stalag 17*. Carlos looked around a room of anxious faces and said, "Who's the asshole who bought this stupid fucking video?"

She told me this story repeatedly, eyes wet. The terrible roulette wheel of the beloved's last words....

The following week was a collage of emotion and overwhelming anguish from all sides.

Muni told us to stop grieving and "be light," proclaiming "a new mood." I considered this a tragic miscalculation, one bound to lead the survivors to explosions of repressed grief; to illness, eating disorders, drugs, overwork, and all types of acting out.

Muni told me to take a notebook and write a stream-of-consciousness essay, a magical task to hasten the healing. "You can say whatever you want about anyone—let it all out! You can even say what you want to about *me*! Then put it in a glass jar and bury it in the backyard. After a week you can read it, burn it, or give it to me to read."

I wrote the essay, put it in the jar, and buried it in the backyard.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I said it was a fucking cult."

"Oh ..."

She fell silent.

Sometimes Muni and I took sedatives. Neither of us were drinkers, so we took children's portions of tranquilizers when we couldn't stand our tears. She asked me if I could spare a few for Fifi, and a half dozen for her. She was no drug taker, and had once surprised me by asking if I'd ever taken Ecstasy.

I had not. "Those kind of drugs scare me, Muni—I don't want to be out of control."

"Ecstasy isn't scary! You *really* should try it—you'd love it! I had it back when it was invented."

I mentioned this to my friend Sally, who made her usual astounding calculations.

"When Ecstasy was *invented*," she said, with unsettling precision, "*Muni was in the Second Attention.*"

One afternoon Muni had taken a Valium. As I massaged her she fell asleep in my lap. The phone rang; it was Fifi. We hadn't spoken in months. She was hysterical.

“Is Muni there? I can’t find her!”

“Oh, hi, Fifi. No, Muni’s not here. I’ll pass the message if we speak.”

Muni woke an hour later. “Fifi called, but I didn’t want to wake you.”

She grimaced. “Thanks, Ellis! They’re all after me! *He’s* gone, and they want to suck me dry. Why can’t they take care of themselves?”

That night Muni called. “I confessed to Fifi.” Why was she acting so sheepish? She went on, “I told her I’d taken a pill and fallen asleep. She said, ‘Wow! I didn’t know Ellis was so *good!* *She’s REALLY good!*’” They were impressed with me for lying so smoothly.

Later, Muni became embarrassed at having turned to pills during that hellish period. She bizarrely pretended to have taken them for my benefit entirely. “I was *stalking* your pills,” she lamely insisted, a pharmaceutical Mother Theresa. I supposed that at last she, too, was cracking.

“And that’s why you wanted a handful to take home?” I inquired. She entirely lacked Florinda’s pizzazz for lying.

Ramon took us all to the movies—I don’t remember what we saw. Fifi lolled about the lobby, slightly dazed. She gave me a groggy smile and said, “I’m soooo relaxed. Are you?”

“I guess.”

Muni attacked me after the movie. Fifi was “the new Scout,” and I had failed a magical test. Fifi was stoned on a Valium I had given to Muni, and I was supposed to respond to this in-joke with: “I’m soooo relaxed too!”

I stared at Muni. She *was* losing her mind. And Fifi ... she seemed to repeat every word I uttered, no matter how innocuous. What did she have against me? Probably nothing. Most likely she did this to everyone, in her hunger and fright, as she worked her way up the ladder of the moment. And in her confusion she weakened, confessing to me her copious drinking and smoking. “How did you hide the smell?” I marveled at this feat. “Lots of mints,” was her doleful reply.

That week brought a chilling occurrence. The Los Angeles Police Department had found Claude's car abandoned in Death Valley, with paperwork inside leading them to Simon's office at the Cleargreen headquarters. Simon tried to hide it, but the story quickly traveled around the group. He disappeared to search for her in Death Valley, his depression now so great that we worried he wouldn't return. But return he did, stone-faced, frozen, and empty-handed.

I was told by two workshop-goers that they had seen Claude driving around Los Angeles in the two weeks following. All that was ever heard of Claude again was told to me by Muni several weeks later: that she (Muni) had received a phone call from Claude, who was in a desolate Death Valley motel. Muni had gone to meet the summons, and found the Scout in a room "covered in blood after attempting suicide."

"She clung to my leg pathetically," Muni said, with considerable distaste, "saying over and over she was 'worthless, a total failure,' " I brought her a LOT of money—a LOT!—and told her to go to Ireland and start a printing business. Why not? She has her whole life ahead, and all that money!" Whether the story was fable or occurrence, Muni's coldness amazed me; her lack of empathy was perfect DSMIII material, casebook grandiose narcissism. But then, there was a lifetime of bitterness between the two women that I knew nothing about, so how could I judge? Evidently Claude had left her apartment suddenly, leaving Ridley, Simon, and Muni to clean it out and distribute her many things. Muni pretended (I thought) that Claude had left me a few mementoes, among them a vintage watch. I was touched by Muni's gesture and pretended to be excited that they were from Claude. "We were playing dolls before she left," Muni said, "and she put these on your doll." Ugh.

Muni called me one night during this miserable week. Guido had developed an ongoing migraine. I had been having them too.

"Would you go to Guido's and sit with him? He's demanding acupuncture every day, and I just don't have time for him anymore! I'm worn out—like I said, I feel like all these assholes are puppies sucking on my tits! Except you, of course. Guido drank and took

some pills for his headache and smoked a couple of Shermans—he quit years ago. Now he’s vomiting from the cigarettes. Would you please take him off my hands?”

“With pleasure.”

“*Thank you!*”

I hurried to Santa Monica. Guido, looking green, led me to his bathroom, where he collapsed in the middle of the floor wrapped in a bath towel and curled in the fetal position.

“We’ve found our power spot,” he moaned.

I took his head in my lap and massaged his brow. I knew more than enough about migraines. He relaxed, his towel slipped, and soon we were embracing. If ever we were to consummate our Victorian love affair, this seemed to be the moment. After considerable tomfoolery, stopping just short of technical consummation, we lay still in each other’s arms.

“Ellis, I know Muni’s fucking someone else. She denies it, but I feel it, El, I *know* it. Tell me who it is. Please. I know you know. Until recently, for *years*, I wasn’t allowed to talk to her, to *look* at her ... it was *hell*. And now ... *tell me*.”

I decided to lie—for Muni, and for Guido, and for myself, to avoid an explosive scene. Perhaps I made a stupid decision. Guido found out soon enough, because Muni’s new boyfriend, at nineteen, was far too young to keep his mouth closed about his conquest—the *nagual* woman, after all!—and his friends told more friends. Soon I was hearing the news from half a dozen people. How Muni had hoped to keep it a secret, I couldn’t begin to imagine. She was thrashing about wildly, just like the rest of us, half-crazed with loss and fear.

“It must be me,” I told Guido. “Muni and I have been fooling around. But we haven’t had sex.” This was true. We had been kissing and caressing, making tentative gestures. Muni had spookily informed me, “I’m waiting for just the right moment to sink my energetic hooks deeper inside you—and I know just how to treat you!” she had added, grabbing a fistful of my hair. (This remark had a dampening effect on my tenuous Sapphic interest; it was a shade too Anne Rice.) This vague information had an erotically

inflammatory effect on Guido. As with so many men, the idea of women together (to say nothing of witches) was exciting. Jealousy took a back seat to curiosity.

“Well, we sunbathed nude and I gave her massages on the rooftop. They got a little racy ... the neighbors took out their binoculars; we were always laughing about that!”

He seemed disappointed. “I can’t believe you didn’t—”

“I’m not experienced at this, Guido. We kissed, caressed a bit, and Muni said, ‘Any day now, when I decide I’m ready. I always have to be the one in control.’ ”

I wondered how she could possibly have been comfortable with Carlos. Then I remembered that for many years she hadn’t. She had confided to me, “There was a whole period when the *nagual* sent me to be only with women; I liked that time better.”

Guido was riveted. “So what stopped you?”

“Carlos died and then it was over.” I shrugged, confused myself. Muni had given no explanation for her withdrawal. It would have been so much easier with Florinda, I mused, if only she and Carlos had been serious. I recalled one particular period of weeks when I was invited to Carlos’ bed, and Florinda greeted me at his door with wild kisses. Carlos said he wanted to “mix us all together energetically” by having sex as a threesome. When I showed enthusiasm instead of anxiety, his interest instantly waned. I had misplayed the game.

Guido wanted stories now, and he pulled me on top of him. “Tell me about being with the *nagual*—what was it like?”

Suddenly, I collapsed in his embrace. I wept like a little girl, my face buried in his neck.

“Ellie, Ellie,” he whispered. “It’ll be okay.... You know, I was with Florinda....”

“Really?”

“Ha! The number of times I did it with Florinda, you could count on an amputee’s hand! Is it true Simon slept with Claude?”

I nodded.

Instantly he was furious. “I should have gone to her, *straight to her door!* I’m the one who *understood her!*”

“Guido, that’s ridiculous! These things were all *arranged* by Carlos alone! *You know that*—you couldn’t possibly have shown up on her doorstep without permission—my God!”

“Ellie, my head hurts ... would you rub my temples?”

He almost slept. Finally he got up, wrapping himself in his towel toga-style. After profuse thanks and a drink at the kitchen table, Guido ushered me out. He was prone to these graceless goodbyes. I drove home, puzzled as usual. Guido still wouldn’t fully kiss, behaving like a prostitute with a john. But stranger things were yet to come.

As I walked in the door, the phone rang. It was Guido.

“Baby ... I can’t sleep. Tell me more about you and the *nagual*, Ellie ... and Muni and what else you did. I can’t sleep.”

“I told you everything. Try to rest—I’ll call you *right* back—I need a moment by myself.”

“Describe it again, Ellie....”

“I’ll call back, okay?”

Guido called back, importuning and ardent.

“I understand, baby, I do ...,” I cooed into the phone. “I’ll call you back, I *promise*.”

The phone rang again. Guido was whispering, “Baby, baby, Ellicita.” He was breathing heavily. I reminded him that he was welcome to visit, but as always, he felt safer on the phone.

“Guido, Carlos is gone. What do you want? We can make our own decisions now.”

He was snide. “Do you think I don’t know that?!” He hung up.

This was Los Angeles, the sorcerer’s world, 1997—where phone sex was safer than an embrace, embraces couldn’t be spoken of ... and no one could ask “why not?”

I sat up late thinking about the word “Why.”

“Why” was the most forbidden word in the sorcerer’s vocabulary, followed closely by “love,” “friendship,” “family,” and the tastelessly human “need.” I found nothing in Castaneda’s rulebook more Orwellian than the edict against “why.” *Particularly* since Carlos, in

all his bestsellers, asked don Juan questions with dog-like persistence. As readers we identified with, we loved and we hated him for his thick-headed questioning, many of us feeling certain that we would have grasped don Juan's points more quickly, if only we had been chosen. These marvelously written exchanges lay behind much of Castaneda's literary success—he had portrayed himself vs. don Juan with nothing less than artistic genius.

Muni had told me when I arrived in their group that I had a brief grace period for questions. When it was over, I learned to use repetition as a semantic tactic in place of the forbidden syllable. For example, Carlos might reveal, "The flyers are eating us at a new, terrifying rate. They're Seymours now, not Bobbies—they 'see more.' I know a way to stop them, but it may be too dangerous to reveal ... I don't know if you're ready."

"Seymours," I would respond. "HMMMM ... at a different rate...."

Carlos' second book, *A Separate Reality*, was published in 1971 and contained this engaging scene in which Carlos, as usual, pestered don Juan with questions:

"Is will the control we may have over ourselves?" I [Carlos] asked.

"You may say that it is a kind of control."

"Do you think I can exercise my will, for instance, by denying myself certain things?"

"Such as asking questions?" he interjected.

As Carlos was dying he directed some of his inner circle to collect quotes for a "best-of Castaneda." Muni called this work "another scavenger hunt to keep them busy." When the book posthumously appeared, it contained my beloved quote, now amputated:

"Denying oneself is an indulgence. The indulgence of denying is by far the worst; it forces us to believe that we are doing great things, when in effect we are only fixed within ourselves."

I took this as one of many signs that although Carlos had begun as a genuine seeker, a true philosopher, he had ended as a tyrant watching over a cult of terrified followers. Power had wielded its

legendary seductions, illness had weakened him terribly. But nothing, I believe, can subtract from the sincerity and beauty of his early works. To take their wisdom and leave the rest would be to take the best of Castaneda.

In my very early days, Muni had puzzled me by insisting that Carlos' readers were far more fortunate than those who came close to him—at last I understood why. Carlos made a terrible mistake when he claimed, "ONLY WE live as we say we do! NO ONE else but us!" This statement, so easily punctured today, had never, I thought, been necessary. Where was the shame in striving for ideals and failing to reach them? Occasionally Carlos altered his statements, claiming to have strived and failed. I loved him the most during outbursts of honesty; but alas, he could never hold them for long.

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Christmastime in the Asylum

*Their fate must always be the same as yours,
To suffer the loss they are afraid of, yes,
Holders of one position, wrong for years.*

—W.H. Auden, “Since you are going to begin today”

The days passed crazily. Guido invited me on a twilight drive. As we held hands, I observed with curiosity that he drove around the streets near Simon and Muni’s homes, and by the apartments of the Trackers, where we could be “caught.” Old pleasures—of being “bad”—apparently died hard. I recalled a smoky embrace in the darkness behind a seminar’s risers. “In the belly of the beast,” he had whispered in my ear, holding me close against his body.

Finally he parked the car in a dark side street, pulling me into his arms. He pressed his lips full against mine, tasting of transgression, bitterness, and sugar, a vast rainbow of sensation. Guido Manfred was *literally* trembling. And so was Ellis Laura Finnegan, trembling as if to explode into atoms, into the millions of passionate sequins that made up the universe. We shuddered so uncontrollably, breathing so fast, that we barely managed our simple kiss. I had never truly trembled in someone’s arms, and he, no better off, could barely hold me still.

Guido held out his forearm and, shaking, touched my fingers to his pulse.

“Listen ...,” he murmured. It was racing. We laughed, we kissed again, gazing now at each other, now at the blackness that danced

behind closed eyes, crazy with the rare, intoxicating air. I placed my hand against his heart and he covered it with his, pressing as if to seal a vow.

Abruptly he pulled away and said, his voice husky and breaking, “I refuse to think of this as anything important.”

“Of course not,” I agreed. He seemed on the verge of collapse. He drove me home.

The next night Guido called and said he was coming over. Had he found his courage?

The phone rang. It was Harry, my old friend from the Sunday class. We had seen each other briefly at the last, sad seminar when Muni had addressed the crowd, fighting back her tears.

“Harry! I’m so happy to hear from you! How is it that we’ve been so out of touch?”

Harry had been one of my closest friends from the Sunday group. I never heard from him after my expulsion, and it had rankled. It was also mysterious—it just wasn’t *like* Harry not to show affection and concern.

I had been too stupefied and depressed to call him; I had also been vaguely afraid that I would be punished if I reached out to more than two of my Sunday group friends. This whole insane year seemed to have followed from the day Susan Johnson called me, crying her tears of violation at Carlos’ attack. Within days of our parting embrace, she appeared to have begun a campaign of betrayal. Harry’s voice pulled me back from these thoughts.

“Ellis, I have something to tell you.” By the sound of his voice, it wasn’t going to be easy. “I never called you after you got kicked out because—Jim Gruber called me. [Jim was an unpopular member of the Sunday class, disliked for his toadying and having cruelly betrayed his wife.] Jim was under Carlos’ orders. Apparently he had a list of people to call—the people Carlos suspected cared about you. Jim told me not to call you, because, because I would be driving you to suicide!”

“What?”

“It’s not true?”

“Harry, *no*. What on earth are you talking about?”

“I was told that I was burdening you with my personal problems—first driving you to drugs, and then possibly to killing yourself.... And then Jim swore you were going to use all the members of the Sunday class, all our confidences, as fodder for your next novel! We’d all be thinly disguised, and totally betrayed. I guess the *nagual* figured if we weren’t concerned for you, we’d be scared for ourselves. I’ve been afraid to call you all this time, for fear I was contributing to your ... self-destruction. Then, when I saw you the other day with Simon at the seminar, I just had to call. Ellis, what’s going on? Is something wrong with Carlos? There were strange rumors going around that day. A lot of people feel that the witches are *gone* somewhere—and him too.”

I had great difficulty remaining collected. I explained to Harry that Carlos’ “speech” about me, via Jim, was made up entirely of lies. In fact, Carlos had been furious with me for *not* gossiping about the Sunday group, and withholding its members’ secrets from him.

“Harry, how many people got that call?”

“I have no idea, Ellis.”

This felt like the worst betrayal I’d ever known. I was too stunned to take it in.

“My God, Harry, I ... Harry—what about Rebecca? It can’t be true that she’s dead, can it?”

“*What?*”

“The *nagual* told us an absurd story about you. He said that Rebecca was a prostitute and you were one of her johns, and that her boyfriend Roger, her pimp, murdered her.”

“My God, Ellis, I barely knew Rebecca! And she’s not dead. Didn’t you hear what happened?”

Rebecca was a gorgeous, shy teenager, who had traveled cross-country in a van with her boyfriend to find Castaneda. They were a hippie couple, young, but straight out of the ’60s. She had been invited to Sunday classes and one day had disappeared. The *nagual* grimly told us the tale of her murder, and said he was hiring private detectives to investigate. I didn’t believe it and was severely

rebuked for my “cynicism.” There was a pall over our group, as if someone really had died. And yet, I asked myself, why was there no police investigation? And why had Carlos created one of his most bizarre and destructive tales ever?

Harry continued. “I heard what really happened. Rebecca was invited to live at Carlos’ house. Astrid was instructed to keep an eye on her at all times. Roger parked in the neighborhood and waited outside the house’s gates for a glimpse of her, and one day she snuck into the garden and motioned him over. She told him that she only had a second, that Astrid was watching. Roger asked her if she wanted to leave, and she said, ‘Yes, get me out of here.’ They left together, and they’re staying with Rebecca’s mother. She’s perfectly safe, Ellis. But she’s afraid that Astrid will come and get her, that’s why she won’t speak out about what happened. She says she’s hiding.”

In answer to his questions, I told Harry that Carlos was dead, and that Muni said the witches had committed suicide. I repeated Muni’s piteous story about Claude. Further, I told Harry that when Carlos had long ago been married to a woman he couldn’t have children with, he had arranged with a family friend to impregnate her.

All went as planned, I explained to Harry. Soon Carlos had an adopted “son,” whom he intermittently supported before and after his separation from his fiancée, and whom he explicitly cut out of his will. His son was contesting the will, and from what I’d heard had hired an inept lawyer and was bumbling his way toward a loss. As a result, Cleargreen could no longer keep Carlos’ death a secret, though they had kept it out of the public eye for three months. I had told my closest friends and some of the Sunday group. (As the result of the case, which his son lost, the front-page obituaries at last appeared, *The New York Times* running a picture of the wrong Carlos Castaneda, a historian of the same name.)

My father died at seventy-four of pancreatic cancer and diabetic complications, and his obituary appeared on the lower-right hand corner of the *L.A. Times* front page, exactly as Carlos’ did. This coincidence was deeply chilling to me. My mother and my brother and his wife, not knowing I was still involved with Carlos, called me

in tears to share their condolences. I was too staggered to tell them anything, yet. During that first day of public awareness the employees of Cleargreen fumbled their way through a swamp of misdirection and crazy answers to inquiries, sometimes saying Carlos had burned from within, until they turned off their phones and issued a press release that was a monument to doublespeak and ambiguity. Shortly thereafter, the couple who had been raiding the garbage and secretly video-taping Carlos inquired at the Culver City Mortuary, and found out that indeed Carlos had died a human death, horribly jaundiced by cancer.

But back in my room, on the telephone, Harry and I were respectively absorbing each other's shocking news. My doorbell rang. Harry and I, equally stunned, agreed to speak again soon.

Guido was at my door, and he followed me up to my bedroom. I told him about my phone call.

"This explains *so much* ... and it's so *terrible*, what Carlos did. And do you know about Rebecca? She's with her mother, she's fine."

He looked away, staring at the ground, his cuticles, anything but my face.

"I'm a bit in shock from this," I continued. "I could never understand why nobody stayed in touch. You came over that one time, remember, Guido?"

He continued to look away, silent, too frightened to express an opinion. He began to pace emphatically, staring at the floor as if it were a recent archeological discovery. Suddenly he sat on my bed and pulled me to him. I was numb and passive. I leaned my head against his shoulder as if I were a rag doll.

Guido made black jokes about which one of us had known Carlos (whom he referred to as "Him") the longest, and who had the maximum prestige, the most "seniority."

"It's you, Ellis! *You* win the prize!"

I could tell by the way he looked at me and the hints he dropped, that he believed Carlos' story of taking my virginity at fifteen—the one Carlos and Muni had tried to convince me to adopt.

Where was the Guido who had screamed, “NO MORE LIES! NO MORE GAMES!”? I was trying to talk about the blow I’d just received from Harry’s revelations, how shocked I was by Carlos’ most malevolent, calculated, and cruel act against me. My mind was topsy-turvy, calculating the years of damage. Where were my “cohorts” with their “blank checks of affection”?

As I sat deadened next to him, Guido suddenly blurted, “Never let anyone know I didn’t have you!” We engaged in tense and awkward fondling. I felt cheap and humiliated. I needed love and help, and all he could offer was adolescent groping. He got up to leave without a word, and not even a kiss goodbye.

I followed him outside and said, “The way you’re treating me makes me feel like an object. It feels wrong. I—”

He interrupted me. “Hey, it’s Christmastime in the asylum! I loved it!”

Ever the edgy jester. So what?

“I didn’t love it, Guido, I—”

But he was already on the run, nearly tripping as he bumped into his car.

The next day he called me from his cell phone while racing through traffic.

“I’m glad you called, Guido. I was going to call. About last night, I —”

“Yeah, you know, I think we should just call it quits.”

“What? You mean, forever or for now? Guido, last night really hurt me. I told you, I felt cheap—you wouldn’t kiss me, and you ran to your car like—”

“I guess it was sorta weird, but I had fun!”

“I didn’t. I just told you it hurt my feelings, very much. When—”

“Oh, hold on, I’ve got a call coming in—don’t go away!”

I was on hold on the cell phone of the man who had appeared to adore me for the better part of two years, while he answered his other call during his Dear Jane speech. He came back on the line, his voice bloated with importance.

“Hey, sorry. Had to take that—it was an *actress*! Now, where were we?”

“I was asking if you were ending our relationship permanently.”

“Hey, who knows about tomorrow? Everything’s cool! Anyway, it’s getting too complicated, and besides it’s no big deal. We never had a sexual relationship anyway. And I met this incredibly cute chick at a party last night—she has everything! Looks, brains, even *money*! Hey, remember how much fun it was when we used to call each other and look up words in the dictionary? Let’s do that some more. That was really fun!”

I felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. The *dictionary*?

“Shit, there goes my phone again! Bye, darlin’! See ya!”

It was my one and only Hollywood Goodbye—dumped via cell phone on the freeway, bumped by call waiting for someone more famous. Guido had certainly learned the essence of the sorcerer’s way from Carlos—to do everything with elegance and grace, as though it were your last act on earth before Infinity.

I remember hating myself at maximum intensity. I had loved an infant, and dreamed him an adult. I was blind, idiotic, and worst of all, meek. We were not ego-less sorcerers, *brujos* and bruhahas, or advanced disciples of the *nagual*’s lineage. We were people eroded by grief.

A death, the death of a remarkable man, hung over all our waking moments, and could not be discussed. The loss invaded my dreams. And I was tortured by the possible suicides of Florinda, Taisha, and Astrid—deaths that were, or weren’t, according to Muni’s whim.

My first intelligent move was to call Richard Jennings and tell him the truth about Carlos and the witches, such as I knew it. Richard came over immediately. I showed him the jewelry I had been left by Astrid and Taisha and Flo, in little envelopes delivered by Muni; I showed him Florinda’s pearls which I now slept with, as she had slept with mine. When he saw Astrid’s jeweled pin in the shape of a butterfly, he cried, like a friend, like a real person.

“I *remember* this,” he said, holding the sparkling butterfly. We wept together. Something real was happening.

Photo by Gerard Barbier



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Coke vs. Pepsi

No woman can shake off her mother.

There should be no mothers, only women.

—George Bernard Shaw, *Too True to Be Good*, Act III

I went numb. I went around the house quietly rounding up and throwing away all the little treats I kept on hand for Florinda and Taisha.

The kitchen was the throbbing heart of the pain. Efficiently, I went through the refrigerator first. Out went Taisha's smoked salmon and cheeses, and a half-drunk bottle of Merlot. Florinda's items took a long time. The stockpile of ingredients for her "hormone cereal"—the flax seeds, walnuts, and cranberries—seemed to multiply in endless profusion in my cabinets. I had purchased in bulk, for convenience and economy, and out of superstition. If I had months of ingredients, perhaps I would have that many more months with the person I dearly loved, and who served as my last link to Carlos.

I bagged up the splits of Taisha's champagne and decided to give them away. At last I came to Florinda's Coca-Cola. As a special treat, someone had a company deliver crates of Coke in the old-fashioned bottles. They were everywhere: in the garage, in a drinks cupboard, in the refrigerator. I hated to waste, but I couldn't cope with anything but immediate removal. I put the full crates outside a local market, then set to clearing the house of the ubiquitous bottles.

One by one, I poured bottles down the kitchen sink, throwing the empties in a bag. An orderly line of tears ran down each cheek, one tear following another like a regiment of soldiers in steady lines that I occasionally wiped with the back of my hand. Open bottle, pour, drop in bag, wipe tears. Open, pour, drop.

Muni burst in on this scene. I looked at her bleakly and continued my task; I was nearly done. Open, pour, drop.

“Don’t do that in front of me!” Muni shrieked.

I looked at her with my dead eyes.

“Florinda—” I began.

“Don’t talk about her. Florinda is DEAD.”

She jerked open the refrigerator and rummaged around.

“Where are my Diet Pepsis?”

“Oh, let’s see ... I don’t know....” I poked around inside and couldn’t find any.

“No Diet Pepsi?!” Muni was screaming.

“I’m sorry, I forgot when I went to the store, I—”

“YOU CARE MORE ABOUT FLORINDA’S COCA-COLA THAN MY DIET PEPSI! YOU CUNT!! I’m *leaving* you and NEVER coming back, NEVER!”

She strode toward the back door.

I lost control. I opened the refrigerator and yanked out all her treats—her sandwich fixings, her olives, her favorite condiments, her lo-cal cookies, and her favorite brand of tapioca pudding.

I began to scream.

“Look at this! Here’s all your stuff! I bought your lunch, your cookies, everything! I FORGOT THE FUCKING DIET PEPSI! Big deal!”

“You asshole,” she sneered, opening the door.

I grabbed her and shoved her up against the wall, food spilling out of my hands. “You can’t leave! Don’t you dare leave! Look at all this—how can you say I don’t care about you?!”

“Selfish bitch! You care more about her than me! You did it on purpose!”

I threw the tapioca pudding at her. It landed a few inches from her head, and dripped down the wall. I was sobbing now.

She seemed erotically excited by my act of violence. She threw her arms around me and kissed me. “I love it when you’re like this! I love it when we fight and make up! See, we love each other, we were meant to be together!”

Then she left, saying, “I loove youuu....”

I slumped down in a ball, my head in my hands, crying until my chest heaved and I could hardly breathe. I ran upstairs and curled up in my bed, holding Florinda’s amethyst pendant, and lay shaking and shivering under the sheets.

We made up, and now Muni revealed to me her full-scale affair with Guido. She no longer took his constant calls to her cell phone in private. I listened as she babied, consoled, and reassured him of her love, grimacing at me from time to time. What was she up to? She assured me that she was untouchable emotionally, and placated him because “I need him for certain things.” I suspected she was denying her own needs, as had Carlos. (Increasingly, I wondered if they’d all read *The Fountainhead* at nineteen.) I thought she genuinely needed Guido—considerable trials lay ahead of her, alone at the helm. And who, indeed, could step into Carlos’ shoes? In his last weeks he had raged at her, “Staying behind to fuck that idiot Guido Manfred?! *Pendeja!*” Carlos was extremely jealous on his deathbed, and I imagined he had sworn all his women to eternal celibacy.

I recalled Tony Karam’s words: “The *nagual* was very specific when he shared with me his desire to train me to become the new *nagual*. In fact, this is one of the elements that he skillfully used in order to try to draw me into his world. I must confess that it almost worked, for I truly desired to receive the transmission of the *nagual*’s lore. Nonetheless I am glad to have seen in time the many contradictions, and not to have renounced my critical intelligence which finally saved me from making a significant mistake. I guess the essential piece in the puzzle was not finding any type of practice, exercise, or actual transmission, which finally helped me make the decision to distance myself from the group. Not to mention the manipulation, lies, and general lack of clarity.

“Having said this, I must also underline my most intimate reflections relating to Carlos Castaneda. He was and is one of the most intelligent, articulate, and charismatic men I have ever met. I feel fortunate to have met him. I am what I now am thanks in part to his luminous presence. For this and many other things, wherever he might be and whatever he might have become, I send him my sorcerer’s affection.”

I believe Muni and I have our own versions of these beautiful words, but as women, as Carlos’ lovers, his *wives*, we had suffered quite a different loss. Sometimes, as I massaged her and she broke down weeping, I saw all the fragility of a wounded bird.

“My heart is *broken* ... utterly broken.... Carlos broke it, Ellis, and I don’t know if I’ll ever get over it. I’m *sure* going to need a *lot* of therapy!” Her words were choked, as she fought between tears and laughter. In her anguish, she pressed her palms to her chest, her fingers curling into fists.

I was unable to think of healing words; but at least she had told someone, and I hoped that she had wept out her deepest grief in Guido’s consoling arms. With Carlos’ love of secrecy on the one hand, and his belief in the supreme powers of catharsis on the other, we were topsy-turvy with confusion. Quite possibly, to some of us he had more profoundly stressed the absolute importance of telling our story, the life-saving power of confession. Knowing that I had grown up in a household of secrets, perhaps he gave me directions different from the others—I expect I’ll never have my answer. Could truthfulness truly heal grief? As much as it can ever heal? Embracing this dream has been the foundation of my healing, a slow, relentless climb to health.

The process was slowed because I had not yet successfully dethroned Muni—I alternately saw her as mentor and troubled woman. Sometimes she tried an old ploy. “Carlos slept with your mother,” she announced, watching for the big reaction. I burst out laughing. Muni looked disappointed. Had Carlos told her for years

that he seduced Sylvia, or was this her game? I highly doubted the story's reality, but I decided to investigate.

"Mom, did Carlos ever make a pass at you?"

"What, honey?" She looked up from *The New Yorker*. "Carlos? No!"

She chuckled at the absurd inquiry and went back to her magazine.

It's my conviction that Muni was starved for girlfriend confidences and slipped between roles. She clung to an immovable belief that I'd "had everything in life" while she "had had nothing." She reminded me of Carlos, craving constant company in his illness, and hammering at whoever was present. Crying in my arms, Muni spoke in anguished, disconnected phrases about cleaning Carlos' body for the crematorium, and "dressing in black widow's weeds, acting the grieving wife at that *place*." Did she mean the mortuary?

Sometimes we were able to put aside our grimness. On one such day we basked in the sun, Muni giddily prattling about her delicious love affairs with Guido and Joey: she was out from under Carlos' thumb at last. Suddenly, she grew flustered.

"I've resisted telling you, Ellis, but—you and my mother have the same birthday."

"Gosh."

"You're like my mother to me; she was so *great*. I loved to go out and fuck different guys and come home and tell her all about it. She was always waiting there, just like you."

I exploded. "*I am not your mother. I don't WANT to be your mother.* And most of all, I don't want to hear about your sexual exploits, particularly with a man I still care for! My god, Muni! Stop it. Stop it now and stop it forever. I know it's as much my fault as yours—I talk about him, but I want this to end."

She was chastened. She apologized. We made a pact to stop discussing Guido. This ushered in a new era of awkwardness. Eventually equilibrium was restored.

Muni happily babbled about her affair with Joey (Fifi's boyfriend, the nineteen-year-old from Sunday class), but this was no source of tension. I found him asexual, a child. Her attraction was to a

carefree playmate, a lover *not chosen by Carlos*. For all their talents, Guido and Carlos were thickets of melancholy and temperament. Joey gave the impression of perpetually arriving from the beach and shaking off the surf, in preparation for night's rigorous pleasures.

Arriving one day for her swim, Muni tested the water with a toe and announced, "Ellis, I have done a bad thing. A *really bad* thing." This was during the first surreal week after Carlos' death. I waited.

"You know, there's a competition over who gets Florinda's new, deluxe mattress. Fifi wants it, but so do I. Well, I ... I fucked her boyfriend in her room, on the mattress! *And I knew Fifi was coming, any minute!* She walked right in on us, went hysterical and threatened to slash her wrists! Joey ran after her, and she kept screaming that I'd betrayed her."

I was appalled, but I hid it. Was this sorcery? It sounded like the nadir of human pettiness. Muni knew full well it was unconscionable. She was fishing for absolution, or maybe just the release of the admission. I could only give it by laughing at the French Farce she created.

Joey had managed to console Fifi; she stopped threatening suicide and refused to touch the tainted mattress ever again. Muni had won on many fronts. What bone-deep hatred had driven this act? As Edith Wharton wrote, "When one woman wishes to strike at the heart of another, she never fails." If I simply dropped the premise that Muni was enlightened, I saw that she must have been sick with jealousy over Fifi's ascent at the eleventh hour. Florinda had instructed Muni to live with Fifi, though she wished to live with me. Fifi, she lamented, wanted to "party" in Hollywood, a wretched prospect.

To top off the travesty of the mattress, Muni soon cooked up the guru spin, which disgusted me most of all. As with all her face-saving acts, it arrived belatedly.

"You see, Ellis, I needed to teach her a lesson. I made her face the truth: she *is* possessive and jealous, though she denies it. I did her a favor. She admitted it once she calmed down."

At last I grasped Muni's repeating dramas, a variation on Carlos': her first impulse was to know she'd done something "really bad."

Her second was to play the guru and come out smelling like roses. She had betrayed, and unable to face it, she lived in a world peopled by potential “betrayers.”

She looked at me appraisingly. “Once I did something REALLY bad to Claude,” she said. “Really, *seriously* bad.”

I said nothing. She wasn’t going to tell me, and I refused to press. She was setting me up to play cat and mouse. Another light bulb went off in my shell-shocked brain. I *had* to sever my need to know. It was one of the first pieces of advice Florinda had given me about Carlos: “Lose the need to know. You never will, we have so many secrets.” This decision placed me squarely on the path to freedom. I saw more clearly, now, that the need went both ways. Muni began to pry, full of questions about what Carlos had said about her. Her greatest concern was that she had been slandered sexually to the men. She prodded me for details.

“Well ...,” I prevaricated, “it wasn’t bad, really.”

“But Dexter asked me why I behaved like such a whore! *What did Carlos tell you?* Why do you think he told the men all these awful things? They’re looking at me *strangely!* *What did he say?*”

Poor Muni. Now she was getting a dose of Carlos’ and her own medicine, suffering with her Need To Know.

“Okay,” I said. “A lot of it was nice. But he said you sat on a little bridge in Hollywood reading Sartre and picking up men. Then he drove us by a big downtown hotel and said that’s where you took your men to fuck them.”

She was silent, her face imploded with pain.

“What else?”

“That he had to go to a crummy club where you were dirty dancing with Juan or José or Enrique—all Mexicans—and toss you over his shoulder and carry you out while the whole crowd applauded.”

She stared at me like a whipped animal.

“What else?”

“The only other story was that you were hiding from your jealous lover José, who was coming after you with a knife, and you called

Carlos to rescue you because you were about to jump out a window.”

“Well, *that’s* true.” She smiled nostalgically—perhaps José was a fond memory.

“There were a lot of nice things, Muni. He went on and on about how you’d written ‘the most gorgeous book he’d ever read,’ *Tales of Energy*, but wouldn’t allow it to be published.”

She hung her head. “There is no book.” I puzzled a long time—I still do—over why Carlos spun this fable. Was he trying to help her by spurring her on?

One day Muni remarked with irritation, “Some people are actually saying that I was in Berkeley and Los Angeles during my years in the Second Attention!”

I said, with irony, that since she was the *nagual* woman, she could be in two places at once, correct? (By now, I had also learned that she was in California at that time.)

This would become the official story line. The very next day, Cleargreen employees were answering telephone queries about Carol’s dubious history with this explanation.

In the wake of Carlos’ death, Muni kept changing her mind about what had become of the missing witches. Giving up my part in cat-and-mouse was a process. I waited, patiently and impatiently, for her to let me in on the secret—were they dead or alive? My mourning was imploding, and I was becoming increasingly depressed by painful fantasies. This was the roughest test I met with in fighting my need to know.

One day, while floating in the pool, Muni gave her trademark witchy cackle. “*I* have all the power now! *I* do! I’m the only one who knows what really happened, and everyone wants me for that!” She wiggled her toes in the water, grinning with delight.

My “process” sped into overdrive. *NO*, I did not need to know. Not from Muni, even *if* she knew. The women who left Pandora Street were adults. If they were alive, they could contact me. Carlos was dead, and for the first time in over thirty years they took orders from no one. And a missing persons search could begin. Sonia’s father, dying of cancer, tried to contact his daughter two years after

her disappearance, reaching out to Cleargreen, which turned a deaf ear to the family. Sonia's father died without a word from his daughter. Her mother and siblings are saving to fund a search.

Finally, I was ready to do what Carlos had advised for so many years—withdraw my beggar's hand. It had been outstretched a year, waiting for a crumb of news about Florinda, Taisha, Astrid, and the details of Carlos' last days. And it had been outstretched for years before that, awaiting each crumb of Carlos' ardor. It was tired and *I* was tired, well beyond my understanding. A great weight had begun to lift.

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The Hierarchy of Emptiness

The chill of her freedom paralyzed her. What cried out in her mind, still, wasn't the atrocity half-realized in her, or waiting to be fulfilled in others. It was the simple misery of knowing that the group had created something to unite them. And it had only left each of them feeling more alone.

—Joel Lane, *Common Land*

It was difficult for me to part from Muni. She thrived on our dramatic quarrels and reunions.

“I love it when you get angry,” she told me, “and *chase* me, and *force* me to come back! You’re so passionate!”

I didn’t love it. It had been an ego-boost to be wanted by her, it had been a *frisson* to be sexual with her, and it had been moving and intimate to be her friend when she let her mask drop. I still miss her humor, which emerged after long acquaintance. When we first met, she had seemed so depressed, so affectless and beaten. But in the end we found one another’s wryness, and she could be a marvelous wit. The story she told me of parting with Florinda, *forever*, was a ghastly dark comedy.

Once she had relinquished the “Florinda burned from within in front of me” story, she stuck to the tale of Flo getting into a newly purchased car packed with belongings, and driven by Astrid or Taisha.

Muni said, “Florinda was getting ready to leave. No ‘I-love-yous,’ nothing. She was so mean. Then suddenly, at the doorway, she turns

to me and says, ‘Muni, were you ever jealous of the *nagual* and his women?’

“So I said, ‘No, Florinda, I wasn’t. I had other issues with him, believe me, but that wasn’t one of them ... I don’t get jealous. I mean, hey, after all—I was *Pimp Number Two*.’

“Then Florinda smiled and said, ‘Well ... he *did* have a lot of women, you know.’

“And I’m thinking, ‘*Now she wants to SHARE?*’

“She says, ‘I just wondered,’ and turned and walked away. No hug, no kiss, no thank-you, no goodbye, nothing.”

“Maybe,” I volunteered, “she was projecting. She’s the one who was ‘bothered’ by all the *nagual*’s women.” Muni snorted. She wasn’t too big on psychology.

I pondered the pimp question for a moment, in silence. Was being Pimp #2 yet *another* second place? But who would want the primary position? I was certain that Florinda was jealous as hell, and pimping was her way of controlling, of having a hand in Carlos’ most private activities. Once she accused me of befriending Fifi in order to control her; it was then I realized that she’d spilled one of her deepest secrets, clueless as it fell out of her mouth. It would never occur to me to befriend anyone to control them—but she supposed others employed her own method (as we all do, with our respective blind spots). My simple desire for a confidante and a girlfriend was *incomprehensible* to them. It was too Pollyanna, too benign, too needy, too ... *human*. Too boring. Much ... too ... boring.

Taisha pimped, though the word was never used in reference to her. Astrid pimped shamelessly. And I was on my way, not only with Susan/Fifi, but with Myrna/Raven. I remembered Florinda grumbling when Fifi, weeping, ran from Carlos’ embrace: “We should have started with the other one!” I remember laughing with her at the scandalized Susan, joining her in a sense of power, enjoying being a madame. Perhaps, if I had continued, I would have grown into her accusation.

Alice told me it was common when a woman “brought another woman in” for her to then be ostracized as a test of her fortitude.

Alice theorized that this was why I'd been ejected after delivering Fifi. This puzzles me still. Why alienate a new and willing pimp?

I remembered Florinda telling me that she *used* to be jealous, while living in a Westwood apartment beside Carlos, peeking out her door to watch rivals come and go. Finally she conquered her foul emotions.

"I'm not like you, Ellis, I could care less. I don't give a shit who was there before, or who comes after."

When she complained about cleaning "Carlos' quarters," changing and ironing his sheets, I made a crack about how much work must be involved. She glared at me. *I* was not senior enough for such jokes.

"If you don't lose your jealousy, how will you feel when you walk in and he's in bed with another woman, or several? Believe me, that could happen," warned Florinda.

As she spoke, I recalled an early tryst in Carlos' bed when he had said, "You're my wife now, you're a *lioness*. Go out and *hunt* for your husband, bring him magical gifts, *energetic gifts*—*you must do it*—this is your *task*. You'll do it for your man—am I your man?"

When I went home that night I took out a pen and paper and made a list of possible energetic gifts for Carlos Castaneda. What do you get for the magician who has everything? A ticket to the Second Attention. Was there mileage? I wound up at a dauntingly expensive antique shop in Beverly Hills—an arcane treasure trove of Egyptian antiquities. I settled on a small figurine, which pushed my budget considerably. But it was so beautiful, a symbol of passion, the only thing of its kind in the shop.

I presented it to Carlos in a wrapped box and waited for him to open it, but he put it aside. I never saw it again. When I inquired a week later if he liked it, he snorted derisively.

"It symbolizes passion, *mi amor*," I said defensively, hurt and bewildered.

He looked away, concealing a grimace. "Passion ...," he muttered.

When I told this painful tale to my friend Sally, brushing my tears away, she shook her head. "I *told* you, Amy [and she had]. 'Hunting as a lioness for her husband' means bringing him *women*." Sally was

kind. She never once rubbed my nose in my ignorance or denial. She saw and I didn't. Sally was always right about such matters.

Muni tried to convince me that because male animals had harems, we were living naturally, like lions. Her explanation sounded lame, as if after all these years she was still trying to convince herself.

Having researched animal mating habits for *The Book of Lists*, I caught her unprepared with a well-informed *riposte*. In the animal kingdom, I explained, *every* form of sexuality was normal. Polygamy for both sexes; monogamy for wolves, lesbianism for seagulls. Dolphins masturbated. There was no argument for one species of mammal being more "natural" than another. Only humans seem to suffer over this matter, though it appears that the higher primates have frequent jealous tiffs. Muni folded up quietly under academic assault.

I decided to try to stop arguing. Let her find someone else and be a lioness all her life. We were grown women—middle-aged, as Carlos would most certainly have reminded us. She was free to pimp for the guru of her choice, just as Florinda was free to commit suicide or live forever on Swiss bank accounts in Monaco.

Irrespective of the animal kingdom's activities, I believe that what's good for the goose should stand for the gander, but Carlos forbade *quid pro quo*. My experiences with the shy maidens, Simon and Guido, had shown me that.

I recalled one of my final embraces with Carlos. He looked at me fiercely, his brown eyes huge and luminous. "What will you do when ... *if* ... I'm gone?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you don't make it to Infinity with me? There are no guarantees, *piernudas*. Are you going to fuck your old friend John?"

"John! Don't be ridiculous!"

"You'd better mean it, *chica*, you had *better* mean it. *After the nagual, do you want to have a FLYER masturbating inside you?*"

I stared at him in disgust. Now he was scaring me with creepy bedtime stories straight out of a bad science-fiction mini-series. I pictured John copulating on top of me with an insect's face. And why? I knew precisely. Carlos Castaneda's need for control was so

great that he wanted my promise of fidelity *forever*, beyond the grave. He wanted to die knowing that no other man would have me. And some of my fellow women warriors made him, or themselves, that promise, vowing never to touch a man again, unless he is chosen by the *nagual* woman.

And still Carlos wanted me to tell my story. And still I loved him, and continue to love him. Carlos' contradictions—from tyranny to tenderness, from compulsive lying to a burning love of truth—were what made him so very, so essentially ... *human*.

Many months after Carlos' death, Muni and I had one of our fights. I no longer recall what about, only that it was hurtful to me and took place over the telephone.

That evening I looked on my porch and found a dozen long-stemmed hothouse roses, white with pale pink tips, the very expensive variety, each in an individual tube of water. I hated these sorts of flowers, because they seemed to me like everything sorcery *wasn't*: they were trapped, inbred, and exhausted-looking; they had no scent. But they were meant to show cost, and a high level of remorse.

I took them inside, unsure what to do with them. I didn't call Muni to thank her.

The next day I received a hysterical call.

"You didn't call me! I thought you'd thrown them away, so I went to your house at 6:30 this morning and went through your trash looking for them!"

"I'm sorry I didn't call. Thank you for the roses. I wasn't ready to talk. They're not in the garbage."

This was one severely disturbed woman; now she was stalking my garbage. Or even if it was a made-up story, it was appalling. The entire group was angry with the couple who had stalked *their* garbage.

"Listen, Muni, I have something important to say to you. You seem to believe in a hierarchy of emptiness, and think that you're at the top and I'm somewhere below you."

“There is a hierarchy of emptiness, and I *am* at the top. One day you’ll be ready to see this.”

“Perhaps. I’ll let you know. But for the moment, I don’t want a guru. I’m finished with gurus. I don’t want any more of your advice. It’s been as much my doing as yours. I’ve come to you, seeking it—”

“I don’t give advice! I won’t give advice! Never again!”

“Great. If you want to give friendship a try, I’d love that. We could go to the movies, and swim, all the things we love. But you’re not my guru anymore. And I’ll stop you if you start up again.”

“Of course we’ll be friends! Great! We’ll have lunch. I never give advice.”

We made it through one last lunch. It was stilted. She was no longer welcome to discourse about Truth, and it changed our entire footing. Within a day or two she slipped back, in innocuous but tiresome ways. And I didn’t keep my word, I didn’t call her on it. I just slipped away. I stopped calling, and she stopped too. It was Endgame. Muni was no Carlos Castaneda. She was unable to hold on to the reins once he was gone, in spite of being a designated *nagual*.

Soon Poona paid me a friendly, stay-in-touch call. She announced, “Muni wanted me to tell you that she’s looking at your energy, and you look great.”

We were back at the starting gate.

I too was looking at her energy, and it looked bad. Here was the *nagual* woman, a brilliant, beautiful, charismatic creature who had lost the power to connect as an equal. She had resorted to using Poona, her factotum. She had given me many loving, happy moments, showed immense bravery and profound kindness, acts of love I will never forget. But along the way, the spirochetes of power had blossomed in her marrow. One can’t have it both ways, it seems. The apprentices of the sorcery world are never allowed to grow up. I was finished as a devotee, and had sadly lost yet another person I loved. This was the price of removing the blinders.

Implosion

There is a curious thing which can happen with human beings. It is the ability to perform for days or weeks like balanced and cheerful automata, when some substrata, something upon which our codes or our hopes had firmly rested, has given way. Men who lose their wives or their God are quite capable of behaving in this manner for an indefinite season. After which the collapse is brilliant and total.

—Tanith Lee, *The Gorgon*

A few months after Carlos' death the remaining apprentices decided to have a party at my house. We chipped in for catering and a full bar, and a few of the group's members were having their first cocktail in a decade.

I opened the door to see Fifi for the first time in close to a year.

"Oh, wow, *Ellis* ... wow...."

She was disguised in a long black wig and sunglasses, and she stumbled drunkenly through the door, her boyfriend Joey in tow. Giggling, she reached for my breasts.

"Oh, wow, *Ellis* ... you have *such* cool tits!"

Extricating myself from her advance, I led her inside.

Soon I was reclining on a rooftop deck chair, eating chocolate-dunked strawberries and chatting with Simon and Patsy, when the crazy couple lurched up the stairs. Fifi slid on top of me and embraced me fiercely, kissing me deeply and murmuring, "You are *sooo HOT!*"

Mixed with the friendship and betrayal, there had long been an erotic undercurrent between us. It was so repressed, in me, at least,

that I had never even had a sexual fantasy about Fifi. And now she was taking the lid off. There were half a dozen people on the roof, pretending sophistication as Fifi and I kissed and caressed. When men came upstairs we shooed them off, only letting Joey stay, who was too drunk to do anything but giggle. The other girls—a few had joined us—began to kiss, and now the pent-up emotions of years of grief, anxiety, longing, and love were taking shape as sexual exploration.

Kissing me ardently, Fifi whispered in my ear, “Did you really hate me, Ellis?”

“No. Did you believe it when Carlos said I did?”

“Never!”

“And did you hate me?”

“What?! Of course not! And now we can be ... *really close*....”

Fifi began in the role of passionate seductress, and soon we were making sensuous, uninhibited love. Other women began to kiss and undress, while Fifi and I had our passionate exorcism. I overheard Guido say to Muni, “What the hell is going on here?” She replied, “They’re both very physical and they’re working out their problems. Let’s go.” Soon, Fifi was sporting with the other girls, while I watched the surreal scene.

When everyone had departed, just after midnight, I felt oddly at peace about the daring things that had occurred. It did feel cathartic; Fifi had to be drunk to make a pass, but that was her style, I told myself. It was a bizarre way to break the ice of more than a year between us but now, I thought, we could begin to talk about what had happened. We would separate Carlos’ words from the truth of our feelings.

The next day most of the guests had splitting hangovers, more emotional than physical. The group’s simmering, repressed sexuality had exploded.

Muni treated Fifi like a mother punishing a “bad” teenaged daughter, saying, “That’s the last time you’re going to a party dressed like that!”

I was amazed when I heard what Patsy had cooked up for herself by way of denial, and what Poona had in turn accepted, telling me,

“Fifi united the green beings with the amber beings.”

I groaned. “No, what did happen is you got drunk for the first time in ten years. My God, I never heard anything so silly!”

Some of the women felt tremendous guilt, and there was a lot of talking-out that needed to be done. Well, I reasoned, perhaps this strange start would allow communication to begin at last.

At the party Buddy, one of the more “outside” members, had caught a glimpse of Fifi and me in extreme *flagrante*. He had gamely climbed the stairs, seen us thoroughly entwined, and ran away horrified. I was informed that he appeared at Cleargreen the next day, red-faced and clearly devastated. No one knew how to approach him, so I offered to try. I called him at the office. His impression, I concluded, was that he had been deliberately left out. He had lived for years in a celibate world; and like Guido, who was also deeply upset (though *he* did have a sex life, with Muni), Buddy drew the conclusion that the group was regularly having group sex.

I explained to Buddy that to the best of my knowledge this had never happened before, that no men had been involved (though I honestly couldn’t think of how to excuse Joey’s presence, except by unsorcerically telling the truth and saying that we had let the drunk boy stay), and that some catharsis was obviously occurring.

The silence was dreadful. I began to extemporize. “In the sorcery world, energy exchange between women means something different, and this has never happened before.”

That seemed to palliate him. Carlos had, of course, said that energy exchange between women was different, and far less damaging, so at least that much I had repeated in good faith. But I felt guilty about using “sorcery babble” to calm him. I was acting like one of the witches now, and it didn’t feel good. I had yet another view behind Oz’ curtain. I saw how easy it was to get out of a tough spot with vague, mystical lingo.

I recalled when Carlos had tried to shock me by saying, “Nancy and Patsy discovered Muni and Flo having wild sex on the couch, twenty orgasms each! The little girls got so scared they ran away home—Nancy zipped her sleeping bag right up to her nose! Wowie

Zimbowie! It was fantastic, *amor!* You should have seen their faces, they were *terrified!*”

The ludicrous scene was too comic even for me to believe. It appeared, however, that not everyone had been told these ribald stories. One day over lunch with me, Sonia, and Astrid, Carlos drew cartoons on his napkin of the Elements’ penises, wildly distorted. I fought (unsuccessfully) for the napkin. I later learned that without explanation, Carlos had asked some of the men to show him their genitals. I doubted Buddy was one of these, and it occurred to me that he hadn’t been privy to Carlos’ most ribald tales.

I began to hear Carlos’ voice at night as I drifted off to sleep, lovingly encouraging me to write. A decade before, alone in Berkeley, I had asked him if he really spoke to me when we were apart, or if I was finally going cuckoo. He answered, “I talk to you all the time, *nena*; it’s an old sorcerer’s trick—I speak into your left ear.”

I had a brightening, an epiphany. If I could withstand the notoriety and the criticism of speaking out, Carlos would have done his duty to my father’s spirit, whether he had imagined that visitation or not. He had promised Irving that he would do everything within his power to free his troubled daughter. He believed that in my case the truth, as the saying goes, would set me free—that freedom lay in telling my story regardless of outcome.

Which brings me full circle to the last time I saw Fifi.

Guido was anxious to make up for his lousy behavior. He sent me jokey e-mails and forwarded perverse websites for the terminally ironic. They were amusing, but it was a crude and impersonal attempt at connection. I felt hopeful that the friendship could be salvaged. Hope can be dangerous. Hope offered me dreams of safety that too often in my life had turned to nightmares.

During the writing of this book my mother had a stroke, I slowly broke my disintegrating ties with the last of my sorcery “family,”

and I had two failed relationships with men on the outer fringes of the group. The accumulated loss led me into a private hell: recurring nightmares of Carlos and group members, clinical depression, and the full menu of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms.

During this period Guido made a second low-budget play. He disappeared into the world of his play, sending me the occasional email. He emerged with a phone call inviting me to the party for the end of rehearsals. He told me that I was the only one not involved with the play he had invited, so it was a very special invitation. I imagine it was his form of apology.

The party was being held at one of those seedy Hollywood nightclubs like the Viper Room—the kind of place you would gladly overdose in just to get out. Trendy L.A. clubs make me nervous, but I was pleased to be invited. My friend Pablito, who had done volunteer work on the play, generously offered to escort me.

Pulling into the parking lot, Pablito said, “Oh, there’s Fifi.”

“*What?* Why is *she* here? Guido told me I was the only person not with the company he’d invited!”

Pablito was confused. “She’s studying theatre; she served tea to the actresses.”

I considered leaving. But I only mumbled, “I didn’t know she’d be here.”

Did I say hope was dangerous? With the decision to write, my repression was falling away like the skin of an animal molting. Fifi had used me to climb to the top. She had never apologized, and after her drunken “confession” and a stab at false intimacy, she was gone. I was determined to end the farce.

Suddenly it all made sense.

I had caught her red-handed stealing my pills at the recent party.

My mind raced back to the day she and Raven were using my computer. Had Fifi, left to her own devices in my apartment, invaded my medicine cabinet? Had she discovered the infamous “suicide Prozac” and immediately told Carlos?

Had she engineered my astonishing banishment from all that I lived for? And from everyone I loved?

This realization occurred in an instant.

Pablito and I entered a remarkably narrow passage just as Fifi exited. The corridor was so small that our bodies touched. She saw me and looked away. And that was it.

I heard Carlos' voice in my left ear. "Sorcerers *never* forgive. Until the scales are balanced, they take an eye for an eye. Don Juan taught me, '*We are predators in a predatory universe. Sorcery is not for sissies.*'"

I entered the room. Guido hugged me. "Ellie, you're here!" I barely heard his words. The crowd, the music's insipid drone, the stream of Hollywood patter ... my head began to throb. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Fifi. She had returned and slipped into a booth full of actresses, all doing the Hollywood gal gaggle.

I looked her hard in the eye; she sputtered an embarrassingly false greeting. I crooked a finger at her.

"Would you step outside for a moment, please? I want to talk to you."

The pasted-on smile disappeared. She looked frightened, squirming past the embarrassed actresses. I led her to the parking lot.

"Fifi. You've never given me an explanation for what you did. What were you thinking? You never once called."

"What? After the party?"

"No. After I got kicked out. Do you understand what you did? I kept my promises to you, never repeated your secrets—and everything I told you came back to me."

She flinched, hung her head, and muttered, "Yeah," then blurted, "Well, like—*whatever.*"

"Whatever? What the fuck are you talking about? Why on earth did you cut me off? I imagine you were following orders, and I understand that, *but do you know what happened?* You completely betrayed me!"

"Well, you know, whatever ... that was sooo long ago."

"Not for me. My life was never the same."

“You’re being quite aggressive.” She was the picture of righteous defiance.

“Yes, I know I’m quite aggressive, and I’m sorry about that, but I want you to tell me the truth—*what were you thinking?*”

“Oh, like, you know, I just cut *everybody* off....”

“I am not everybody. You didn’t cut Carlos off, or Florinda, or Poona, or Zuna. What’s the difference between Poona and me? I brought you to Carlos, *I pimped for you.*”

She stared at the ground and nodded in guilty admission. Yes, I *had* pimped for her.

“And at the party, why did you ask me if I really hated you? Why did you say that you never believed I hated you, and now you snub me? What did you mean by all that talk? You told me that you never believed all the lies Carlos told you about me, you initiated sex at the party, you said you wanted to be close—”

She stared at me, goggle-eyed.

“You said you didn’t believe Carlos when he said I hated you,” I repeated.

“I said *that?! Oh, wow. I don’t remember anything* from that night, *nothing.*”

This time I was shocked into silence. The words that had meant so very much were just alcohol and pills talking. Or were they, did she remember?

She found a foothold in my silence. “Like, you know, I’m sorry if you feel bad, but you know, that was *soooo long ago*. I don’t even remember that time.”

“You were part of what wrecked my life. You betrayed our promises. And you can’t even remember enough to talk about it?”

“*Whatever....*”

“Fifi. ‘Whatever’ is what you say when you’re too terrified to deal with another person. ‘Whatever’ is the cover for your fear. We’re never going to speak again, unless you decide to talk about this with guts. Short of that, it’s finished forever. Miss Whatever.”

I turned and walked back into the party. I found Pablito and said, “Take me home right now. I’ll explain in the car. I have to go.”

He nodded. As we were leaving, Guido stopped me. Evidently Fifi had run straight to Daddy and cried. Guido began to scream, attracting the attention of everybody in the room. Total silence descended.

“How could you do this to ME? *ME*? It’s MY party, mine! You ruined my party! What about ME?! How could you, this is MY night, MINE! Don’t you hang out with Fifi? YOU SPOILED MY PARTY! HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?”

“No, I haven’t seen Fifi in nearly a year. And I took her outside, into the empty parking lot. You’re making a huge scene in front of everybody—and you haven’t even asked me a single question about my side of it. I did not spoil your party. I’m leaving now.”

“YOU DID THIS TO *ME*!”

The sound of his shrieks followed me out the door.

Returning home, I left him a message, broken with choked sobs. “I’m sorry you think I spoiled your party, but I’m through with the sorcery world—and it’s through with me. I don’t fit anymore. Once you said you that ‘were through with the lies, through with the secrets!’ It’s over now. If you ever want to talk without the lies, I’ll be here.”

I couldn’t stop sobbing. It was ending. This was the cost of the truth.

Me. Me. Me.

I was haunted by Carlos’ nauseating mantra: “One day I’ll be gone and you’ll be left with the birdies, singing ‘memememememe.’ ”

I never saw Guido or Fifi again. I soon heard that my words had sent her weeping, a victim, to Muni. Forever after I thought of Fifi as “The Whatever Girl.”

Does Sorcery Tough Love Work?

I learned long ago that being Lewis Carroll was infinitely more exciting than being Alice.

—Joyce Carol Oates

I initiated discussions with a few fellow apprentices about whether or not the ego-busting methods we experienced had succeeded in freeing them, however each defined freedom. These were difficult conversations, because of the danger of tattling and punishment, so I made my approaches delicately. I came away with what I perceived as good and bad news.

Guido told me that if he hadn't found the sorcerers he'd be in a mental institution or back living on the street. However tragically self-centered I may find him—the living example of so many of the qualities Carlos vigorously rebuked—Guido is creative, energetic, and fierce about his artistic vision. Furthermore, Guido frankly said that he was incapable of coping with the adult demands of a loving, intimate relationship. He cited the relationship for which he briefly left the sorcery world. “When I couldn't make it work with her, I realized I would never be able to step up to the plate. She's the finest person I know.” Florinda later told me that this woman, a public figure, wanted children and a family life, which she soon found with a renowned athlete. The story rang true: Guido's dramatic infatuation, his excited run toward domesticity, and the ensuing balk at the reality of day-to-day life with his dream woman.

The qualities that make up a thriving love, I believe, are respect, generosity, trust, excitement, honesty. Carlos' methods did not inspire such behaviors. Feelings were something to be conquered by a warrior, and "the warrior who needs no one" was the creation of a man in need of a protective philosophy. The Carlos Castaneda I knew for twenty-seven years both shrunk from deepening intimacy and found it enticing—had he not craved it in doses, I think he would have kicked me out for good. I was a siren for Carlos—one of many—and it fascinated him to watch me, alternately obsequious and timid, defiant and fierce.

Carlos masterfully created episodes of divine closeness, brilliantly crafting each woman. Many who experienced these moments cherish them as the happiest of their lives. That was the gift Carlos could give—a taste of heaven. He often said, "The *nagual* is like heroin." I was relieved when Florinda said in a lecture, "The *nagual* is a drug, and that drug is inside *all of us*." Unfortunately, they contradicted themselves hopelessly, saying in the next breath, "There is no game without the *nagual*—no other way out of our hell, this sea of gargoyles. *You need us*."

Where intimacy was concerned, Carlos was a magnificent sprinter, and a failure as a long-distance runner. What had occurred in his youth to create such a brilliant, complex being, a man who transformed his fears into tales of such dimension and such verisimilitude that he won the admiration of millions? He spoke to all of us who wanted more than tedium and a proscribed path. He made magic alive, while never patronizing the science of his time. Sadly, he painted himself into a corner when he swore he was infallible, insisting, "Only *we* live what we dream. There is no division between our words and our actions. *Not a single living being besides my cohorts and I live as we say*." Learning that he did not incites anger, compassion, and wonder. Even Carlos didn't understand his metaphor.

Castaneda's *Tales of Power* are no less beautiful, no less inspirational. His fantastic life, in addition to being one of astounding literary achievement, makes an intense cautionary tale. I saw the danger first-hand of buying one's own publicity—the price

is intimacy. When one has no equal, who is to be respected? Where can one go to trust, surrender and find solace, together with dignity and love? Why extol loneliness, unless one fears horrendous loss? Where is sweet relaxation, and where is simple peace?

A critical stage in my healing came when I realized that Carlos' primary defense—indeed, one of his keys to survival—was projection: *Ellis* was needy, *Beulah* was terrified, *Taisha* was envious, *Tarina* was competitive, *Candice* was jealous. Even *Claude* was “possessive.” *He* never left *us*. *We* were the betrayers, it was *we* who abandoned him in his purity. And then, complex being that he was, he swung, only occasionally, to the opposite extreme—questioning his own failures, doubting his purity, and taking fleeting responsibility for his cruel acts.

As for the witches, I have come to perceive their defense as three modalities as distinct and different as the women themselves.

Taisha, “taken” at nineteen, had come to believe that her long and moving tales of life in the wilderness were “dreaming” reality; thus when she lectured, she *believed* her fantasies to have happened.

Florinda, by contrast, often spoke with disdain of Taisha's magical techniques, insisting that abstract knowledge was the road to truth. I believe she knew the Castaneda mythos was comprised of instructional parables, and nothing more.

Muni I found conflicted, and complex. One day she *truly* seemed to believe she'd lived in another world; the next, she openly admitted to having lived an ordinary life. I attribute much of their irrationality and hostility to the demands of seeking *rapprochement* between these opposing claims.

I would need an advanced degree in psychiatry to understand one of Carlos' favorite stories. “Don Juan killed Claude and made her into strips of jerky. Muni and I as her parents were ordered to eat her—to take our quintessential power back from our child. This was don Juan's ultimate test of his apprentice's obedience and surrender. We did it, nearly vomiting, until don Juan burst out laughing—we had only eaten beef.”

In the middle of my apprenticeship, Carlos created a new story about our meeting, saying he had taken my virginity at fifteen. He told the group, and I was urged to adopt it and instructed to tell the story, to test my ability to reinvent my memories. I was slow to pick up this ball and run with it, as I was stubbornly addicted to my own recollections. Carlos finally got me to agree that he had deflowered me *energetically*. The others were only flyers, after all, only apes, only human beings. Carlos was insistent, repeating, “Your husband took your virginity.”

Did sorcery boot camp succeed with some, or many? Or any? I gave much thought to Poona, who is very dear to me, and whose story is so very complex. She told an audience in Colorado that when the sorcerers found her she was “allergic to everything.” She had suffered the bizarre ailment in which she was actually allergic to herself. She lived in a hypo-allergenically controlled environment and was, she said, on the way to an early death. Carlos wrote a riveting, comic speech for her in which she told the audience, “I could only wear cashmere underwear, and eat rice balls with a slice of cucumber inside.” Like Guido, she swore to me that the sorcery world had saved her life. She could now speak of “the mother” and “the father,” creating a distance she needed. I take Poona at her word that Carlos’ world saved her life, or at least her sanity.

To see Guido and Poona, like myself, be further verbally abused by Carlos was horrible. But for family trauma survivors, a dictatorial parent is as familiar as an old pair of shoes, and therefore may actually serve a life-saving function. The cruelty is familiar, it is known, it replicates the family, and thereby lends a certain measure of order to the “victim’s” life. Because of my mother’s lifetime of clinical depression and my parents’ troubled marriage, I grew up in a glamorous yet damaging family, in spite of my parents’ *best* intentions for their children and each other, in spite of the fact that they did their *best* as partners and as parents. After the *Life* magazine or *People* photographers had packed up and gone home, real life would resume, and it was sometimes extremely turbulent. Thus I could identify with Guido and Poona’s belief that Carlos’ cruelty “was for their own good.” Some group members, to maintain

a form of stability, desperately need a family in which secrets and lies are not only familiar but sanctified as mystical practice. It's a relief to feel special (a.k.a. not human) when lying, instead of feeling guilt and shame.

Those who made it into the inner circle, only to be brutally thrust out, showed a variety of responses. Some recovered quickly and moved on, others more slowly. Still others broke down entirely and to this day have shattered lives, without job, family, or friends. Others have spent a decade trying to claw their way into Cleargreen, without success. This, too, gives a structure to their lives, a Graillike quest.

I always admired the minority who picked up their marbles and went home when they saw what repressive lives lay ahead. Best of all were those who took in a little philosophy here, a few techniques there, were enthralled by the marvelous speakers in the heyday of the lectures, and never wanted for more. These people, who did not upset the balance of their lives, appear to have benefited greatly. Not surprisingly, many divorces were inspired by the workshops. Some I saw as wise moves, sorcery at last providing the impetus for a stagnant couple's change, while other people claim to have made a shambles of their family life.

After years of esoteric studies and arcane reading, my friend Bill observed that most spiritual teachers try to push the disciple to collect his energy and increase its quantity by blocking off the "doors," the outlets we use to disperse the discomfort of what feels like too much pent-up energy. One spiritual discipline, the Arica Training, has labeled them "the doors of compensation," and Carlos was acquainted with the teachers who created the Training. The doors are legion: sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll, TV, violence, overeating and overdrinking, depression, obsessive collecting, stringent dieting and addictive exercising, or the American favorite, overwork to the point of exhaustion. And of course, there are the doors of courtship, romance, and love.

Hedonism or Puritanism, Apollo or Dionysus; it doesn't much matter—they're all the ways we blow off steam. And steam builds up quickly when we meditate, recapitulate, and do Tensegrity or

other martial arts. When one probes the self with too strong a light, too quickly, or when the group's leader is too harsh, it all leads to a bag of cookies at midnight or its anorexic opposite.

If we stop this acting out, then what? Travel to Infinity, said Carlos. But how? We never quite knew. Carlos once told me to "go to the desert, and drive as fast as your car will go. As the speed increases you'll be swallowed up—car and all!—into the Unknown." There are more such science-fiction-like *dreaming* exercises in *The Art of Dreaming*.

But I couldn't do any of them. Some people could, but when they woke up there were still those darn cookies. Or cigarettes. Or TV. After Carlos' death Ramon went to Amsterdam, found a hotel room, and took a lot of psychedelics, "hoping to join the *nagual* forever." He merely woke up in Amsterdam with a hangover.

I believe that the examined life is the life worth living, and that closing off all the tension-releasing doors is a big mistake. Perhaps a mix of Castaneda philosophy and not fighting City Hall—allowing for some release of tension—would make for a fine life.

And I often remind myself: I did not know any of these people *before*. Florinda frequently said, "If you think X is bad now, you should have seen him when we found him! He was intolerable!" I'd have to hear X's version, of course, before arriving at an opinion. But Carlos and the witches noted that happy people were never attracted to the sorcerers' world; they were too busy enjoying their lives. As Muni said, "You have to be pretty fucked-up to wind up here in the first place—I mean, who would stay for all this abuse?" And as for the "non-bored fucks"—what became of them, I asked? "They run corporations!" was the reply. But most of the inner circle had been troubled when taken in. And when one is adrift, a passing piece of flotsam can look like a luxury liner. By any standard, Castaneda and crew were no average bit of flotsam.

I never forgot Florinda's remark the first time I heard her lecture. She was responding to a woman who wanted to know how to join the group.

"Who'd want to be with us? I wouldn't wish it on a dog! We were *chosen*. There isn't a moment's pause from the ruthlessness and

hardship of our daily lives. The truth was much too brutal to put in my book. My editor made me cut out the real stuff.”

If the questioner was confused, well, so was I. So special, so glamorous, so chosen, so awful? As the witches got into their limousine that night in Berkeley, waving me a fond goodbye, I decided that Florinda was lying. I later learned about the power of intermittent reinforcement: a taste of heaven, a period of isolation, the cycle repeating over and over. The adrenaline was addictive. Every day was life or death, which, of course, it is. And Carlos and crew made a point of beating it into us, sometimes far too harshly, sometimes to our glorious benefit.

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Epilogue

*The life that I have is all that I have
And the life that I have is yours
The love that I have of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours*

*A sleep I shall have
A rest I shall have,
But death shall be but a pause
For the peace of my years in the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.*

—Leo Marks, “A Code Poem for the French Resistance”

As Carlos so wisely advised, I am putting all my cards on the table. I have survived the unhappiest years of my life. I lost family, friends, and lovers. I lost the beliefs I lived by, and my dreams for the future.

Like many members of the inner group, I was showing severe signs of clinical depression after Carlos’ death. I woke up screaming. I cried all day, then cried myself to sleep. I stopped eating. I took tranquilizers. I got in a car crash. I overate, living on coffee and sugary comfort foods. I went on hysterical shopping binges, and then I became agoraphobic and refused to leave my house for weeks. I wept uncontrollably when I heard love lyrics of any kind, and I stopped going to the movies altogether, because they reminded me of happy moments with the witches. I was unable to accept invitations, because I couldn’t make it through a social engagement without breaking down. I stopped washing my hair and wearing clean clothes. Bills piled up because I couldn’t concentrate

long enough to pay them. I bounced checks. I was constantly ill with ear and bronchial infections and migraines, and I stopped menstruating for months due to shock.

Worse still, we didn't know who was dead or alive. We couldn't ask or discuss. There were so many accounts of Carlos' "death" that it felt like the prophecy of the three witches in Macbeth: "When fair is foul, and foul is fair." There was absolutely no closure. Where was I going to find a support group for "Missing In Action Possible Suicides"?

At last I found a brilliant therapist (secretly, against group rules) and renewed ties with a few loving friends from my past. I suffered recurring nightmares in which Carlos publicly humiliated me in a classroom, and the group formed a tribunal that found me guilty. (I woke from this dream digging my nails into my legs until I drew blood.) Florinda made suicide attempts in my dreams, while ex-lovers morphed into Carlos, parading in front of me a series of women who had replaced me in their hearts.

As I read I discovered that a great many gurus had abused and beaten their disciples, from Zen masters who hit students with sticks, to Synanon's infamous "Game." Werner Erhardt used verbal abuse and sleep deprivation; Gurdjieff was well known to have driven disciples to mental and physical collapse.

I always remembered Florinda's early advice. "As don Juan told me, Amy, 'The ego is like a tired old dog. We can never kill it, so put it out on the back porch, let it rest there, and step around it.' "

Yet Carlos insisted on using a Howitzer, especially with those like myself, whom he most scapegoated. Sometimes he claimed it was because we were "the toughest fighters—the ones who could take it." Carlos was, after all, a *macho* to the end, with a *macho's* set of values. When a man in the group approached him and asked why he was never criticized, Carlos replied, "You couldn't take it," and walked away.

After my mother suffered two serious strokes, my post-trauma symptoms worsened. I became less and less able to function. Worried, my friends Bill and Jeannie installed me for a month in a

bed and breakfast next to their house in Berkeley, so I could write this book away from the site of bad memories.

Thus in the midst of despair came a gift, the brass ring I grabbed, the chance to write this book, and it has become my reason for living. As the bubble of my fantasy burst, my dream of “leaving for Infinity with my true love,” it released the pent-up feelings of years, adding to the immensity of the final losses. As feeling returns to a numbed limb, haunting dreams of suicide returned as I wrote. But happily, I realized day by day how much I wanted to live to see this story published. Because if some reader, somewhere, takes a moment’s pause and halts before handing over his or her free will to another, it will all have counted for something. I will have acted impeccably, if only for the raw year in which I endeavored at this task. I asked Bill for his views. He loved Carlos’ books and studied with some of Castaneda’s earliest teachers, Naranjo and Ichazo. I was fascinated by the following observations:

“This [Carlos’ method] was supposed to lead to freedom—but once the power resides in the approval of hierarchy, the result is not freedom but the creation of automatons afraid of being kicked out.... The ego is battered with even more force, and the result is even more fear.... The ‘perfected’ ones are *by definition* without ego and therefore free to discipline others while doing what they want themselves. No one can become perfected like the leaders—the process does not allow it.”

He was accurate: it was a closed system. When faced with difficult questions, the sorcerers replied, “You’re not ready for the answer—someday, perhaps.”

I continue to share Carlos’ belief that this is a magical world, that there are things we will never grasp with our minds, terrible and glorious things. I believe that we are capable of sublime acts of love and creation. Like Carlos, I believe that our dreams are myriad, that the fight for impeccability is not over until we breathe our last; for all I know, it may not be over then.

How was I to reconcile these convictions with the painful truths I learned? Over the years I’ve seen how many people forgave Carlos his foibles on account of his vibrancy and genius. These were

usually men, because they were not the ones seduced and discarded; or they were women he never slept with. I do not believe that Carlos was a con man who callously sought money and women. I think that he believed in his dream to the last, and did his best to make it come true; that he made terrible mistakes as the years went by, due to poor judgment, narcissism, and illness; and in his last decade he did create an abusive cult. This is no black and white tale, for Carlos was not a shifty huckster but a misguided philosopher whose experience of power was corrupting. Thus he damaged many lives, at the same time exalting many others. I have tried to do justice to the gifts he gave, particularly the gentle guidance he used to teach me to express love to my mother, a gift that has radiated into many of the relationships I now hold dear.

Now I believe that there is no *nagual* outside of the one inside me, and I prefer to forge my own path rather than seek a replacement father; to live a life without sacrificing my power for crumbs of intimacy within a harem. Carlos, by wish or accident, *did* guide me, in the end, to the awareness that I hold all my own answers.

Considering Castaneda's books, pondering his extraordinary influence on millions, I have asked myself the question, "Would the world have been better off with or without him?" This question, I believe, can only be answered by each reader. As Muni had cautioned, "Don't move to Los Angeles. Those that do the best are the ones who take his work, use it and make it their own, and stay far away from here—the stress is too great." But she was addressing a woman in love, a woman seeking a "family," who was certainly not going to listen to cautionary advice such as this. On the other hand, Tony Karam had this to say, "After many years of contemplation I have personally concluded that my incursion in the world of Carlos Castaneda gave me many things. It showed me the reality of relying on yourself and not projecting your fantasies upon others. It showed me that the only true magic is 'ordinary magic' and that the most important thing in life is the way we treat each other." Tony does not believe there was a don Juan, but retains respect and affection for Castaneda.

Unarguably, countless readers' lives became richer and more precious after reading Castaneda's works. Those readers made a deeper inquiry into the nature of their existence, and many found greater beauty and meaning in their days.

Which brings us to a crucial argument: "Does it matter if a genius—a genius who can move a culture—is fallible? And how fallible is fallible? When is bad behavior eccentricity, and when is it cruelty?" It is arguable that it does not detract from one's enjoyment of a Mailer novel or a Sinatra song to know that they were misogynists. But Sinatra never, as far as I know, claimed to preach the way to eternal life, much less to be its last exponent on the planet. This makes people like Castaneda, or Ayn Rand, for example, a different matter altogether than other geniuses. Further, Carlos fiercely insisted that he alone in all the world lived what he wrote. Sadly, my experience showed me that although he sorely wished to, he was unable to live up to his standards of "impeccability." Occasionally, Carlos would bounce like a rubber ball to the extreme opposite of his fierce insistence, and say, "Do what I say, but don't imitate what I do, because I'm just human—what do you expect from me? I lack don Juan's power—I've failed to sustain impeccability."

There is no arguing the immensity of Castaneda's impact. A great many people feel that if his books are fiction, it speaks all the more for his greatness. His was a true literary, philosophical, and imaginative genius. For these readers, the books stand on their own merit, be they fact or fiction, regardless of the life choices of their author. For years I kept pinned on my wall a favorite remark made by Carlos: "When what you have is more than enough, you're on the edge of impeccability."

That remark is no less true for me now than it was during the years of my first infatuation, remaining an ideal to strive for. We need ideals, I believe, for they are what inspire us to reach toward our best. Carlos was forever reaching. I have defended him to so many people who consider him to have been a P.T. Barnum, a classic con artist. Rather, I think he was a wizard of Oz, trying hard to create a spectacle that would cause people to reach for the stars. In so doing, he failed personally, damaging some of those close to

him and inadvertently spearheading a cult, the last thing he would have consciously wished to do.

But the majority know Castaneda through his remarkable writings, and presumably have not cut themselves off from loved ones and friendship and family, as did his closest disciples.

Mine is the story of someone who got very close indeed, and in the interests of my truth I have reported what I experienced, what I saw, and what I felt.

After Carlos' death I read an interview with Federico Fellini, conducted by Toni Mariani and translated by A.F. Bierman for *Bright Lights Film Journal*. Fellini's version of the story deeply affected me because it was so dramatically representative of the discoveries that I was, and continue to be, making.

Fellini told the interviewer, "I first looked for Castaneda through his publishers. I talked with the publisher, who gave me the address of Castaneda's agent, a Ned Brown in New York. The publisher told me it would be easy for Brown to give me Castaneda's address. Once a year a Mexican boy brought the publisher manuscripts. Ned Brown told me he had never met Castaneda.

"Persisting in my search, I was told that Castaneda was in an insane asylum, even that he was dead. Someone else said he'd met him and that he was alive, that he had seen a lecture Castaneda gave. Then, in Rome, there was a Mrs. Ioghi who put me in contact with him. And I finally met Castaneda.

"Castaneda's personality is quite different from what you might imagine. He seemed like a Sicilian—a cordial, easygoing, smiling Sicilian host. Brown skin, black eyes, a very white smile. He has the effusiveness of a Latin, a Mediterranean. He's Peruvian, not Mexican.

"This likable gentleman, who had seen all my films, told me that one day with don Juan, thirty or forty years ago, he had seen my film, *La Strada*—which was made in 1952. Don Juan had told him, 'You will have to meet the director of this film.' He said that don Juan had prophesied this meeting. That's what Castaneda told me. I told you that he came here to find me, here, in this living room, seated right here.

“The one thing that fascinated and almost somewhat alienated me—an Italian, a Latin, a Mediterranean, conditioned by a Catholic education—was Castaneda’s and don Juan’s particular vision of the world. I saw something inhuman there. Independently of don Juan, who is charming in a literary way and whom we are made to see as an old sage, I couldn’t help being invaded at times by a feeling of strangeness. As if I were confronted with a vision of a world dictated by a quartz! Or a green lizard!”

Fellini continued, “In don Juan’s vision of the world, there was no comfort, nothing of what so many other texts can give.... This was what made them terrible and fascinating for me. Yet I seemed to find myself in an asphyxiated world.... Maybe madness can resemble this kind of astral, icy cold, solitary silence.”

Fellini’s version of meeting Castaneda was quite different than the one I had come to know so well. He said, “Phenomena and wonders popped up. When he came to my hotel, he brought along some women. I never saw him again, but after that I found strange messages in my room and objects moved around. I think it was black magic. His women, but not Castaneda, went with me to Tulun, and the same things happened there.

“It’s been some years—that was in 1986—and I still haven’t been able to figure out what really happened. Maybe Castaneda was sorry to have brought me there and worked out a series of phenomena that discouraged me from making my film. Or maybe his associates didn’t want me to make a film and did these things. Anyway, it was all too strange, so I decided not to make the film.”

Why was I so shocked? After all, by now I knew that Carlos had a penchant for untruths as far back as anyone could remember. For example, Douglas Price Williams, a fellow university professor, said, “Carlos was such a liar at UCLA that when he told me ‘It’s a sunny day,’ I ran to the window to see if it was raining.”

However, I had been smitten by Carlos’ and Florinda’s tales of their time spent with the great Fellini. I believed their wild stories, and this was no paltry celebrity gossip for me—it was the meeting of two of the twentieth century’s most extraordinary fabulists.

I finally realized why I was deeply shaken. Besides the loss of the cherished and charming story Carlos had told me, I also realized how much Carlos' teachings still inhabited me. Just as lapsed Catholics will sometimes involuntarily make the sign of the cross—or, for that matter, a former smoker will absently chew on a toothpick—I had a set of beliefs about Carlos that were so deeply ingrained as to be virtually Pavlovian. I began to realize that no matter how profound the loss of faith, the beliefs *supporting* that faith were a fortress that could not be stormed overnight, but rather torn down brick by brick.

Carlos Castaneda gave the world, in my opinion, some of the most beautiful books ever written. To this day, I feel inspiration upon reading my favorite, *Journey to Ixtlan*. Take the beauty therein, and aspire as he and so many millions have. I would advise every reader to remember—you are the magical being. Carlos' last words to everyone he saw were, "Have a splendid day! Be a raccoon, devour every last moment of life, so delicious, so precious!" He had ceased to intone his familiar grim mantra, "I am driven by fear," and now spoke of the ineffable splendor of every day. To greet Infinity in that spirit, he must surely have seen a light in the darkness.

I still believe in magic but my definitions have changed. My father experienced startling paranormal occurrences; I have experienced telepathy and psychic healing. Finally I understand that writing and loving are mystery enough for one lifetime. I find friendship precious. Unlike Carlos, I don't need to sleep with my friends to enjoy their magic. And as Lord Alfred Douglas wrote in a sonnet, "Under the common thing, the hidden grace."

And courtship. To this day I've never been able to understand what was so evil about it. No wonder I was the group's misfit. I rejected the fundament of its beliefs. I was a hopeless romantic. And beneath all Carlos' bluff and bravado, so I believe was he.

And should I ever, touring the giddy heights, run into my husband, I'll ask him if he dreamed me this freedom, this new-found independence, or if I found it by defying him. We'd most certainly have a lovers' quarrel—and I'll bet you an amber tiara that he would laugh, and kiss me, and say, "*Mi corazón*, don't you think it's

exciting here, at the front of the train? *Mi vida*—this place is very special—it's *only for everyone. Everyone who dreams.*”

*Out of my tumult
came artistry,
out of my tumult,
the finished song.*

—Michael Hartnett, *Tao*

The Beginning

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Afterword to the 2007 Edition

Though nine years have passed since my lover died and friends disappeared, as the saying goes, it feels both like it happened yesterday and also in another life.

I miss Florinda most of all. When Carlos, dying of pancreatic cancer and adult-onset diabetes, grew increasingly cruel and insufferable to live with, all three of the witches came to my nearby house to drink a glass of wine, go for a swim, relax, and get away from the demands and pressures at the compound. Florinda and I went to the movies nearly every night, sometimes night and day. For several years I was unable to go to the movies: I knew all the theatres, and I saw her everywhere. To this day, passing certain neighborhoods still makes my heart drop into my stomach. I became increasing agoraphobic, for fear I would run into my former “family” at the market, and eventually I moved to Los Feliz, a charming part of Los Angeles that the cult never visited.

During this period my mother was dying, and she gave me her jewelry. I chose some particularly lovely pieces and gave them to the women I was close to, along with a goodbye note. One particularly dear woman misread my note, and called to say, “Oh, thank you, now we can really be friends again!” But we couldn’t. I was the enemy.

A friend of mine who was outside the group but attended workshops ran into a central remaining member. She asked, “How is Ellis? I haven’t seen her in such a long time!” The woman snarled, bristled, and screwed up her face, according to my friend. Evidently after so many years of sorceric training she had failed to absorb Carlos’ teachings about giving “the blank check of affection” (I will

love you regardless of my opinion, which is just my ego), and his constant urgings not to judge. Surely we learn more by example than by dictum.

Everyone who departs a cult is left with feelings of relief and terrible regret at what seem like wasted years. I am still struggling with this dichotomy, and continue to have dreams: dreams of making love with Carlos, and dreams of his berating me in public, all very realistic. My subconscious is not finished with its healing, and it may never be.

When *Sorcerer's Apprentice* was published, I received accolades: I became an *L.A. Times* bestseller, I appeared in numerous documentaries, from ones in America to the BBC in London and still another in progress with an Italian filmmaker, which is the story of Carlos' relationship with Federico Fellini and Marcello Mastroianni. I received letters from grateful readers who had decided not to kill themselves after reading the book, who had reunited with partners, parents, and children, and who had found the courage to leave cults. I also received hate mail, death threats, and letters from crazies who claimed Carlos was still alive and they could take me to him.

I appeared memorably on Haines Ely's radio show, *The Mystery Hour*. Haines had known Florinda and Taisha, though not Carlos, and gone camping with them on several occasions. He told me the one credible story about the possible identity of don Juan, although I have done no follow-up research. According to Haines, in Carlos' early days of seeking his doctorate, he went to Mexico as he always said, in search of medicinal plants. There he encountered an elderly Yaqui Indian, Grandfather Cachora, with whom he struck a deal. Cachora offered to teach Carlos sorcery, enough, it turned out, for three books—which would become bestsellers and make him famous and wealthy. By the original deal, half the proceeds for the books would go to Carlos, the other half to Grandfather, who would share them with the Yaquis and improve their standard of living.

Cachora and helpers concocted potions from psychedelic plants, and gave them to Carlos. Apparently Carlos became obstreperous and insisted he could fly. The attending Yaqui Indians were forced to tie him to a tree with leather straps, to prevent him from jumping

into a ravine. Carlos fought back furiously and struggled to free himself. Carlos in fact wrote eloquently about this in one of his books.

The three books were #1 bestsellers. However, Carlos renigged on his promise and kept all the profits earned. Then, according to Haines, Carlos had the temerity to return and ask for more lessons! For not being a man of his word, he was sent away.

Readers of the Castaneda books usually comment that the quality of the books went rapidly downhill, becoming dry and academic, and worst of all, don Juan (Cachora?) had left for other dimensions. By then the books had lost their central dynamic—the time-honored, teacher-pupil conflicts, love, and adventures. Carlos was left to take over don Juan’s role, and the stories never achieved the poetic heights of the first three. This account offers a middle road between the literal existence of Carlos’ don Juan as an actual Yaqui Indian and his mere fictive invention by Carlos. Like all such matters the final determination may be neither black nor white, but somewhere in between.

Carlos made a regular game of the riddle in his class monologues: “So, I started to write shitty books! What can I say? I DID write shitty books! I don’t know why!” He laughed heartily, and we laughed with him. I always felt awkward at this display of “carefree” self-contempt.

Lest anyone leave *Sorcerer’s Apprentice* with doubts about the complexities of the human heart, I can only say that this is a harrowing book, a book of pain and ecstasies and tears, and for all that, it is the story of my profound love for a brilliant, crazy man and of his love for me.

I would like to share with you a quote and a story. In 1951 Eric Hoffer, author of *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements*, wrote perhaps the greatest study of the cult mind. He points out that it is self-hatred that leads to the view of “us” and “them”—in this case, the warriors and the plebians. The superior “sorcerers” and “warriors” live in a world of suspicion, ascribing

their own fears and self-doubt to those lower beings, the mere humans.

He wrote, “Not only does a mass movement depict the present as mean and miserable—it deliberately makes it so.... To enjoy oneself is to have truck with the enemy.” No wonder the witches came daily for wine and relaxation!

For this, as described by Hoffer, is Castaneda’s world of fear in a nutshell. Perhaps, as he was dying—when his final words to me were to “Have a splendid day! Be a raccoon, devour every last moment of life, so delicious, so precious!”—he had seen the tragedy of his former philosophy and wished to impart a blessing of joy. It certainly resonated that way.

Finally, I would like to leave you with this story, make of it what you will: As you know, Carlos demanded I get rid of my beloved cats in Berkeley, Henry and Retsina, for he believed that cats were energetic vampires. Certainly cats make very poor cult members and constitutionally resist authority.

When I felt my life hung in the balance, as you have read, I found the cats a good rural home with a truly loving family. To this day, I have never regretted anything more in my life than giving them up. Although the little girl happily went feral in the countryside, losing her baby fat and visiting the house to be with her mate, our beloved Henry was never happy in his new household, which included small children and a dog. He led a sad life for many years, and one day, he got up and walked away to die, I like to think by the side of his beloved Retsina.

Years later my boyfriend and I decided to get a cat from a rescue foundation, and wound up with two. One looked a lot like my little furry grey girl, Retsina, the house cat who joyously went feral.

The other, chosen on a sudden whim—BEFORE I KNEW HIS NAME—was Henry. He is nearly the spitting image of Henry #1 in looks, charm, wicked humor, and radiant love. I have no fixed opinion about reincarnation, but the balm these cats have brought to my broken heart is indescribable. The two new cats, Bella and

Henry, who had never met, fell madly in love, just like the couple before them, and rest curled together as I write this love letter to my readers, and to Carlos and the women I will always love, no matter how stark the truth.

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APPENDICES

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A Guide to the Cast of Major Characters

“A Separate Reality” vs. Reality: A Brief Comparison of the Sorcery Myth with Real-Life Chronologies of Major Characters

- 1) Given Name (or Worldly Name)
- 2) Sorcery Name(s)
- 3) Myth
- 4) What Castaneda and the witches said
- 5) What they were really doing

Because the book has such a large cast of characters, with so many names and conflicting stories, this list was compiled to help the reader keep track of major players involved. Carlos Castaneda, Florinda Donner, Taisha Abelar, Carol/Muni Alexander, and Claude Alexander are referred to by both their real and “sorcery” names. Other names have been changed, both real and “sorcery,” after one of the major characters said he “would prefer not to be mentioned by name.” For the purposes of simplicity and continuity, therefore, real names are used only for prominent public figures.

- 1) Maryann Simko
- 2) **Taisha Abelar** (and a variety of names for her roles in “the theatre of the real”)
- 3) One of don Juan’s four students. A consummate *stalker*.
- 4) Claimed to have spent over a year living in don Juan’s “magical” house in Mexico, and well over a decade as his apprentice. Later changes story claiming to be Castaneda’s

apprentice only, then in private conversation with Ellis changes story back again, emphasizing an ambiguous “they” who taught her.

5) As a nineteen-year-old UCLA student she meets Castaneda. Receives a Master’s degree and Ph.D. in Anthropology at UCLA. Teaches at a community college during the same years she claims to have been in Mexico receiving sorceric training.

In 1974 and 1975 photographs are taken of her performing karate along with Florinda, despite don Juan’s dictum against photography. Taisha leaves Los Angeles after Castaneda’s death and is never heard from again. Carol tells Ellis she is dead, while Cleargreen publicly states she “is directing the workshops from a distance.” Carol later tells Ellis she has visited Taisha at an unknown location. Ellis sends a gift *via* Carol, and Carol returns with a “thank-you” quote so unbelievable that Ellis now believes Taisha is dead, or at least has not met with Carol.

1) Regine (“Gina”) Thal

2) Christina Casablanca/Florinda Donner-Grau

3) One of don Juan’s four students. A consummate *dreamer*.

4) In lectures she claims to have studied with don Juan, and is the parent of Tarina, the Orange Scout, along with Castaneda. Her book *Being-In-Dreaming* states that she met don Juan and his party in July 1970.

5) Born in Venezuela to German émigrés. In September 1970 enrolls in UCLA. Meets Taisha while attending karate class; Taisha introduces her to Castaneda. Is married to a German businessman for five years. They lived in Manhattan Beach until mid-1972, when she divorces.

Full-time student at UCLA in 1972 and 1973—the year don Juan’s party was said to have left the world. Receives Master’s in Anthropology from UCLA in June 1974. Leaves UCLA before completing her doctoral program. In September 1975 she is named in Castaneda’s will.

In early 1990s writes book about her supposed apprenticeship with don Juan, *Being-In-Dreaming*. In a 1992 interview in *Dimensions*

she states, “Actually, I’m not an apprentice of don Juan. I was an apprentice of Castaneda who was an apprentice of don Juan,” thus radically contradicting her original story. States in a lecture that don Juan was “very sexually active,” contradicting Castaneda’s books. Marries Castaneda in September 1993 in Las Vegas, under the name Florinda Donner. Marries Castaneda’s agent Simon McKrindle in June 1994, under the name Florinda Grau. States in another of her final lectures that Castaneda “has sex,” after publicly stating for ten years that he is celibate.

Disappears in 1998, three days after Castaneda’s death. The week before, tells Ellis, “I don’t want to be around for the circus that’s coming!” Cleargreen claims she is “supervising” current workshops. Callers to Cleargreen, the company sponsoring workshops taught by Castaneda’s disciples, are informed that Ms. Grau is “traveling.”

1) Kathleen (“Chickie”) Pohlman

2) **Carol Tiggs/ Muni Alexander/** Carol Aranha/ the *nagual* woman

3) The female counterpart to the *nagual*. Allegedly disappeared into the “Second Attention” for ten years. “Channels” the “Death Defier,” a supernatural character from Carlos’ book *The Art of Dreaming*. Castaneda states publicly that “Muni” (a.k.a. Carol) “controls us—she holds us all in the palm of her hand.”

4) According to her workshop lectures, she met don Juan and Carlos together when she was nineteen years old, visiting Mexico as an art student.

5) Born November 24, 1947, in Hollywood. Meets Castaneda in 1968. During the ten years she was supposed to have been in the Second Attention, she was living in Berkeley, California, and the Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles with her mother. She married, then received her acupuncture license in 1981. Carol left her husband; she later tells Ellis that he said, “I knew you’d go back to them.”

When Castaneda allows her back into the group, she files for change of name to Muni Alexander. Castaneda tells Ellis and others that sexual relations with Carol “stop the internal dialogue”—a step

on the way to “inner silence,” analogous to enlightenment. Castaneda orders Carol to have sex with various disciples, male and female, as he does with Florinda Donner, while telling disciples she is “a whore.”

On September 29, 1993, Carol Muni Tiggs Alexander marries Carlos Aranha in Las Vegas, two days after Castaneda’s marriage to Florinda Donner in the same locale. After Castaneda’s death she takes an apartment in Westwood, Los Angeles, and becomes a recluse. After Castaneda’s will passes probate, she becomes a multi-millionaire, living on Castaneda’s royalties and Cleargreen seminar income. Tells Ellis that Castaneda “hated women,” “broke her heart,” and that she is “seriously ill” and “is going to need a lot of therapy.” Alternately, she claims to be an “empty, egoless being,” declaring, “I have attained inner silence.” When asked about her supernatural abilities, Carol generally tells questioners: “You don’t have the equipment to comprehend my words, because you are not on my level; we’ll discuss it when you have advanced.” Speaking of her fellow sorcerers, she tells Ellis, “I don’t like what left and I don’t like what stayed!”

1) Patricia (“Patti”) Partin

2) **Nury/Nuri Alexander**/Claude/Claudine/Nuli/the Blue Scout

3) A being from the “inorganic world” incarnated physically through the *nagual* woman and the *nagual* Castaneda, introduced privately and publicly as their daughter.

4) Castaneda alternately claims his daughter “was raised by don Juan,” “was raised by Florinda,” “was found in an orphanage,” and “raped me at the age of seven.” Tells Ellis that she “despises men” and has “the emotional capacity of a seven-year-old.” Also tells Ellis that “you are my daughter’s double—I can’t tell you apart in bed.”

Claude has the power to select and reject members of the inner circle, which she exercises with severity. Is said to be “violently jealous” and “an egoless being.” Castaneda announces that she possesses “non-human sexual organs.” Appears normal when she dances naked for the inner circle.

5) Born in Southern California in 1957. Does not finish high school. Works as a waitress in 1976. Marries Mark Silliphant in 1977, son of Hollywood writer/producer Stirling Silliphant, who at one time planned to film a version of Castaneda's first book. Separates from husband nineteen days after marriage, then divorces. It is assumed that he also was involved in the group. Mark has refused to speak publicly on this topic. Castaneda supports her in lavish style for the rest of her life. She cuts ties with her family in 1977 or '78, sending them a letter presumably dictated by Carlos. Castaneda adopts her as his daughter in the 1990s.

Was last seen leaving Castaneda's home shortly after his death, and stalkers reported seeing her driving in Los Angeles over a two-week period thereafter. However, certain inner circle members are told that she "burned from within" inside the house, or "burned with the *nagual*." Her car is soon found abandoned in Death Valley, California. Carol tells Ellis that Claude attempted a bloody suicide in a desert hotel room, and claims to have brought her "millions in cash" advising her to "open a print shop in Ireland and be excited about her future." Muni tells Ellis that she clings to her "mother's" legs, wailing, "I'm a failure, I'm a failure!" When a journalist contacts "The Blue Scout's" family, her sister writes the following reply:

Name: Kim Partin

Date: Thursday, November 11, 1999

Just read about my sister, Patty Partin. Glad to see she is being exposed for what she is—a complete and utter phony, not to mention a con artist. Among her other "attributes," I consider her to be a murderess. She kills people in her mind. She killed me and she killed my family. She had "false memories" of a horrible childhood that simply did not exist. To think that people had to hold themselves up to her as the "perfect being" is laughable. I could not think of a more twisted, hateful or sick "being," although the part about her not being human does ring true.

1) Marco Antonio Karam

2) **Tony Lama**

3) the new nagual

4) Tony arranged a Buddhist gathering in Mexico for the Dalai Lama at the pyramids of Teotihuacan. He took photos of the crowd from a height, and on the negatives black winged creatures appeared, corresponding to Carlos' descriptions of alien predators, the "flyers" or "*voladores*." This high concentration of people with religious force, Carlos believed, had made it possible for the creatures to anthropomorphize, since their food is egotistical self-absorption (which is what Castaneda believes religious dedication is). This photo is shown to the inner group, then to participants at several workshops in 1995.

5) Head of Mexico's Casa Tibet. Meets Castaneda in 1994. Castaneda invites him for visits to Los Angeles, believing he has paranormal powers. Tony organizes and hosts a February 1995 workshop in Mexico, in addition being a linguistic prodigy, providing brilliant translations in Spanish and English. After the omen of the "flyer" photographs, Carlos urges him to relocate to Los Angeles.

The title I initially received—that of "the Electric Warrior," a mythic sorceress of *non-pareil* gifts—was given to a number of women upon joining the group. We soon learned that this moniker was part of a routine seduction, a game of musical chairs continuing until Carlos' death. But when Carlos told Tony that he was "the new *nagual*," *this* was an event unprecedented in Carlos' experience. After much consideration, Tony declined the offer, increasingly convinced that Carlos' stories were fabricated, his methods destructive and debasing. Above all, he was unwilling to promote a philosophy fueled by lies and Byzantine subterfuge. Piqued by this rejection, Castaneda later described Tony as "a liar and an egomaniacal asshole." Tony told Ellis, "I'm not going to leave my life's work to answer phones for the Chacmools."

Where Are They Now?

A great deal has happened in the four years since *Sorcerer's Apprentice* was published.

Confession, speculation, and now some evidence have led me to the definite conclusion that the five women who left Los Angeles after Carlos' death have committed suicide.

Before entering into explanation, I would like to point out some of effects of the death and disappearances vis-à-vis mental stability and suicide.

In Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2002, a woman jumped to her death from a bridge into a canyon in an attempt to "join the nagual in the second attention." A posthumously published book of "the best of" Castaneda's sayings was found in her home. Similar attempts have been made by persons overdosing on the psychedelic concoctions described in Castaneda's early works. Some survivors report prolonged stays in mental hospitals.

While Cleargreen employees crank out the party line that "the witches are alive—they're traveling; they oversee our work from afar; they want us to carry on here by ourselves," evidence mounts that they are dead.

Florinda Donner, for reasons unknown, was permitted close contact with her parents, unlike almost everyone else (besides myself). She called them weekly in Germany, sent presents I helped her shop for, and one of her brothers visited her as a houseguest. After her disappearance, Richard Jennings asked Gabi Guenther, who speaks fluent German, to call Florinda's parents and inquire if

they'd heard from her. They had not and wept at this sudden cessation of contact with their beloved daughter.

In early May of 1998, only weeks after Carlos' death, Patti Partin, his adopted daughter and lover, aka "The Blue Scout," left her red Ford Escort in a parking lot near the head of a hiking trail in the Panamint Dunes in Death Valley, east of Los Angeles. Paperwork in the glove box of the car led the police to the Cleargreen office in Los Angeles. I was present when the police called; Brandon took the phone. Then they arrived at our office with the news. All but Tracy Kramer were told to leave the room while he alone spoke with the police. The results of that conversation have never been revealed. Not long after, Tracy took a solo excursion to the desert, ostensibly to look for Patti, to view the site, or, as many of us feared, to commit suicide.

Carlos told me several times that if "the Blue Scout failed to go with me to Infinity, all she had to do was get in her little red car and drive very, very fast into the desert, where the car, with her in it, would ascend to a higher plane."

In February 2003, skeletal remains were found by hikers in the sand dunes near Panamint Springs. Sheriff's investigator Marson Matweiller suspects the bones are Partin's, but has no proof. The body had apparently been devoured by wolves, and few bones remained in the harsh elements.

It is of note that the group members were told that Patti "left with Carlos" (presumably for Infinity), whereas she was seen driving around Los Angeles long after the disappearance of the four witches.

Three years later, in February of 2006, Partin's family, after an advancement in technology, obtained DNA samples from the body, and the remains were identified as Ms. Partin's.

Following this, the LAPD finally opened a missing person's case file on Amalia Marquez, aka Talia Bey. According to her brother Luis and her sister Carmen, the siblings had worked to get a case file open in 1999, but were repeatedly ignored by the LAPD. When Amalia's father was dying of cancer and wanted to say goodbye to his daughter, who at the time was employed at Cleargreen, she refused to speak to him—Carlos berated her publicly for retaining

emotional ties to her parents—and her father died brokenhearted. According to Detective Lydia Dillard, the case was not brought to the attention of the LAPD until after the identification of Partin's remains. The Marquez family has continued to pursue their quest for answers.

In the summer of 2006, Sheriff investigator Matweiller confirmed to journalists that consideration is being given to investigating an abandoned mine shaft not far from where Partin's remains were found. A long-standing "joke" of Carlos' was that Talia (Amalia) wanted to kill herself by "jumping down an abandoned mine shaft."

This information was largely gathered by journalist Robert Marshall, author of a memoir of his adolescence, titled *A Separate Reality* (the title of one of Carlos' books), focusing on the influence Castaneda's books had on him as a young man and his attempts to follow the sorcerer's path.

Currently the LAPD continues to investigate the Marquez case, with urging from author Marshall and Amalia's brother, Luiz. Efforts are now being made to open a second case on one of the missing witches.

The group and the hierarchy expand and change, and with a few exceptions, cluster in Westwood near to the six who live in what was Carlos' home.

After Carlos' death, Carol Tiggs, "the nagual woman" who now goes by one of her pseudonyms, Elizabeth Austin, took an apartment in our Westwood neighborhood, which I helped her find. One day she said to me, "Do you want to go visit my mother in the Pacific Palisades? That would be a trip." I nervously agreed.

But before this excursion, we fell out, and Carol left her apartment. I asked her landlords if they knew of a forwarding address. I had a letter and a piece of jewelry for her. "She said she was going to live with her mother in the Palisades, but we don't know where."

I recently heard, via Robert Marshall, that her mother had died, and that she was living in the house. Such is the rumor. If anyone

knows what happened to the missing, I suppose it is she. What she said was: “A non-decision decision kept me here—I don’t like who went and I don’t like who stayed behind.” A lonely woman. Brave enough not to die in a pact, tired of being a guru, and yet with no passion or dreams that I know of, all that having been, so to speak, beaten out of her by Carlos. Still I admire her stubbornness, her will to live and to move far away (in Los Angeles she certainly has!) from the acolytes she complained were “sucking on her teats.”

I wish her freedom, and I wish myself a gentle recovery from the eons of mourning that remain. Perhaps I should take a lesson or two from Henry the cat. When he was rescued, he was a moment from death, his entire head in a dog’s mouth. He detests dogs but in every other way is the soul of happiness. He lives a larking, joyous life, and most certainly thinks for himself. If there are other worlds and planes, he traverses them gracefully, and of all the beings I know, like his brother before him, he has honored me with that most magical gift of all, a blank check of affection.

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Carlos Castaneda's Will and Death Certificate

LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT OF CARLOS CASTANEDA

I, **CARLOS CASTANEDA**, a resident of the County of Los Angeles, State of California, make, publish and declare this to be my Last Will and Testament, and do hereby revoke all prior Wills made by me. I direct my Executor to pay my funeral expenses, the expenses of my last illness and the expenses of administering my estate.

ARTICLE I

I am not currently married. I was previously married to **MARGARET RUNYON CASTANEDA**, which marriage was terminated by dissolution. Although I once treated him as if were my son, **ADRIAN VASHON**, also known as **C.J. CASTANEDA**, is not my son, natural or adopted. I have legally adopted **NURI ALEXANDER** as my daughter. I have no other issue.

ARTICLE II

I give, devise and bequeath all my property and estate of every kind and nature and wherever situated, both real and personal, to the Trustee of **THE EAGLE'S TRUST** (the "Trust"), established pursuant to that certain Declaration of Trust executed on the date on which

this Will is executed, by me as Trustor and Deborah Drooz as Trustee, to be added to and become a part of the corpus of the trust estate there under and to be held, administered, and distributed according to the terms and provisions thereof, including any amendments thereto made prior to the date of my death. To the extent permitted by law, it is not my intent to create a separate trust by this Will or to subject the Trust or the property added to it by this Will to the jurisdiction of the probate court.

If the foregoing disposition to the said Trustee under the Trust is not operative or is invalid for any reason, or if the Trust fails or has been revoked, then I hereby incorporate by this reference the terms of the Trust executed on this date, without giving effect to any amendments made subsequently, and I give my said property and estate to the Trustee named therein, to be held, administered and distributed as provided in this instrument after incorporating herein the terms of the Trust.

ARTICLE III

The Trust provides for the payment from a portion of the assets held there under of all taxes incurred or payable by reason of my death, whether or not such taxes are attributable to assets held in that portion of the Trust, or to other assets subject to tax upon my death. If and to the extent that the assets held under the Trust and available for the payment of such taxes shall be insufficient therefore, I direct that all estate, inheritance and succession taxes imposed by the federal government or by any country, state, district or territory and occasioned and payable by reason of my death, whether or not attributable to property to property subject to probate administration, shall be chargeable to and paid out of the residue of my estate provided for under the terms of Article II, above, without apportionment, deduction or reimbursement

therefore, and without adjustment thereof among any of the beneficiaries of my estate.

ARTICLE IV

Except as otherwise provided in this Will, I have intentionally and with full knowledge omitted to provide for my heirs.

ARTICLE V

If any devisee, legatee or beneficiary named in this Will, or any person who would be entitled to share in my estate through interstate succession, shall in any manner whatsoever, either directly or indirectly, oppose, contest, or attack this Will or the distribution of my estate hereunder, or seek to impair, invalidate or set aside any of the provisions of this Will, or shall aid in doing any of the above acts, then in that event I specifically disinherit each such person and all legacies, bequests, devises and interests passing under this Will to that person shall lapse and be forfeited and shall be disposed of as if such person (together with anyone claiming through such person any anti-lapse law) had predeceased me.

ARTICLE VI

Any provision of this Will is unenforceable; the remaining provisions shall nevertheless be carried into effect.

ARTICLE VII

I nominate and appoint **DEBORAH DROOZ** as Executor of this Will, and if she is unable or unwilling to serve as Executor, then I nominate and appoint **JULIUS RENARD** to serve as Executor in her stead and if is unwilling or unable to serve, then I nominate and

appoint **FABRICIO MAGALDI** to serve as Executor. No bond shall be required of my Executor.

My Executor shall have full power and authority to sell any property of my estate at public or private sale, with or without notice; to lease, exchange, or encumber the whole or any part of my estate, with or without notice; to own and manage any property and to operate any business belonging to my estate, at the risk of my estate and not at the risk of my Executor, the profits and losses there from to inure to and to be chargeable to my estate as a whole; to invest and reinvest surplus monies of my estate in such types of investments, both real and personal, as said Executor in his, her or their discretion may select, including corporate obligations of every kind, preferred or common stocks, common trust funds, improved or unimproved real properties, interests joint ventures and partnerships and interests in ownership and/or operation of a business. I further authorize my Executor to administer my estate with full authority pursuant to the independent Administration of Estates Act as amended from time to time.

My Executor shall be empowered to retain professional financial counsel and to charge the expense of such counsel to my estate as a whole.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto subscribed my name this 23rd day of April, 1998 at Los Angeles, California.

CARLOS CASTANEDA

On the date written above, **CARLOS CASTANEDA** declared to us, the under-signed, that this instrument, consisting of six (6) pages,

including the page signed by us as witnesses, was his Will and requested us to act as witnesses to it. He thereupon signed this Will in our presence, all of us being present at the same time

At this time, **CARLOS CASTANEDA** is over eighteen (18) years of age and appears to be of sound mind. We have no knowledge of any facts indicating that this instrument, or any part of it, was procured by duress, menace, fraud, or undue influence. Each of us is now over eighteen (18) years of age. We now, in his presence and in the presence of each other, subscribe our names as witnesses.

EXECUTED on April 23, 1998, at Los Angeles, California.

We declare under penalty or perjury under the laws of the State of California that the foregoing is true and correct.

Signature: MARY L. MUIR, residing at 3120 4th Street #23, Santa Monica, California 90405

Signature: LITARES E-PORRAL, residing at 3120 4th Street #25, Santa Monica, California 90405

Carlos' terms were a conglomeration of words used in his native Peru, and also Mexico, Brazil, Spain, and Argentina, as well as some combined words of his own.

Endearments

Amor/amorcita—love/diminutive, little love

Besos—kisses

Bolas—testicles, balls

Bonita—pretty, lovely, beautiful

Cariño/cariña—dear

Chica—girl

Chico—boy

Chola—rough or girl, used affectionately by Carlos

Concha—vagina, in an endearing way

Corazón—heart

Delicioso(a)—delicious

Duende—elf, pixie

Encantar—to enchant, to love

Huevos—testicles, balls

Macho/macha—a strong man or woman

Mamita—mama (slightly sexy or tender)

Mi amor—my love

Mi bebe—my baby

Mi corazón—my beloved
Mi tesoro—my treasure
Mujer—woman; or wife
Nena—girl, babe, baby
Niña—little girl
Novia/Novio—girlfriend, boyfriend; or fiancée, fiancé
Piernitas—diminutive for legs
Piernudas—word play for bare (nude) legs
Pincho or bincho—penis; in Mexico, penis as “little bug”
Preciosa—precious, striking
Qué bestia!—what a beast! you’re wild! you’re an animal! a tigress!
Simpática—very nice, appealing
Singula—special
Te adoro—I adore you
Te amo—I love you

Insults

Babosa—the slimy trail left by a snail; nasal mucus
Cabrón—asshole/butt
Carajo—1) prick 2) mother-fucker 3) bastard 4) Fuck it! Damn it!
Castrati—castrated
Cojudo—stupid
Coño—1) Shit! 2) Cunt! 3) You fucking idiot! 4) Stupid person
Culo—asshole
Hijo de puta/hija de puta—son of a whore/daughter of a whore
Idiota—idiot
Mierda—shit
No jodas!—don’t fuck with me

Pedo—a fart (in Castaneda’s books, an arrogant know-it-all)

Pendejo/pendeja—stupid, foolish

*Put**a*—whore; slut

Sietes culos—literally “seven asses,” meaning fat and lazy

Estúpida/estúpido—stupid

Miscellaneous

Besos—kisses

Brujo/bruja—warlock, witch

Brujería—witchcraft

Canciones—songs, folksongs

Cansado/cansada—tired

Chau—goodbye, Argentinean spelling

Curandero/curandera—healer

Hola—hello

Intento—intent; try

Loco—crazy

Nada—nothing

Nagual—the unknown; a title for one who represents the unknown

Pesado—heavy, heavy-spirited

Por favor—please

Porqué no?—why not?

Presentito—little gift

Qué bárbaro!—outrageous, shocking

Shaman—mystic teacher

Siempre—always

Voladores—literally, “flyers”; according to Carlos, inorganic beings who feed on us; also, acrobats in Mexico who perform around a

pole

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ABOUT THE THE AUTHOR



Photo by Ilena Lieberman

Amy Wallace has written fourteen books, including *The Psychic Healing Book* with Bill Henkin, and with her family co-authored the #1 *New York Times* bestselling *Book of Lists* series, which has sold millions of copies worldwide. In November of 2007, she published *The Official Punk Rock Book of Lists* co-authored with “Handsome Dick” Manitoba. Her solo works include the highly acclaimed erotic novel, *Desire*, and the best-selling biography *The Prodigy: The Life of William James Sidis*. In spring 2008, Feral House Press will publish a revised and updated version of a Wallace-family bestseller, *The Sex Lives of Famous People*, and that Halloween HarperCollins will

publish the co-authored *Horror Book of Lists*. She lives in Los Angeles, California, with her two feline muses, Bella and Henry.

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