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*Jimmy Weiskopf*

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SEARCHING FOR PEDRO BACH IN THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE FOREST

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*Dedicated to Pablo B., who stoked the fires of Mapiá*

COSTANZA

“Questa ragione arcana  
Che i dissimili accorda,  
Proporzion s’appella, ordine e norma  
Universal delle create cose. . .

SCIPIONE

Ma un’ armonia sì grande  
Perchè non giunge a noi? Perchè non l’ode  
Chi vive là nella terrestre sede?

COSTANZA

Troppo il poter de’ vostri  
Sensi eccede.”

(Pietro Metastasio, Libretto of Mozart’s operatic piece *Il sogno di Scipione*)<sup>1</sup>

**W**hile escaping from the imprisonment of an apartment to the open-air freedom of the jungle was indispensable to my physical and mental health, my visits to Leticia weren’t strictly a holiday. As a writer, I was always gathering material and my amateurish interest in sacred plants a thread, like any other, through the labyrinth of words.

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On this, the morning after my arrival, I was sitting in front of my laptop at the side of the swimming pool flanked by the rooms the university rented out to visiting academics (I qualified as an ex-prof), the lodge where students on field trips stayed in hammocks and, beyond the deck chairs and communal kitchen on the third side, a fringe of palms and bush that made the jungle into a well-tended garden.

It always took a time to shed my urban restlessness, and now, as I involuntarily fretted over my next move, I got a demonstration of how life in the Amazon unexpectedly upsets your plans: the arrival of Enrique in a boxy, bright-yellow safari jeep. A year ago, his jungle-tour business had barely kept afloat and now this! It was one sign of the gentrification of Leticia which amazed me every time I returned, another being the glossy façade of a new store, seen the night before, which sold imported liquors less than 1% of the locals could afford. A narco-dollar laundry no doubt, but no more of a threat to the old, dilapidated frontier charm of the place, I thought, than its rising international reputation as a hip, cheap travel destination or its unstoppable colonization (and polarization) by people and capital from the rest of the country.

Enrique brought news of the Russians. Two guys in their twenties who'd read my book on *yajé*<sup>2</sup> and asked me to recommend a healer in the Amazon. As they knew neither Colombia nor Spanish, I'd put them in his charge, partly as noblesse oblige, but much more to earn brownie points with both Wilmer, the shaman and my best indigenous friend, and Enrique, since, uniquely among such inquirers, they weren't backpackers but willing to pay a good price for . . . "authenticity."

A questionable term, given the acculturated *yajé* scene, but short of an expedition to the wilds of Vaupés (if the guerrilla would allow it) Wilmer was the best shot for two foreigners who only had a few weeks. He was a *maloquero*<sup>3</sup>, spoke his language, prepared the remedy himself and held the rituals on a site which, while close to the town, was sufficiently enclosed by the forest for a drinker to feel the full charge of its goblins.

I now learned that they'd complained about everything, first the hotel and food, then the lack of a toilet at Wilmer's, his Catholic orations and not getting visions from the medicine. This put me in a tricky position. Based on his close acquaintance with such tourists, Enrique was probably right to classify them as the kind who, arrogantly encased in their own culture and the privilege of hard currency, were incapable of surrendering their egos to the gods of *yajé* and blamed the lack of results on the mendacious, mercenary natives. Yet, from our brief meeting in Bogotá, I knew that Ivan, a dot.com entrepreneur, was smart,

widely-traveled, and, thanks to his excellent command of English, enjoyed a thorough book knowledge of *ayahuasca*<sup>4</sup>. And, from the e-mail I'd just read, had unerringly spotted the weak point after carefully watching Wilmer cook. Wilmer didn't grow enough *chacruna*<sup>5</sup>, the plant that brings the visions when cooked with the yajé vine, and there were times when it was too scarce or expensive in the region for him to fill the gap.

Fed up when their moaning intensified after the session, Enrique had just told them to get another guide. Now I was on the scene, I'd sort out their problem with Wilmer, I told him, though I wasn't as confident as I sounded. Since he, like any *taita*<sup>6</sup>, was prickly, suggesting that he hadn't been up to the mark might ruin my friendship with a man who'd taught me a lot and also supplied me with his magical plants.

Added to my obligation to the Russians, were other, possibly conflicting ones. This was the first time in years that my wife was with me, and likewise would drink yajé and hopefully gain more sympathy for an enthusiasm she'd coldly left to me after suffering my crazy behavior in a few sessions we'd shared. Finally, I'd convinced a friend, a doctor from Bogotá, to join us on the trip, and that was the reason I was here in Easter Week (the only free time he had), when the air fare was highest and the town crowded with tourists. But my rule of sticking to the off-season was less important than giving him his first chance to do the frog poison in an indigenous community near Benjamin Constant, in the hope that he'd then introduce to Bogotá an intriguing remedy I'd only known twice before in regions much further from home, if, that is, my contact proved reliable when we got there.

The first step was to visit Wilmer, easily done by moto-taxi<sup>7</sup> along the road running past the campus, I assured my wife, shortly discovering, however, that the new military airfield was no longer the rumor I'd never believed in but a fact that necessitated a long loop round the Lagos<sup>8</sup>. As the backtrack would practically bring us downtown, I decided I might as well first check on the Russians and confer with Fabricio, the medic.

One thing I liked about Leticia was that no one minded how you dressed, but the posh, new five-star hotel built on the confiscated riverside estate of the famous narco was starchy about my shorts and muddy Wellies and it was only after an argument that they curtly informed me that the Russians had checked out, without giving further details, though I imagined it was only a side-trip.

Fabricio's hotel was also costly but followed the city's informal style. Our friendship was based more on common interests than warmth and though it was my hang-up, not his, I never quite felt at ease with a tall, hefty, self-assured man

who not only was but *looked* like a successful, well-born, wealthy professional. Likewise, his distaste for the heat, mud and bugs had a dismissive edge that fed a growing suspicion that my relish for “roughing it” might be a masochistic compensation for being a city boy with an urge to show off and even phonier in a relatively tame part of the Amazon, evidenced now by his calling Wilmer to avoid wasting a morning when (as sometimes happened to me) he might be just round the corner instead of the jungle.

I remembered my first inkling, on a previous trip, of how the cell phone was revolutionizing life here: a summons to the driver of the moto-taxi I was on to rush to the port and hire a craft to rescue a group of tourists stranded on an isolated bank of the Amazon by the breakdown of their excursion launch. I’d once been in a similar situation myself in Brazil and though it fortunately didn’t last long, the prospect of spending a night without food or shelter on a damp, chilly, mosquito-ridden sandbank was pretty alarming.

One (minor) obligation I could avoid was to stop lordly Fabricio from paying our share of the taxi which, turning right off the one and only paved road out of Leticia, brought us to the little indigenous settlement at the start of the track to Wilmer’s place. For the natives, it was a highway, but the sensation of being swallowed by a huge, vegetal beast always stirred a primitive essence in me. The cattle and battery-chicken farms we’d just passed showed the ever-widening gap between the myth in the brochures and the urbanization that was turning the Indians into a jungle proletariat, but the chance to touch that core drew me back to Leticia over and over again.

At the spot where the forest opened into the clearing a few hundred yards short of the still invisible *maloca*<sup>9</sup>, we ran into the vanguard of a party of tourists walking back to the main road. *Bogotanos*, mostly in nuclear-family units, with the talkative, bubbly excitement of kids emptying out of school and a proprietary nonchalance about hazards like the slippery logs bridging the marshy sectors or the exotica of a psychedelic lizard or silhouetted howler. Quite different from the foreigners, in Banana Republic gear, who tended to be young, quiet, solitary and too earnest to have fun.

Deaf to the calls of the guide in a bush-jacket with the logo of the jungle-tour company, a few stragglers still sat on log-stools within, mesmerized by its cosmic dome of thatch, make-do domesticity and his soothing talk on indigenous ways, from the mythological significance of the four tree-pillars to the long tube of woven fronds, known as the *boa* from its shape, used to squeeze the poisonous juice out of the cassava, all interspersed with discreetly Christian homilies. It was less a lecture than a genial showing of a mansion beyond their reach they could

vicariously inhabit for a while. Hopefully leaving a tip on their way out, but not insincere for that. Merely, I reflected, the endpoint of a half a millennium of mutual hostility, oddly reversed, in its final tenth, by a modernization that made the Indians *interesting* to a white, urban middle class.

Meanwhile, Wilmer spooned *mambe*<sup>10</sup> into his cheeks, supplemented by a lick of *ambil*<sup>11</sup>, plant preparations as sacred as *ayahuasca* to him. The former, a green powder made from toasted coca leaves, was the inseparable spouse of the latter, a bitter tobacco paste. In contrast with yajé's astral flights, they were substances of daily use which I'd become enamored of myself as an entryway to crystal thought.

Wilmer now beckoned the credential of a gringo and a doctor. It came more naturally to Fabricio, who, without being pretentious, didn't try to be a *mensch*, as I did. Wilmer was a man of many poses—sage, simpleton, preacher and sorcerer—but his dark, angled, somehow scowling features now relaxed in the presence of old acquaintances and I asked about the session with the Russians, innocuous because standard for anyone I sent to him.

Equally automatic was his answer that they'd purged like anyone else and been humbled, amazed and grateful. On the other hand, a bad trip or angry disappointment were easy to spot, so I wondered whether Enrique's annoyance with their fussiness might not have led him to exaggerate their opinion of the ritual as such. Nevertheless, I believed Ivan's version more, partly because Wilmer's brew had been flat and uninspiring in the sessions I'd attended on my previous trip. The brew could have been a bit stronger, he granted, but that was their fault. Since they'd wanted to watch the process from beginning to end, their late arrival had forced him to cut the cooking short. And, sure, he could always use more *chacruna* but it was basically the same yajé he always made and nobody ever complained about.

Still, in view of my promise to the Russians and the presence of Fabricio, my wife and I, he understood that the upcoming ritual would be a special occasion that merited a quality medicine and we, his fancy friends, would gladly pay for the raw materials he might not have himself. Mind-blowing I'd had, the trance which awes, scorches and demolishes. But, as the *taitas* taught, psycho-drama wasn't an end in itself, only a preparation for losing yourself in the netherworlds and I'd been blocked for quite a time. The countryside round Bogotá where I usually drank was sufficiently "natural" but I needed a greater distance, both physical and psychic, from my urban preoccupations to concentrate on the spirit messages.

With that out of the way, I mentioned the *mambe* I always bought from him. If I didn't remind him now and insist over and over again, he was likely to leave it to the last moment or even forget. Jungle time was different, as were its notions of values bred into me, like "commitment" or "responsibility." Cultural relativity was all very well in theory and I'd become a little more tolerant over the years. But the lackadaisical honoring of them still pissed me off. As we were leaving, Wilmer smilingly asked me whether I'd seen Pedro of late.

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I'd been on the point of asking him that myself, since I'd been hoping to see Pedro there. Wilmer's good nature was that of real friend, but he, like many Indians, was subtle, a quality that made him even more attractive to me, and I later wondered whether his question might have been barbed. Pedro, a guy in his forties from Argentina I'd grown close to during a two-month stay in Mapiá, the headquarters of Santo Daime<sup>12</sup> in the Brazilian Amazon, was, so to speak, the *doppelgänger* of the white, urban, educated *yajeceros* of my circle. His commitment to the vine was such that he'd become a dharma bum of *ayahuasca*: a hard man both at drinking and surviving in the jungle practically without money on the bush skills he'd acquired.

As Mapiá grew from an isolated settlement of 20 *caboclo*<sup>13</sup> families to one of 500 ever more sophisticated ones from all over the place, his frankness about the loss of its purity made him unpopular and since he was also curious about indigenous *ayahuasca*, he'd been traveling around the Amazon as an apprentice shaman, paying for his stay in different indigenous communities as a day laborer; feasible at Wilmer's as well, I'd assured him, forgetting that the persons I'd previously recommended had been *clients*, including the odd foreigner who shared his lifestyle for a while, in exchange for hard cash that was essentially for the class in yajé rather than room and board.

Only now was it evident to me that Pedro wasn't the kind of guest Wilmer wanted and I was afraid that asking when he'd left and where he'd gone would bring up my responsibility for an arrangement Wilmer had never agreed to. Avoiding that sore point led to another, however. Shortly before my departure, Pedro's wife had sent me an e-mail from Mapiá (the telecommunications tower which rose above the surrounding forest was symbolic, I thought), urgently begging me to put her in touch with him. Since they were separated and the message unprecedented, it must have been serious.

The duty to a friend was inescapable, but, as I saw it, impossible when that friend was an inveterate wanderer who'd never used a computer and rang his

family in Buenos Aires maybe once a year. I had in fact spoken to Pedro about meeting up in Leticia a few weeks before Easter the last time he'd visited me in Bogotá, on the understanding that we'd confirm it nearer the date. Having had no word from him since then, I'd postponed the trip without remorse. All I knew now was that he'd passed through Leticia but, given his footloose style and the absence of details, he might be anywhere from Machu Picchu to the Isla Margarita at the moment. I couldn't shake off the obligation so easily and at the same time was pissed off for having to think about it. Once again, life not letting me be tranquil was my fault, but I didn't deserve the blame.

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[From Pedro's diary]

*Weeks since I've written anything and everything's a blur: that endless boat ride from Manaus, hassle when my passport was stamped in Leticia, Jimmy not being here. Before Easter, he'd sworn and that screwed it up with Wilmer from the start. Nice guy, though, and he was right, wasn't the scene I was looking for, circus half the time with all the tourists gawking and him bullshitting about the ancestral culture and so forth, cause, as he said, it's just as much a money economy for him as anyone, and when he needs a hand, holds a minga<sup>14</sup> and the neighbors pitch in, no room for me in particular. Not that I doubt his sincerity when he says that he's teaching the blancos<sup>15</sup> at the same time and yajé and the rest is a mission. First couple of sessions, just him, me and a few friends, were fine. There was gentleness about him I liked, the miraçao<sup>16</sup> too, low-key but flowing.*

*After that, drinking with the tourists, my just being there was a threat. Why, if I kept to myself and blended in? Gradually figured out it was my being who I am.*

*Jesus has called him to heal the blancos. Yajeceros like Jimmy aren't a problem either, because they're psychologists or whatnot, fits in with their lifestyle. Knowing he just about gets by, naturally felt bad about not having any money but a place for my hammock and a bowl of soup wasn't such a sacrifice, not when I was helping him cook and clear the chagra<sup>17</sup> and so forth. The harder I worked, the tenser he got, only it was smiles and Christian charity, should have acted sooner on this hunch that what really got him was the idea of a blanco living like an Indian . . . because he wants to.*

*When I finally owned up, he apologized every which way for being poor, unchristian, etc. and was so humble about himself, I had no right to criticize. Man, the relief on his face, like I was this big embarrassment.*

*So, once again, in the shit. No bread to move on, no Jimmy to give me the contacts in Leticia he promised, the lousy month's visa running out, when everyone else gets three. Despite that, there's a good vibe here, sense of possibilities in and around Leticia. Just now, I'm crashing at this place along the highway, a kilometer or two beyond Wilmer's, doing some carpentry on a log-cabin type restaurant they're putting up. But not paying*

*me for, so I usually have to walk all the way to Leticia. Worth it, since talking to people is easy, among others, this guy from Yugoslavia who might have a gig for me at his jungle lodge. Even someone I knew, though only for a few days, years ago: one of those freaks from nobody knows where the wind blows into Mapiá and out again. Even more down and out than I am.*

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Compared to Pedro, I was a timid explorer who, once he'd found a good berth, liked to return over and over again and kept within a tight perimeter. By now, after periodical visits stretching to ten years, I'd established a routine in Leticia: meeting old friends, making short excursions to the environs or doing nothing much on the pretense of tuning into the atmosphere. The only difference this time was that, with my twelve-year old son as well as my wife in tow, I took in some places I'd snobbishly avoided up to then for being "touristy," like a slapdash nature reserve a launch pilot took us to or the canopy ride, for which I, unlike them, didn't have the guts or strength either, though patronizing it wasn't so shameful since it was run by an acquaintance: Milos of Sarajevo.

A grace of Leticia was the ease of meeting up with acquaintances in an impromptu way when, idling over a coffee on an outdoor terrace, I would divert myself with people-watching, an exercise in what might be called the urban sociology of an Amazon which, in a way, was becoming as complex as Bogotá, as the different layers of its development overlapped the influence of Indians, colonizers, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, civil servants, the armed forces, university students, hippies and, especially noticeable this Easter week, foreigners stopping off on the popular river route between Iquitos and Manaus.

As the Wi-Fi at the university wasn't working well for me, I'd check my e-mails at least once a day at one of the many internet cafés, where, literally elbow to elbow to them, I peeked at evidences that the internet was revolutionizing jungle travel parallel with the cell-phone. The Canadian fellow alongside me one morning, for example, had just learnt that a pal he'd lost track of was on his way to Lima, and just like that, arranged to meet him there in three days' time and travel round Peru together for the rest of their vacation.

For that reason, I was puzzled by the lack of a reply to the mail I'd sent to my contact in Benjamin Constant, a Colombian anthropologist I'd once met a few years before, with whom I'd been corresponding for months about doing the frog poison with the Marubos on the nearby Rio Javari. As we'd arranged, I'd written to him as soon as we'd arrived in Leticia to confirm our visit towards the end of the week. The Brazilian cell-phone number he'd given me wasn't working either.



With little inclination to go out and about until our trip to Brazil, Fabricio was content to keep to *his* Leticia of an air-conditioned hotel room with satellite TV, his laptop and German manuals on ethno-medicine, broken by meals at restaurants far more expensive than ours, an odd night at a disco or poolside afternoon with ourselves.

We made a midweek visit to Enrique's jungle-tour office, a whole house, rather than the hotel room he'd formerly used, with several employees, computers and fax, and an alcove stocked with sleeping bags, rubber boots and mosquito nets, along with a few kayaks. Just as we arrived, he pulled up in the canary jeep with a group of Scandinavians he'd collected from the airport and seeing him too busy for a chat, I limited myself to the whereabouts of the Russians. "Funny," he said, "I was going to ask you the same, since we have some pending matters and they're flying back to Bogotá soon. For God's sake, if you run into them tell me at once."

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Though happiest on his land, Wilmer was a kind of commuter, no more self-sufficient than the majority of Indians on the outskirts of Leticia who now lived in wooden or breeze-block boxes in tightly clustered roadside settlements and farmed plots in the forest much smaller than his. Thus, I'd often see him in Leticia, and usually without a precise appointment. On this, the day before the session, it was at the restaurant where we'd gone for lunch, opposite the barn-like crafts store near the park. Dressed in a green cowboy Stetson and embroidered shirt, he was seated with two middle-aged businessmen from Bogotá and his cheery, effusive manner indicated that he'd just landed two well-paying clients.

He remained like that after they left, but I wasn't convinced by his "the Lord will provide" confidence about the brew he was preparing for us and even when he finally conceded that he hadn't got hold of the *chacrana* so far, he didn't give it much importance. It was one of those moments when the gap between cultures opened so wide that it nearly swallowed my willingness to bridge them, and worse, he sensed it. Then, after a long, strained silence, the sight of his outfit led to an inspiration.

Its source was a photo I'd given him a long time before, forgotten about until I'd glimpsed it again in the *maloca*. There, in the same Sunday best, stood Wilmer, and me alongside, comically towering over a little man in goggle glasses we were visiting: Núñez, the *chacrana* king of Tabatinga!

As Wilmer hadn't seen him for five years at least, it was a long, long shot but the hopeful face I'd put on as a tactful disguise suddenly bred an enthusiasm of its own for a little jungle adventure—not hacking through the undergrowth but the comfortable kind afforded by a ride in one of the Amazonian rickshaws parked along the curb outside—the three-seat, canopied surreys, pulled by a motorbike, known as *motocarros*.

Though it was petty sight-seeing at best, I'd acquired the pleasure in Iquitos, where they were common, and always delighted in the feeling it gave me of being a leisuredly sahib (opposite to the hanging on for dear life of a moto-taxi), now heightened by acting the big shot on a hurried mission who spared no expense. It also brought an appreciation of qualities of the city otherwise unnoticed and perhaps truer to its essence—the leafiness of certain side streets, the pastel shadows on walls, the thrust of vegetation through neglected cement.

It was a short ride past the frontier between two countries indivisibly merged into one urban sprawl and, a few blocks along, a right down a road which led to the central market to the point where it began to curve to follow the river. The house, like many around there, had a weedy backyard, commemorated by another photo where Núñez was dwarfed by a clump of mature *chacruna* bushes. He no longer lived there, the man who opened the door told us, adding that he might have moved to his other place.

That I remembered too, so I got the waiting *motocarro* to drive us to the back of the soccer stadium on the other side of the main avenue of Tabatinga: shadeless, impersonal and ugly compared to its equivalent in Leticia. The district, like the outskirts of any town in the Amazon nowadays, was a no man's land, neither urban nor rural, where the paved roads petered out into rutted earth and the jungle was being *appropriated*, rather than developed, or not in a way that allowed for clear ideological conclusions. It was a curious *mélange* of miserable squatter's huts made of boards, lots of plantains and elephant grass and monstrosities of cement erected by what passed for the middle-class.

Once there, we aimlessly drove round, but, as I assured the driver, worried by the mounting bill, the place was a veritable landmark and before long I spotted it from a distance. Oasis was the only word for the cluster of tall palms and bamboos that stood out from the flat terrain and traced a broken circle round one of those shallow rainforest lakes known as *cochas*<sup>18</sup>. Here, I recalled, Núñez had had a sizeable plantation of *chacruna* interspersed with maize, fruit trees, cassava and some coffee bushes that enabled me to see, for the first time, the botanical parentage between the first and last plants. And a ramshackle house where he ran *ayahuasca* ceremonies.

There was usually no need for Portuguese in bilingual Tabatinga but the Spanish of the current tenants was a reverse *Portunhol*<sup>19</sup> as rough as mine and, as happened to me at such times, and like the conversation in dreams, I wasn't sure which language either of us was speaking and caught the drift without being certain about the details, especially the vital one. Núñez was gone, that much was clear, but not their reference to a house around the corner. Had he actually moved there or was it the typical peasant humoring of strangers?

The bizarre afternoon had brought me a bemused detachment from the actual purpose of our mission, increased, when we got there, by our encounter with a knot of men in the middle of the road watching something with the nervous excitement of bystanders at a fire: the erection of poles for an electricity line. I'd given up, but Wilmer was still optimistic and what happened next was so enigmatic one side of me regarded it as an exceptionally fortunate accident and another (simultaneously), the work of the guardians of a steadfast apostle of *yajé*, which, if so, meant that what I thought were his defects, might be inseparable from those virtues.

A local like the others, he joined in the casual exchange of comments without discomfiting anyone, among them a lean, muscular, bare-chested man of seventy. Then, as if they recognized each other on a deeper plane, it was quickly established that he, the grizzled veteran, was, first, the cousin of Núñez, second, a dedicated *ayahuasquero*<sup>20</sup> and third, willing to sell us the plants we were after!

He invited us onto his property, which, characteristic of the earliest settlements there, resembled any isolated jungle dwelling at first sight—a rancho in a small forest clearing—but in fact was only a modest tract surrounded by the cancerous urbanization just described, so, depending on the angle of view, it was like being in two different time zones. In a densely-vegetated corner, relic of the pristine past, he showed us the “temple” where he too healed neighbors with *ayahuasca*, a windowless outhouse surrounded by miscellaneous garbage. He introduced us to his apprentice, who was working at a decoction of plants on the open fire by the side of the cabin. In police parlance, he was male, black, stocky, medium-height, late twenties. In mine, he was a ragged, frizzy-haired vagrant from the Cartucho (the Bowery of Bogotá). Nevertheless, in this, the land of *yajé*, I'd occasionally run into characters, just as abandoned as him, who had a remarkable mastery of *yajé* and, at times when I was entranced, even made me wonder whether they might be *saddhus* of the vine, unrecognizable by definition, precisely because it was easier for them than anyone else to abandon the worldly illusions, like family, homeland and possessions, which stood in the way of the oneness with the be-all of the likes of myself.

Even as I thought this, I was aware of the silly projection of my own fantasies onto nobodies, especially futile in the case of one who had zero Spanish and spoke in a regional dialect so thick I only understood one word in ten of his Portuguese, enough to learn he'd spent some time with Santo Daime anyway, though it didn't really explain my intuition that he was somehow of interest to me.

The trouble wasn't the language barrier but the one between an over-explicit industrialized culture and another, at the opposite end, so downtrodden it didn't articulate anything, if it could help it. And, like the neighbors around the corner, fed your own expectations back to you. I was struggling to explain the difficulties in bridging the gap between Daime and the indigenous school I was grounded in when he suddenly got excited. Not long ago, a "gringo" just like me had stayed with him and the old man for a few days—blondish, strong, great *ayahuasca* cook too but just when he was getting into things, he hurried off to some tourist spectacle. The apprentice acted this out in a *viva voce*, present tense peasant way and my assumption that the "gringo" spoke Portuguese too strengthened this premonition I just mentioned, but the passage of a jeep through a gap in the trees rudely burst that like a bubble. I took it as a summons from the time zone outside: *my* reality and drab as it was, the only one I could trust in.

It likewise offered me the opportunity which now came up to exploit the innocence of those in the other one. The old man showed Wilmer a sample of fresh, richly green leaves that surpassed our expectations and said he'd be happy to sell him a sackful the following morning, after he'd harvested them from his plantation in the jungle a few hours walk away.

Now came the hard part. Núñez's price had been stiff, so much so that Wilmer was rarely able to buy as much he needed. For a split second, I sincerely thought I was imagining things when I heard the man say twenty thousand (a quarter of what Núñez had charged), then, almost as quickly, I neutrally told him that we might as well make it two and pulled two bills of twenty out of my wallet. Instead of being suspicious, the guy seemed stunned by my generosity and fixed a time to collect the leaves, which I left to Wilmer.

As we walked back to find a moto-taxi, my guilt diminished, since, contrary to what Wilmer thought, knowing I sometimes cooked *yajé* back home, I hadn't bought the extra sack for myself. The leaves were a present for him, and all I was after was a decent brew for our session. There was no need to explain what that meant either, since he already understood that our purpose was to show the Russians that the visions they'd read about were not only real but revelatory in a way they'd never imagined, the life-changing privilege of beginners, so to speak, whereas I had other but not necessarily lesser hopes. Proving that you

could reach the rapture without going insane (to my wife) and (to Fabricio) that the unpleasantness of shitting in the woods and so forth counted for little against what I, in turn, sought most of all: the unique enrichment of the experience that came from a direct contact with the spirits of the jungle. An interpenetration, sorely missed, that might be the way out of my restless, garrulous misconduct whenever I confused the messages from the beyond with the chatter of the radio in my head.

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[From Pedro's diary]

*Nothing's turned up in Leticia so far. Thinking about my girls a lot and sad about missing them. If they're all that matters in my life, why I am so far away? Easy to blame it on Carla, that combo of witches she's in, doing Daime makes them too immaculate for a mere man. But it isn't her who stops me being with my daughters when I want to. It's me, as she says, should be calm, accept the breakup, not bother about arseholes who have nothing to do with it. For the gente do sul<sup>21</sup>, some anyway, I'm a pathetic has-been from the student protests but that's not as bad as some of the caboclos, cause I live just like them. Shoving me around, so I'd blow up in front of everyone. That I put up with, then, I caught one of them wrecking my rancho, punched him and it was me who got the warning from the council. Few nights later, the injustice inside me exploded, though it wasn't drinking more of the medicine than I could handle, as they said. Truth is, amount gave me super-clarity, conviction, hymns more meaningful than they'd ever been, right to tell everyone that the two arseholes singing alongside me, and acting so superior, were doing just the opposite of what they meant. Anyway, it was peaceful and even if scaring the virgins and old maids was part of the fun, God with me, I swear. Jimmy later told me that doing exactly what I did there, in the middle of a ceremony, got some professor elected mayor of Bogotá! Me, I was expelled. Wouldn't have stayed anyway, not to be humiliated in front of Juana and Bea again. At 9 and 11, old enough to know what's happening, but not to understand. Probably let me return by now, but wouldn't do any good. Carla right: first sort myself out, and to do that, get well clear of Mapiá for a stretch. Sacrificing myself for the girls' sake is o.k., Carla's a good mum, so why this depression all of a sudden?*

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On the way back to the campus I stopped in Leticia to check my e-mails again and found a brief one from Ivan which confirmed that he and Arkady were still in the region and would return to Leticia the following day. Looking for a traditional Yagua shaman in Caballo Cocha, an hour or so upriver on the Peruvian side, they'd wound up with a mestizo *spiritista*<sup>22</sup> who, after a lot of mumbo-jumbo, served a little glass of *ayahuasca* that did nothing, left them to their own devices and only

came back at dawn to angrily demand a payment of twice what they'd agreed on. He ended with regards to Wilmer, a hint perhaps that the misadventure had given them a better appreciation of him. I immediately wrote back about the *chacruna* we'd bought and pointed out that since they'd come this far and had to spend at least another night in Leticia, they should give it a final shot.

Having done what I could for people I barely knew, I was more concerned about the absence of a reply from Benjamin Constant, since Fabricio was due back in Bogotá after the weekend. I'd enthused about the frog medicine to my friends for a whole year (following my previous experience in Iquitos) before I finally found out about the Marubos. As a person generally regarded as a clown in yajé circles, the fact that Fabricio, who was serious himself, was the only one who'd taken me seriously was especially important. As Enrique's office was just around the corner, I decided to follow up my message to Ivan. He'd be back in ten minutes, the secretary told me, so, in the midst of talk in French or Norwegian and the squawking of the pet macaw on his perch in the front yard, I studied the bulletin board, where, among posters of Amacayacu National Park and Monkey Island, there was a small, smudgy photocopied notice, with a picture of Indians in grass skirts. Seeing my puzzlement, the secretary exclaimed that it was a pity I'd just missed a rare opportunity to see a traditional indigenous ceremony, especially because it was dying out and the community where it was held had put no restriction on the attendance of outsiders.

Enrique, when he appeared, sourly remarked that Ivan should have e-mailed *him* and said he'd try to convince them, if only as a favor to Wilmer.

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Our occasional misunderstandings aside, I liked the Indians on a simple human level. Their gentle vibe was a relief from the competitiveness built into my society yet, once on that wavelength, you'd catch insights that showed they were sometimes much sharper than they seemed. Santos, the gardener, was the silent phantom of the compound where we were staying, always present without being noticed much and shy in the way of an Indian with a steady (if ill-paid) job that might be endangered if he got too close to the unpredictable *blancos* around him. As we'd vaguely known each other for years, however, and he'd open up when he and I had the place to ourselves, he understood that I wasn't exactly a tourist and could be trusted, up to a point.

With, for example, some personal details, a little embarrassed about things which, far from being a secret, made him a prototype of the condition of the Indians of Leticia nowadays. Another commuter, riding his bike 8 kilometers every

day between work and his home in a community where the family *chagra* was now uselessly divided among 10 siblings.

We both knew that such settlements were also plagued by alcoholism and intra-family violence, and the only way out, for the lucky few, a dead-end job like his, yet he spoke of his life with a resignation that was less sad than perplexed, as if the shit happening to him was as incomprehensible as his possible entrance into the motorbike-owning class (if he saved enough) or the dispersal of his family: one brother begging in the marketplace, another happily employed as a cop, a sister who'd moved to Cali and his father . . . a teacher of their language at the Bogotá campus of the university.

*Mambe* was openly used on the campus without scandal. Ironically, Santos, who had far more right to it than we, was afraid that accepting the spoonfuls I offered might get him into trouble. But it was nice, when he was near, to get blessed by his understanding smile and mutually complain about its present abuses, like the growing number of students who treated it as a party drug, threatening a tolerance that dated back to the founding of the university, only a decade before, when it had been like a single extended family united by indigeneist ideals who treated the substance with respect. Little known to us idealists, however, were cases (he told me) where Indians in Leticia were now stripping off the *chagras* of others the leaves of a plant we naively thought they revered without exceptions.

Demographics, in short, the problem behind the jungle's other ones.

On the morning before the session, he made a roundabout approach to a favor he must have had in mind for a while, by way of the high price of *mambe*, his not having the land to produce his own and its growing popularity in Bogotá among the *yajé* set. To save him from the awkwardness of coming out with it, I told him I'd be happy to get a pound from Wilmer to take back to Bogotá for the old man—on the house, what is more, since he was a sage for whom it was bread. He thanked me with a sincerity that made me depressed about the so-called nobility of the gesture. Had my quest for sacred knowledge come down to this: that we, the white men, were pricing the Indians out of the market for the mysteries that belonged to them alone!

\* \* \*

The locals being what they were, I wasn't certain that our new supplier had delivered the leaves, but the stars felt right and the usual pre-session nerves made me fatalistic anyway. We didn't stir far from the pool except for a meal

in town, where I got a message from the secretary that Enrique was driving the Russians around and asked us not to leave for Wilmer's until he'd passed by in the afternoon.

Hearing that they *would* be joining us turned apprehension into an optimistic eagerness for the ritual, shared, if more temperately, by Fabricio, who wryly remarked that that's what we were here for, wasn't it. We agreed to meet on the campus later on, though there was no need for him to contract a taxi, I said, since, as Ivan and Arkady would be aboard, the yellow beast was sure to drive our whole party to the start of the track.

The gringo in me had us packed well before Enrique's E.T.A. at four and left me in a void where half of my mind was on the swaying palm needles framed by the loggia between the kitchen and toilets and the other far, far away. Finally, around quarter to five, Enrique appeared, but . . . without the Russians and tenser than I'd ever seen him.

Not without reason, since they'd boarded the afternoon flight to Bogotá at the last minute without paying him the seven hundred dollars he'd advanced for their hotels and other expenses!

My first thought was a rip-off and my second reporting them to the emigration officials at El Dorado. No, he replied, shocked at my uncharacteristic vehemence, a reflection of my guilt.

He'd developed a nose for such things over the years and trusted them, especially knowing that the international cash cards they relied on sometimes didn't work in Leticia, as he'd seen himself when taking them round the ATMs.

Reassuring as he was, I couldn't ignore that I was morally responsible for the money. In theory, that is, since it would be painful and while Ivan had seemed upright to me as well, I wasn't so confident about him as Enrique was. From my years on the hippy trail, I knew that even honest travelers (myself among them) might do a midnight flit, because they could get away with it and the road brought out the gaily irresponsible side of oneself. And, sure, the amount was a trifle for Ivan, only at times a blitheness about such debts was precisely one of the ways the rich were very different from you and me.

Meanwhile, I'd forgotten about Fabricio, who, probably mistaking our arrangements, must have been waiting for us to collect him at his hotel. And it was only after Enrique left that I realized I'd lost my one shot at a cell phone (given that we'd stupidly left ours in Bogotá and there were no pay phones on the campus).



By the time, laden with backpacks, we walked to the airport, found three moto-taxis and arrived there, it was ten past five, which left us just enough time for a taxi to the trailhead and the walk to the *maloca* before it got dark.

But even Leticia had a rush hour, so taxis were scarce and the driver of the one we eventually stopped was already skirting the army base when he realized he was short of gas. Not grave at first sight since the busiest gas station in town was only a few blocks behind us. Except that for the only time I could remember, it was dry and that forced us to drive all the way back to one near the frontier. Then, the line, the friendly word to the attendant, the delay to find change for a fifty, the roundabout route to our starting point, the leisurely pace after that: how alien the concept of hurry was to Leticia and more so, those who insisted on it!

When we got to the settlement, the position of the sun was alarming, but I reminded myself that the trick was to literally take it one step at a time along a path both familiar and clear, counting, as before, on the psychic momentum you got when you surrendered yourself to the jungle. As night sight sharpened, along with a sixth sense of where to place the foot, we advanced pretty quickly, until, about 2/3 along, we reached the boggy part where the footing was most treacherous yet the trail too hemmed in by the forest to admit the minimal starlight which had guided us thus far.

Knowing what awaited us, I had taken a spoonful of *mambe* and it kept me alert but balance was hard with the weight on my back and there were moments when I was entangled, blinded, tripped, sweated and out of breath at the same time, so that all that propelled me was animal instinct, aided by the solidarity of my clan, better at it than the so-called leader of the expedition: wife slow but focused, Fabricio on march with a rocky aplomb, son laughingly leaping from one bar to the next of the jungle gym, then turning back to scold me for being clumsy.

After cursing the trail for fooling me about it several times, the definitive sight of sky at the end of the alley of trees brought a giddy exhilaration, slightly clouded, when we emerged, by a nostalgia for feelings raised to a rare intensesness.

You could hardly call a safe, quarter hour's scramble a feat I knew, but, in galvanizing habitual thought, it was as good a preparation for the vine as I was likely to find.

As it was barely seven at the most, we faced a wait of a few hours till the start, with nothing to do once we'd placed our blankets and other stuff beneath the hammocks and mosquito nets Wilmer had thoughtfully put up. For him and other healers, this dead time was a tacit part of the ritual itself, meant to get both sides into a meditative frame of mind before the cups were served, but my

worries about the forthcoming purge were usually lightened by the exchange of news and jokes with my companions and the surroundings, if rural, relatively urbane.

By day, the *maloca* was impressive as vernacular architecture: its ingenious structure, surprising span, fitness to site, folkloric glamour. By night, on the other hand, it was the amphitheater of the supermundane which caught and compressed the primal influences rampant in the jungle.

Hunched on the little stool, bare feet on soil, hands clasped to knees, nostrils invaded by smoke, dust, mould and straw, our only illumination a wick in a tin can of petroleum which deepened the shadows even more, I felt as though the space were materializing a dread simultaneously inside and around me. Reviewing my weaknesses, fears and faults was inescapable in the prelude to a session, whereas I was now up against something *out there* that closed in and crushed.

After dousing us with talc, Wilmer knelt over his “altar” on the boards at the back—medicine, cups, posy, crucifix, images, shells, stones and skulls—recited Hail Marys and Paternosters and, holding the open mouth of the bottle close to his lips, as though confiding a secret, whispered and whistled a blessing. The tension was like a shrillness without voice but it vanished when, after the last, slow sip, I reached the point of no return and felt a mixture of recklessness, relief and pride.

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Compared to the brew from the Putumayo I usually drank—as much sour as bitter and liquid to the palate—Wilmer’s had a syrupy sweetness I found foul, but, having steeled myself in advance, I let it pass and likewise tried not to be overpowered by the heaviness in my stomach, remembering how fear of the unknown had exaggerated the effect when I first drank with him.

No more than five minutes had passed when there was a sudden scuffle of creaking wood, distressed moans and emphatic heaving: my wife vomiting a step beyond the door, which prompted a silly but unavoidable feeling of superiority. Virtually in the same instant, however, the eruptions in her body became mine and I found myself on the perimeter of the clearing, having emptied my bowels without knowing how, listening to her waterfall in the distance as I watched Fabricio, erect and impassive, vomiting into a cluster of roots a few yards away.

Around midnight, after vomiting profusely outside for the second time, I was searching for the rear door when I stumbled into my wife, flopped on the ground like a rag-doll. She’d always been far more of a warrior than I, however,

and her cries for Wilmer to come were full of a rage that told me she'd endure. For a minute or two, as I rested my trembling limbs in the hammock, the netted enclosure felt snug and homely, then the surround tightened into a trap for turbulent currents, clothed in sickly greens and yellows. Wave upon wave of an electrified negativism that brought a flashback to my earliest experiences of yajé in the heart of the Putumayo. The fire, dizziness, fear and remorse in the midst of the horror movie projected by the agonizing intestines: that was terrifying enough, but to lose the kernel the self-observing self had always relied on, well . . . maybe the only way to put it is *Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini*<sup>23</sup>.

Seeing Wilmer pass by, I got him to shake the leaf-fan over me but just as the wind began to work its cooling miracle, there was another cry from her and a groan from the recess of the hut where Fabricio, rigid as a block of wood, was clinging to a pillar, momentarily overwhelmed. What I sensed, though, was not defeat but a transcendental disgust with the sheer needlessness of what he'd let himself in for.

With the intersection of theirs with mine, the defenselessness that is a synonym of the vine was at its highest pitch, the *crux* where the self that separates the real from the unreal blanks out, and the you that you think is you either collapses or (luckily for me now) instinct emerges to tap of hidden reserve of strength. Borrowing from the *taitas*, I fought off the bad spirits with bestial bellows, explosive puffs of breath and an emphatic waving of hands until the same automatic pilot lifted me up and guided me through the blackness to the clearing, where, after puking again, I took stock for the first time and wondered for the millionth time whether yajé was too strong for me or I too weak for him, the tiger. The stuff I'd begun on was widely acknowledged to be rocket fuel, but so were many that followed it I'd coped with, more or less. Apparently, then, the difference were the twenty intervening years, and if not wiser now than then, I was older, hence chastened by life as well and presumably more reverential.

I let thought slide into the furtive presences suggested by croaks, shrieks, silhouettes and gleams, underlain by the rank perfume of life rotting to regenerate itself, and was gradually drawn into the embrace of something behind the details, a welding of sense, thought and spirit into the inescapably organic *that* of the true.

No, I wasn't mistaken, this brew was as potent as any I'd drunk, and the obvious explanation, the bonanza of *chacrana*: theoretically, that is, because, while helpful as a guide to yajé's effects, every drinker worth his salt knew that biochemistry yielded to the enigma of its persona, the jokester who skewed human concepts of the divine, as seen, I reflected, in the chain of events leading up to this moment. The agents of it all, the Russians, had missed the boat just as

it docked. The imbalance between the sordid and the sublime was confirming Fabricio's disenchantment with Jungle Jim's act. And the long-awaited opportunity to effect a truce between my wife and my rival passion was a season in hell for her so far.

When I returned to our encampment, however, another convergence occurred. My restlessness touched off a disturbance in her, and our heightened perceptions knotted into a single suspension which broke into a flight to Juramidam<sup>24</sup>:

*A meu Pai peço firmeza  
E não saia da minha mente  
Dou ensino a quem não sabe  
E aconselho os inocentes<sup>25</sup>*

Wherever it came from, the hymn crystallized the *moment*, cutting through our confusion to that point where *ayahuasca* confronts you with all you were and are and would like to be. But why here?: in a context first damned, I'd felt, and soon to be graced, I hoped, by the wild factuality of nature, shorn of manmade accretions. But all that mattered then was that it worked, causing, as it built momentum, a fragmented recreation of Mapiá, especially sightings of Pedro, to the point where my son, who hadn't drunk and been pretty bored up to then, now became our enthusiastic and word-perfect prompter, recalling the hymns from that journey much better than myself.

As one followed the next, without any conscious effort of ours, I marveled, as often before, at Daime's uncanny transformation of that which usually holds down into that which uplifts, our old earthly clay, and especially puzzling for me, the writer, freed from the cage of words by the same surrender to song which manifested my human condition in words so vivid they became fiery creatures that leapt out of the page and burned into my soul.

A radiance rose from our corner that swelled and enclosed us in a phantasmal ball of a faint lilac transparency, feeding and fed in turn by an ether of tenderness. In my case, a silent gratitude—to life and the plant and the turns in my life leading up to this moment. In hers, a weepy outburst of love for my son and the Virgin Mary, a harmless heartfelt craziness that I poked gentle fun at while envying her freedom to let go, the ultimate wisdom of the plant and often blurred by my zeal for the “mystical.”

In one moment, Wilmer started to cleanse me, and sensing this aura as well, froze, gave us a mock-bow and left. Though Fabricio had stood up to the purge better than we, the light on us had likewise lengthened our distance from each other.

It was only when we reached “civilization” in the form of the road that I remembered the session had coincided with the celebration of a passage from agony to resurrection, but that had no significance for me. What had made the night exceptionally memorable was the purge and that was for other reasons and the remedy for an inexplicable uneasiness I now felt not rosaries, but a shower, hearty breakfast and deep sleep. On our return to the compound after a late lunch in Leticia, I sought to place my spirit in a garden as green, quiet and private as the one around me until more or less came back to myself, but the underlying anxiety persisted.

\* \* \*

One obvious source of the worry was a scan of my e-mails during the brief trip to Leticia on the same post-session Saturday. That there was still no news from my contact in Benjamin Constant might not have been so upsetting on its own, but reminders of Bogotá heightened the fragility of a high where the drinker feels both threatened and resentful about the intrusion of “real life.”

The next morning, with my balanced restored, I went (with my family) to Fabricio’s hotel to share our impressions of the session and work out a solution to the problem, caused, I guessed, by our arrival at the beginning of Easter week, and the strong possibility that my acquaintance in Benjamin might have taken advantage of the holiday for a short trip but was bound to return when the university he worked at reopened on the Monday. So far as I knew, he was pretty reliable and, as the launch to Benjamin only took an hour, we could settle the thing that morning. If, as I expected, he was there, we’d do the frog medicine then or the next day, which, given the benefits and the flexibility of being his own boss, would be worth a little delay for Fabricio, I hoped.

Now that the session was sufficiently behind both of us to turn its tortures into the war stories drinkers enjoy telling one another, I was upbeat, talkative and not particularly put off by his taciturn condescension, because that was usual for him and I’d learned that, strained as I felt our friendship to be at times, he was basically shy and liked me precisely for drawing him out instead of being over-awed like others in our crowd.

This time, however, his good-natured indulgence of the over-excited kid was betrayed by a long, pitying stare, a disbelief mixed with impatience finally broken by a subtle shift of gaze which awakened me to the folded clothes, pile of books and opened suitcase on his bed.

The contretemps about the frog poison had nothing to do with his departure in a few hours, he explained. Interesting as it might have been, it wasn't that important to him or no more than anything else in the jungle. Like yajé, for example, a uniquely powerful medicine, to be sure, but one he could do just as fruitfully at home without immersing himself in a cultural context that was largely irrelevant nowadays, he believed, and not just to him but the patients he treated with it. Much as he liked the Indians as individuals, he wasn't convinced, as I was, about the indispensability of their traditional medicine, either because they blindly stuck to customs whose rationale they no longer understood or the wisdom they did have couldn't be transposed to our society without a lot being lost.

"I won't deny that the *pinta*<sup>26</sup> was amazing, but in the end the only revelation at Wilmer's was that I'm a *doctor*. And that wasn't just because the jungle's too hot for my taste and the *maloca* too dirty and dark. Only with that on top of the purge stretching on and on till it seemed like there was nothing else, it hit me that the things you love about the jungle . . . well, for me they're a distraction. What really matters is my work. I'm not on a *pilgrimage* the way you are."

Sandwiched between two more pleas from Pedro's wife, the long-awaited mail arrived just around the time that Fabricio took off: undoubtedly a sign, I thought, but exactly of what? My first reaction was that he'd got what he deserved but, on further consideration, I had some doubts of my own about how the trip had unfolded so far. From the Russians' complaint to the apparition of the leaves to the fabrication of a brew beyond imagining to Fabricio's surfeit of sensations, one accident had tripped off the next in a series of events that successively redefined and obscured my purposes for being here.

Nevertheless, the trance always emboldened me to follow a healthy egotism and that recklessness still lingered sufficiently to set aside, for a while, my ingrained concern for what others thought of me. Back at the campus, as twilight came on, and the contemplation of the next step—with the Marubos on the Javari—tautened my nerves, I glimpsed a clue to resolving the vagueness of the quest, a principle of velocity, as it were, that I had to maintain, harmonizing my rhythms, if possible, with the sentience flowing through the beings of the forest. The muting of day hushed my spirit and though far from primeval, this patch of forest had a magic of its own under the surrealistic reflection of artificial light on the surface of pool, louvered windows and whitewashed walls.

I had more reason than most to count my blessings just then. The mere fact that I was here in the Amazon, after being raised in the Bronx, narrowly escaping the treadmill of a career, accidentally finding Colombia, etc. was a miracle, and looked at another way, the session had been an unexpected bonus. The evening

gave a velvety texture to the stubby grass and corrugated trees which smoothed out my worries about the coming adventure into a sense of satisfaction undisturbed by the summons of the ordinary as a bulldozer passed on the road, my son turned on the TV and the students clanged pots in the kitchen. Yet it didn't dim a warning light, faint as a glowworm: a signal of *unfinished business*.

\* \* \*

[From Pedro's diary]

*Shifted to Tabatinga, plot of land near the forest owned by this old man who runs ceremonies here. I was already tired of whining when I ran into that freak from Brazil again and suddenly decided to take up his invitation. Supposed to be an ayahuasquero, ain't I? Now that I'm back to the medicine on a regular basis, more certain that this part of the Amazon is right for me. Place pretty dirty and primitive, man's not much of a healer and the patients a few locals so poor we're down to a pot of beans and rice between us. While I don't like to take advantage, he says helping him out might help me too if I stay a while. Real jungle's only an hour from here, where he has this big plantation of leaves and sticks we're gonna harvest and cook and selling the bottles from that to ayahuasqueros he knows will keep him going for another few months and enough left over for me to keep traveling, running sessions along the way. The idea is to work flat out till Easter week, when, with big sessions nearly every day, he hopes for a bonanza, then, if we're short of stuff to sell, as per our plan, cook more to reach the required amount. Downside this Brazilian bugger, too lazy to help much, yet expects his share of the cut.*

\* \* \*

The launch ride to Benjamin was a mortifying reminder of my blindness towards a fundamental glory of a region called the Amazon because of the river of the same name. Unadventurous and not one for messing around with boat, rod or net anyway, I stuck to the handkerchief of mainland I'd accidentally colonized, roughly a few kilometers-wide strip following the line of the road from Leticia, past the airport, university and Wilmer's, to my ex-wife's place on kilometer 11 and the *maloca* of another indigenous friend on 12.

This didn't exclude a passing acquaintance with the Amazon, the considerable stretch between Manaus and Iquitos in fact, but the one three and a half day voyage downriver and several dawn to dusk upriver ones had only reinforced my indifference to its activity, since, given the size and/or speed of the boat, it was like riding down the middle of a titanic motorway, made of water instead of asphalt, and reduced the forest to a distant, monotonous backdrop.

I'd forgotten the fun of odd trips of an hour or two over the years in slower and humbler craft. Arriving at the anchored barge in Tabatinga, we bought the tickets, signed our names in the book (blessing the freedom from immigration control) and within five minutes, clambered onto the small but fast fiberglass launch, found a bench, put on the vest and at a great roar, felt an uplift literalized by the bucking prow.

That this was commuting for the other passengers, Brazilian workers and housewives for the most part, only added to the enjoyment. On the one hand, I felt as fully Amazonian as they in being at ease with the rough arrangements, and on the other, the consideration that this was as much their daily bread as, say, a bus ride in Bogotá was for me, heightened the privilege of getting what might be called the maximum impact of the Amazon, a sort of dizzying, dazzling, archetypal amplitude, as though sky, water, horizon and so forth were spinning around a primal axis.

Like the serpent the Indians believed it to be, the river coiled round itself so that one bank turned into its opposite or the two closed into a lake or what seemed like a channel became a dead end or vice versa. At times, when I did a soft focus on the sheet of water, it seemed like the motion of the launch wasn't forward, but a buffeting of the still center of a huge revolution. I'd add to that the effect of speed, gleam, spray, bumps, vibration or the wind when the pilot opened the panes onto the bow, if it didn't make me sound like a goddamn tourist.

The one who nevertheless got a basic sense of direction from the fading of waterside Tabatinga into blobs which became scarcer without disappearing as we advanced and in a half hour, clustered again into the approach to Benjamin, though they were piffling up close compared to the frontage of Leticia/Tabatinga: a few sheds and barges, and on the rise where the commercial district began, a pocket promenade where Jhonny Piña's car awaited us.

As though it had been days, not years, since our acquaintanceship in Manaus, we immediately felt relaxed in each other's company. A short drive from the port brought us to his house, where we met his wife and baby daughter, but catching up with each other was cut short by a class he had, so we went for a long walk round Benjamin Constant, which would also give me a chance, I thought, to correct what I'd assumed was my mistaken impression, from a short visit years before, that there wasn't much to the place. But after going up one main avenue at a right angle to the river, back down the other that paralleled it, and rechecking the dockside area, I realized I'd been right. There was no sign of the supermarkets, internet cafes and modern hotels that were common in Leticia, only that core of basic commerce and inland, straggly, haphazard residential districts of the kind I'd seen in Tabatinga.



It also fitted in with the hopeless internet service, for Jhonny had actually been at home the whole week, and as frustrated by ourselves by the breakdown of e-mails. That afternoon, he showed us the university, which looked more like a high school (as the main building in fact had been). Seeing a large, half-built classroom wing behind it, however, I reflected that Harvard had started the same way and the chance to be in on the start was one of the region's advantages. But in bending backwards to be fair, I was wrong in another way, for the annex was already falling apart due to shoddy materials and delays, an example, among many others there, of the local corruption he was in trouble for denouncing, along with the razing of the forest on the large tract of surrounding land set aside for the future campus, when it could easily be pruned into a landscaping.

Wait a minute, I interrupted, you make it sound as bad as Colombia. "It's worse, this part at least." The biggest scandal, he went on, was the collapse of the health service that attended the indigenous communities around Benjamin, so that literally scores were dying from diseases apparently wiped out by modern medicine decades ago, which fed back into the perennial problems of stolen resources, malnutrition, alcoholism, etc.

Even so, the town didn't look *that* bad, I considered. Boring and jerrybuilt, yes, but it wasn't as though shit ran through the gutters, and judging by the motorbikes nearly every student had and the mod. cons. of most houses, his comfortable lifestyle wasn't the exception. In short, taking Benjamin as the norm of urbanized Amazonia, a nowhere just about justified by basic creature comforts, climate, neighborliness and surrounding wilderness, Leticia stood out even more, since it combined all that (with similar problems) and a certain urbaneness into a quality which distinguished it from Manhattan, on the one hand, and, say, Puerto Maldonado<sup>27</sup>, on the other, symbolized perhaps by its tri-frontier tee-shirts, postcards and flags: a certain *fluidity*. Nations, races, classes, species, landscapes, spirits, eras—everything flowed through it in the most natural way.

All the while, moreover, it was clear that Jhonny appreciated the mellowness of a tight-knit, slow-paced, unpretentious frontier town. He joshed with the porter, slapped the rector on the back, amiably fended off the many gals who had a crush on the slender, youngish, handsome, curly-haired prof and relished its Macondo-like idiosyncrasies.

Back at his house, he led us to nearby hill, with a great view of the river, the only spot where his cell phone was able to connect with Colombia, and the site of a little futuristic church in a shape of a tent which hinted that Benjamin might be more interesting than I'd thought.

It wasn't in the end, save for one thing much better, discovered in the same serendipitous way when, on our way to tank up, Jhonny saluted a man laying some cables in a ditch who happened to be an indigenous leader, and seeing a gringo alongside him, urged him to show me the museum on the same block. What one had to with the other was, I soon learned, that it was probably the only one in the world exclusively devoted to the Tikunas, the dominant tribe of this region in former times.

Museum was hardly the word for a one-storey bungalow with an amateurish display. The community-culture angle gave it a certain appeal, I admit, but examining even the most modest collection of Indian artifacts was stressful for me, as my Indiana Jones fantasies roused a thirst for ancient wisdom I had neither the temperament or talent to satisfy, aggravated in this case by the blown-up photos of explorer/anthropologists from the good old days.

Objectively speaking, the pots, spears, blowguns, baskets and the like were too crude or like their current equivalents to be intimidating, which fitted into the opinion I already had that the magic of the Amazonian cultures wasn't a matter of crafts but lay in a more intangible realm of sacred plants, music, cosmovision, mythology, social codes and so forth. As a quaint hand-painted map showed, their settlements had stretched to Manaus and, in Leticia the conglomerate indigenous culture of today was permeated by their influence in the way of names, factions, customs, technologies and especially the face-painting, bark hula skirts and masks seen in the traditional dances and the pop version of the same at the festivals of so-called Amazonian culture the municipality put on from time to time.

In that respect, they were the stock exotics of the jungle alright, but I'd somehow never been heated by the *idea* of them, as for example, with the Ingas, Huitotos or Kogis, who were still trailed by a shamanic magic I'd never heard of in their case. The most interesting thing there was at the same time a further reason for my undoubtedly prejudiced view that their absorption of everything else had left them with little of particular interest to me, exclusive to them, I mean. It was a replica of the small, conical grass hut that was the centerpiece of their most important ritual, when girls who have reached puberty are initiated into womanhood at a community gathering.

Following a long isolation in the forest, with her only company her mother, the girl is numbed by an alcoholic drink given by her father, who, after plucking out all the hair on her head, hosts an orgy of drinking and dancing for the whole tribe.

And that's it? I asked myself.

I was nevertheless impressed by the two men Jhonny got into a conversation with: one the director, who lived in the back, and the other an elder of the Tikuna community. In my experience, the pride in indigenous culture that motivated such efforts often had a bitter or militant edge. But they ruefully acknowledged that the museum was only a gesture towards the younger generation that might or might not do some good.

No, the museum was great, Jhonny told them, particularly the posters on their language, with some of the common phrases alongside the translation into Portuguese and the phonetics. I already knew that he had a smattering of a few Indian languages, but this was my first inkling of his amazing facility. Tikuna, it seemed, was as tough as Chinese for the practically imperceptible intonations that might give one word six different meanings and he mastered their examples of it straightaway.

Enchanted by something in the sounds absent from the objects, I bought a C.D. of their traditional music on the way out and when I looked at the little photo, surmised that the notice I'd seen at Enrique's office was for a Tikuna menstruation ritual.

\* \* \*

[From Pedro's diary]

*Just when it's going right, it goes wrong for me again, but may turn out to have been a blessing in disguise. Three days doing a huge harvest, another two for the wood, borrowed some pots and got down to it, all going well until the boss has some second thoughts, suspect it's that Brazilian freak badmouthing me behind my back. Resents me for being white, educated, clean-minded and so forth, but it's underhand, sucks up till I'm sick of the sight of him. There's something else—bad energy when the three of us are drinking on our own. Macumbeiro<sup>28</sup>, if ever I saw one! What tipped me off was his interest in my pipe the other night. Grabs it from me, supposedly just to have a look. Never seen one like it before: so big, with the quality wood and fine carving. Fixing his eyes on it, muttering something, fills it, hands it back. Here, try this, some special tobacco I have, happened to be out, so I did, tasted alright, but almost at once I got a warning in the miração, recited protective chant I learned from the Ashaninka<sup>29</sup>. Only works so far, so the next day went to Leticia, to be clear of his influence and also check in with that fellow Milos, possibility of doing something at his lodge. While I'm waiting for him there, look at a notice for this special ritual I'd already heard about, but without knowing the details, and all of sudden I'm sure it's meant for me. Then I remember I haven't got the cash to get to Puerto Nariño, and this gal brushes up against*

*me, says she's come all the way from Switzerland to be there and I mustn't miss it. Nordic goddess type, but haven't had a woman for a long time, tongue freezes, red in the face. Instead of putting her off, that gets her more interested, invites me to a coffee. Maybe because I've been holding things in for too long and I'll never see her again, spill out my recent woes. You're a shaman!, she cries, fascinated, and when I try to put her straight, goes on about how modest I am, the nobility of my path. She's lonely, sees no harm in a friendly conversation, I get up to leave and she offers to pay for my trip to the ceremony! Maybe she's loony, I'm thinking now, when she whistles a moto-taxi, takes us to the office near the market, buys us the tickets for next morning and hands me mine. Back at the plot, old man sorry to see me go, hadn't been fooled by that freak after all and handed me four big bottles of the most potent stuff we'd made as a going away present. So I get to the ceremony and after that, if what I've been told about Puerto Nariño is true, run some sessions and keep going.*

\* \* \*

The bizarreness of gliding in a late-model sedan to a mysterious tribal ritual didn't occur to me in the hour after dawn on the following day but it wasn't because I was too preoccupied to take in my surroundings, reminiscent of the penultimate stage of the trip to Mapiá, along the highway, from the Peruvian border (a few hours after Puerto Maldonado) to Rio Branco, equally new, well made and lethal in accelerating the conversion of the ownerless indigenous jungle into the white man's cattle ranches and roadside developments. The thought was driven away by the effortless motion through a jungle unexpectedly cross-sectioned into barbed wire, meadow and tree line topped by a blue sea with rosy streaks.

Somehow I'd abstracted myself from the ordeal in store, partly from a conscious conditioning but more as the effect of an environment which forced a shedding of skins of neurosis necessarily thickened in Bogotá by responsibility, routine, brainwork, sedentary lifestyle and so forth.

Twenty minutes along, we parked on the verge, and after a short walk, reached a clearing where basic houses semi-circled a *maloca* of the kind seen in photos by long-gone ethnographers. From without, it was a small, squat cone that fell to the ground in a mop of uncombed hair. Within, it was an irregular oval marred by holes and very dark, but judging from the domestic activity in its depths, closer to the original way of life than the ones with neat plaits and giant pillars I'd seen in Leticia, which were mostly for the tourists nowadays.

For the first quarter hour Jhonny, the *payé*,<sup>30</sup> his two sons and I, sitting on opposite logs, awkwardly peered at each other amidst long silences. René was in his fifties, with chunky features, offset by a boyish short back and sides with quiff: a slow man of few words and incurious about strangers.

When Jhonny mentioned my book on *ayahuasca*, René summoned the boys to fetch his *rapé*<sup>31</sup>, the brown-green snuff made of toasted and pulverized tobacco leaves. He then inserted the hollowed out bird's bone into one of my nostrils, gave me a strong blast, and, after a minute, did the other. I was accustomed to the effect (like plunging into a pool) of a frigid nail driven straight into the brain, which after a brief dizziness, wakes you up and clears your breathing.

I was a little disquieted by his scrutiny, remembering that any indigenous healer, when first approached, tested your character. The key to unlock his gifts was to keep humble and quiet. At the slightest suggestion that you were a tough guy, even at second hand, however, appraisal might turn into combat.

René reached for something in the thatch and I averted my glance until the moment of truth, announced by a shifting of weight on the log, but it turned out to be a gourd of *ayahuasca*!

Jhonny had told me about the rituals he'd shared with them, but I'd never expected such a test when I most needed to be grounded. He returned my pleading look with a silent reminder that I had no choice. From his account, the Marubos had the eccentric custom of starting at sunset, casually drinking a cup every half hour or so and only opening the ceremony around midnight, when the cumulative effect kicked in. And, indeed, the brew tasted insipid and thin. But when the time came, me, not him, would be the guinea pig.

From a *mochila*<sup>32</sup> he removed a stick whose flattened side was smeared with dry snot, pointed his chin at it, meditating for a while, and told me a story about another gringo. Joining one of their nocturnal expeditions, he took hold of a frog they'd caught, and impatient with sacramental rigmarole, licked its back and dropped dead on the spot!

Oddly, this was the first sign that I'd be in safe hands. From his mischievous expression, the story was doubtless as apocryphal to him as to me and its true purpose to make me complicit in his own malice and thus laugh at my fear.

I asked him how much they took and on what occasions. That prompted René to a pantomime of rapid, repeated jabs of his fist up and down arms and legs. "Before the hunt, so you're alert and lucky." And the women? for healing, but only down here (jabbing at his ankles), they don't like people to see the marks. For us, it shows you're a real man."

With the heated end of a stick with the roundness of a pencil, he now made two punctures on each of my upper arms: it stung but didn't hurt, the idea being to open a miniscule layer of skin and leave the ones underneath as a protective filter.

“He wants you to change into your trunks,” Jhonny interrupted. “There, in the corner, it’s dark and no one cares.”

I was encircled by Jhonny, René’s sons and mine, watched him spit on the glue and soften it with the scrape of a penknife, the point of which was then used to apply it. In an instant, each impress began to burn and the heat quickly spread through my body with a rising intensity.

I lurched across the clearing, with my son protectively alongside, leftwards to a thin grove of trees overlooking a lake. I wanted to be out of sight and close to the calming water and it became a race between a dwindling self-control and a swelling bestiality that had me grabbing trunks for support until it drove me to my knees halfway along.

And to the full realization that I’d landed in a multi-sensorial hell of nausea, asphyxiation, muscle loss and blurred sight, and the distress as bad as the worst of *ayahuasca*. Yet the vine gave you a picture of the monsters you fought, whereas this wrenched you right out of anything that might be *conceived* into a null suspension, a hairsbreadth above death.

“Dad, your face is as red as a tomato!,” my son exclaimed and René sent someone to splash water on me.

In another sense, however, this hell was more comprehensible than that of *ayahuasca*, insofar as it was concentrated in the pit of my stomach. But if the perceptual chaos was less, the sheer physical torture was far worse, as if the prolonged purge of the vine had been compressed into the essence of agony.

I placed my forehead on the ground, arched my back, forced deep breaths and silently repeated to myself that it wouldn’t last long. I’d reached the make-or-break point where survival is uncertain and your only defense is prayer.

I heard the laughter of some kids who’d edged into the grove to observe the crazy gringo. It was an insult to the pride of he who’d learnt a lesson or two from *ayahuasca* and spurred me to focus on the pebbly feel of the soil on my brow, opposing the immediacy of that to the immediacy of pain.

I was in a trance ruled not specifically by the spirit of the frog or any other icon of *ayahuasca*. It was an impersonal force that squeezed me into a dimension unrecognizable but for the thrust to the guts.

When the dagger signaled a transcendental vomit, I squatted, put a fist to the ground for balance, heaved hard several times without result, stood up to loosen my trunks, tripped, fought a desperate struggle with the knot and nearly shat myself.

The pain dulled but still woozy, I took that for the prelude and tensed for a greater flow. Then, as if gradually awakening from a nightmare, I came back to where I literally was: calves cramped, arse bare and itchy, son worried and slightly disgusted. In line with the traditional finale, I bathed in the lake and it was like floating through liquid reflections of sky, field and forest that momentarily turned the Amazon into rapture.

Back at the *maloca*, René listened to my impressions with a benign neutrality, pleased but not excited, as I was, about solving a sum of maths elementary to him. I'd sensed his vigilance all along as a murmur of accompaniment in the buzzing of the grove, but it was only now that I appreciated how lucky I'd been to have such a skilled and kindly guide.

As the person of presumably broader outlook, I should have known that the cultural gap worked both ways. Instead, I had distorted, into a hazing, the wariness and unease of a man whose meanings were implicit and had only been prodding me in the right direction. To face the challenge as he and his kind did: modestly, in a low key and taking one thing at a time.

He was embarrassed when I brought up the fee and handed him the equivalent in *reais*<sup>33</sup> of the cost of a session back home.

After posing with his family for a photo in front of the *maloca*, we hit the road again.

\* \* \*

[From Pedro's diary]

*Past few days pretty hectic, but now have a temporary base and some peace to write. Lucky to get a launch from Puerto Nariño to the ceremony, given the distance and crowds. Not what I expected: community center of breeze blocks in the middle of nowhere, little tent village nearby. Had this idea there'd be ayahuasca, mambe or the like, turns out the "medicine" is chicha<sup>34</sup>: gigantic piss-up, from one angle. Arrived just before dark, full moon rising, place gradually filled up, maybe eighty in all, mostly Tikunas, some painted with huito<sup>35</sup>, or these masks and bark skirts. Friendly enough, but offended if you don't drink. Cazabe<sup>36</sup>, meat, plantain I tucked into, long day, made me sleepy, put up hammock alongside others, tuned into the drumming and singing, not really asleep but half-dreaming the music.*

*Up early, swim in the river, breakfast, milling round with the visitors, walk round the forest, little nap, I thought, but conked out and nearly missed the main event, round midday, when the family led the girl in to this big hoo-ha of drums, flutes, rattles, etc., dancing and chanting round her. Just about squeezed into the doorway, don't like*

*outsiders to get close anyway, plus they pull out her hairs in miniature hut only the family is let into. Later, paraded her round, whole body black with huito, feather head-dress, shells round her waist. Wasted, she looked, poor lass. No wonder, after months on her own, scaring her about becoming a woman, thrown into this riot, pain to drive the lesson home, get her dead drunk, poke her to stay awake whole time. Kind of proud too, now grown-up, star of the show. Different culture, who knows.*

*By then, Swiss gal's latched onto someone else: so-called shaman from Peru: beads, crystals, braids, hawk nose, but no way indigenous, wants to get into her pants. Acts like she never knew me, just as well, talking all the time about ancient wisdom, guardians of the forest, like a religious nut.*

*The rumba first night nothing compared to next, like the initiation turned on the switch. More and more commotion, till it got to the aggressive stage: noise, arguments, fights. Still, trapped, as I was, fixed on the positive side: elders, more traditional approach, chanting and drumming non-stop, spacey look, miraçao, I'd bet. Dancers, bare feet, bark gear, hula skirts, clasping in facing lines, stamp, rattle, charge, hot, dark, smoky, atmosphere. When I screened out the cursing and puking, reminded me a little of the Ashaninka, except, being blanco, couldn't escape stupid questions, jokes, pressing of drinks. Wore me down, strung hammock in patio at the back, though, like before, semi-conscious most of the night.*

*More of the same for another two days and nights didn't appeal, not sure where to go, or boat out of there till it was over. Previous day, hung out with tourists in breaks. Naturally interested in ayahuasca, not all hippies, profs or sightseers, some in eco-tourism around Puerto Nariño, help me run some ceremonies, they say. Now, hung-over, I remember, how these new age types jump from one craze to another without meaning their promises. It's dawn, no one's round, sorry for myself, and one of them pops out of nowhere. If you're serious about what you said, get hold of your stuff, and follow me, fast, the launch with the blue tarp over there. Anything to get out of there, learn on way he owns lodge near the town, some guests mad to do ayahuasca but leaving next day, so it's tonight or never!*

\* \* \*

To round off our visit, we continued in the same direction for another twenty minutes to Atalaia do Norte, a port on the Javari, which, due to the tributary's looping course to the Amazon, meant that that village was much closer to Benjamin by land than by water. It wasn't much of a place but, compared to Benjamin, I felt, it didn't even pretend to be and I rather liked its little board houses, painted in primary colors and with fretwork details, sunken into rather than built on grassy lots of plantains, flowering bushes and left-over jungle. Its only tourist attraction, so to speak, was a small plaza or park, just behind the marketplace, that overlooked the river at a bend even bigger than that of its neighbor. From its width and sparsely settled banks alone, I didn't find farfetched Jhonny's claim



that, upriver a day or two, the Javará became one of those last, lost wilderness places of *Discovery Channel* documentaries.

One reason for it, he explained, was that the region was a protected indigenous reserve closed off to anyone who didn't have a permit from the Funai,<sup>37</sup> and so pristine there were still tribes who killed (and sometimes ate) white intruders. But just as my mouth watered (my explorer fantasies again), he gave us the drawback, which, not surprisingly, was similar to the one of its Colombian equivalents: lands freed from the constraints of civilization, yes! . . . but free to be plundered by all sorts of bandits, especially, in this case, loggers from Peru (on the other side of this pluvial frontier) who were ruthlessly deforesting the area, and rumor had it, responsible for burning down a jungle lodge because of the environmental protests by its owners and the foreign tourists who stayed there.

Though, Jhonny noted, it might have been the paramilitary wing of the Colombian narcos, out for protection money and hostile to hippies. For a moment, the thought of their reach—*here*, in the innocent Brazil of my imaginings—was depressing, but when he told me yet another version (a disgruntled employee) I decided that, as always in Macondo, the truth was what you wanted it to be and mine, that I wouldn't let the story spoil my post-purge high.

To be sure, it wasn't what I'd been led to believe. In Mapiá, where it was widely used, I'd been told that *kambó*<sup>38</sup> activated a latent vigor that even went beyond that of *ayahuasca*: an energizing of body, mind and senses, bordering, at times, on those extra-perceptual faculties the indigenous hunter relied on. And of appetite, naturally, but while I'd enjoyed the *café da manhã*<sup>39</sup> we'd just had, I hadn't been ravenous, as I was after a session, and despite feeling alert, clean, carefree and receptive to hidden nuances, little of the hyper-exhilaration.

Possibly the only sign of a "heightened awareness" was a sense of connection with Pedro, but it was easily explained as a train of associations. It was he who'd given me the most detailed account of what taking *kambó* was actually like and that, backed by my respect for a veteran *ayahuasquero*, was what originally got me interested in it.

In the park there were some larger than life, plaster sculptures of a flamingo, turtle and other beasts of an endearing Disneyland cuteness and we took some photos of ourselves petting or sitting on them. Then, to immortalize the jungle man, one of me on my own posing in front of a civic homage to "roots": a wall with an amateurish terracotta bas relief of an Indian couple by a river: he, in loincloth, with fishing spear, alongside a jaguar; she nakedly bathing, breasts covered by braids; and above, an incongruous longhorn steer.

An unconscious vanity led me to first primp my hair in a wing mirror and I was astounded. In the rushed, collective post-mortem at the *maloca*, I hadn't credited the effect the others most commented on: not that my face was red but had swollen into that of a frog!

Eyes slit, eyebrows depressed, cheeks doughy, the wrinkles I already had severely underscored, I looked like the bad guy in a chainsaw movie. So be it! for, as the *payé* had said, the mark of the frog was the mark of the warrior.

It reminded me of Pedro again, who, the first time I did the medicine, in Mapiá, got me to take a mirror along, so as to see for myself. But it didn't even purge that time and though it did work the next, in Iquitos, and was as tough as now, it didn't disfigure me, so I'd dismissed what he'd said. I also began to reconsider his claim that your body acted like a frog's as well.

The hunched over, four-footed posture I'd got into, the only device I knew to (minimally) weather the purge, was the result of long years of trial and error with *ayahuasca* and as such, a matter of experience, I was sure at the time. Straining for a sight of those moments through the post-purge amnesia, however, I vaguely recalled being possessed: by, as I've said, something too formless to be identified with a frog or any other creature, a fever cloud or poisonous mist which, now that I thought of the way it enveloped me and wouldn't let go, punishing me for my sins, as *ayahuasca* did, but with an added spite towards an alien, nevertheless had a sort of life and might well have been the emanation of an animal whose living cells I'd rudely injected into mine.

That link with him was reinforced by different, half-conscious impressions that brought back the spirit of place, the one our friendship originated in. Snatches of Portuguese; the river, a twin of the Purus<sup>40</sup>; a phone box that took cards, not coins; the square, tin chassis of a jeep; and out of all that Proustian chatter, I felt literally embodied in me for a moment or two his aquiline gaze, erectness of posture, chin lifted to trouble and the hoarse voice of a man who wasn't just playing at being an outsider but asked for the consequences with a sad, settled fatalism.

Pedro's blessing on the successful climax of my trip strangely led me again to the business which had brought me here in the first place, which I'd never kidded myself was a mission yet now, when it was finally done, still seemed *incomplete*.

It wasn't the futility of escape I sensed, the reminder, in the melancholy of saying farewell to the jungle, that the only solution to my problems lay in that which caused them: the city, though less as place than identity and, given heritage, upbringing (and ambition) all but ineradicable but by the same token not

a puzzle like the one I faced now. Might it not be that I had in fact freed myself, for a time, from the conditioning I'd never expected to escape and, as the hidden price of it, met obligations that *pertained to the jungle alone!*

If so, it didn't feel like the *kambó* had done it, or not in itself. It was only the latest of several recent hints that I was being shadowed, but by whom or by what was unfathomable.

Out of the waters of the Javarí came a hymn:

*A morada do meu pai  
É no coração do mundo  
Aonde existe todo amor  
E tem um segredo profundo  
  
Este segredo profundo  
Está em toda humanidade  
Se todos se conhecerem  
Aqui dentro da verdade<sup>41</sup>.*

Given the spacey, tranquil, impressionable state I was in, Jhonny's invitation to spend another night with them was tempting. There was nothing pending in Leticia and we'd not only felt comfortable and cosseted there, but the ambit was not all that different from our niche on the campus, especially the patio at the back, where, relaxing in a hammock close to a pocket jungle of overgrown garden, I'd been fascinated by his first-hand stories of the Amazonian terrain and tribes. But I desperately wanted to get away and was only stopped from leaving at once by the great lunch they'd laid on. My excuse to myself was that there was no reason to risk further boredom in Benjamin now that I'd crossed the last item off the list: mean-spirited, because I was deserting friends who were hungry for likeminded company and sure to prevent that happening. On the other hand, the zeal for one's own bed after a purge was natural, as Jhonny understood, as was the writer's to tap his impressions into the laptop before they grew cold.

My regrets faded on the voyage back to Tabatinga, not so shiny now, when my thoughts turned, like any commuter, to the things to be done in town. Among them, getting plants or their derivatives from Wilmer, and as we only had a few more days and nothing was straightforward in Leticia, best tackled soon, which would meanwhile give my family the chance to visit one or another of the touristy places first promised and now positively owed them, for being good sports about jungle medicine, a trip that was mine, not theirs. A mental list I was in the middle of when we docked and I remembered that among the stores selling

cheap household goods around us there were a couple that had the diced natural jungle tobacco tightly compressed by a fiber spiral into a tube, nearly a meter long, that looked like a giant cigar.

Given our tiredness, the noisy, crowded streets and the limiting of its supply to certain seasons, my luck was in. On the way to the moto-taxis, the roll I was holding upright roused the curiosity of a passerby, though, from his rough look, his was the feigned interest of a thief or beggar, so I quickened my pace. Then, turning round again to check on my family, I recognized the apprentice of the old man who'd sold us the leaves.

We got into a conversation of sorts about *ayahuasca* until there was a bridge back to the tube I lost due to his sudden animation, though I gathered it was about crumbling up the tobacco in the tube for a roll-up or pipe.

(And in clear again, accompanied by a wide spreading of hands).

“Big mother, wasn't he!”.

Noticing the impatience of my wife, I ended it there and my gratitude on returning to a base that suited us so well wiped out the last trace of guilt about Jhonny and his family. Around seven that evening, as I skirted the pool on my way to the communal kitchen, I was arrested by a movement on its non-slip border, stooped for a closer look in an orangey-yellow glow from the lamps in the flower bed and met up with my totem!

Granted, it was the right habitat for a common creature, but, happening when it did, my first sight of a frog on the campus was an omen. And maybe doubly favorable, when I thought back to my very first morning in Leticia, when I saw one the size of a chicken in the bathroom where I was having a shower.

At Wilmer's the following day, he and I first inspected his stand of yajé for some thick sections of vine to be planted at a plot of land I had in the mountains near Bogotá, to be cut at the very last moment to keep them fresh. When we returned to the *maloca*, he installed himself on his “throne”—a little stool with a curved back carved out of a log—and I gave him a cigarette to put into the pipe he smoked from time to time when we conversed over *mambe*. Like other healers I knew, the straying of a white follower from the reservation provoked a little jealousy, but his scornful reaction to my eulogy of *kambó* was mostly pro forma, we both knew, and he listened to my account with interest. That got me onto Pedro and how I'd been treated as a subversive by some in Mapiá for our brotherly closeness, down to sharing our last crust or disassembled butt.

The *mambe* wasn't forthcoming for once and though I normally didn't like to, I asked outright and learned he was out. That, though a disappointment, happened

occasionally and the deficit never lasted long. But, with Easter week over, the usual explanation—that he'd been too busy with the tourists—didn't fit, which might mean that his bushes were stripped of mature leaves for the time being.

It was partly both, he conceded, but, as I knew, his son-in-law always helped him out at such times.

“Anyway, two jars isn't much.”

He'd apparently forgotten I'd ordered three for myself, plus another for Santos' dad. You got it, he said when I reminded him, but without much conviction.

The possibility that Wilmer might let me down touched off an irritation that now, as in similar situations in Leticia but rarely in Bogotá, painfully exposed the fragility of my identification with “the other.” For me at least, probably the most “spiritual” thing about the jungle was this seeing your expectations on the face of those who didn't even hold the premises they rested on and how it sometimes made me cling even harder to the nervous, aggressive nastiness in my civilized self that I wanted to therapeutically dissolve in them.

Just then, however, the question was turned in a different direction. If the omen of the previous night had been a testimonial to a decade's constancy to the jungle, such an immersion might explain some recent intuitions. Be it literary device or actual place, the Amazon naturally went with the notion of being *stalked*, of critical influences on one's life, felt as a breath on the neck but always a step behind. Or specifically, that far from one frog closing a chapter opened by the other, the already weary hunter was starting all over again

Doubtlessly our next stop played a part in it: from 7 to 11 by moto-taxi to invite my ex-wife to a restaurant in Santa Rosa. After all we'd been through since she'd yanked me out of our Irish hippy ghetto a quarter century before, to land in rural Cundinamarca, where we'd raised two kids, then broken up and quarreled for years, we'd established a truce. I admired her living the Amazon full time, without making a thing of it, idyllically in the wood-and-thatch vernacular of a preserve alongside her daughter and three or four friends. And she, me, for writing about what I knew much less of, and either way a luxury of the distance between then and now.

But, with all the personal items which identify the person whose home it is and she alone (*cuatro*<sup>42</sup>, knitting, Aquarian-age books and especially the photos of us with the kids) even in a visit of a quarter hour it was impossible not to look back and be reminded of those influences and the way (running backwards, as it were) you never quite catch up with yourself or whatever it is in them that makes you run in the first place . . . or they to chase.

The outing to the restaurant the following day was a different context, however, and returned me to the present of her life and ours over a feast of fish—fresh, breaded, fried and satiating—that, so far as I saw, was practically the only reason for being of a place more sandbar than island, with a funny subculture of its own, including twenty transvestites playing soccer on the muddy shoreline just below the restaurant (which, like the others, was a blown-up boatshed projected on stilts).

We were on our way back, rounding the bend of the spit of land between the landing stage of Leticia and the river in the late afternoon richness of color, when something flashed out of the water a couple of yards from our side of the launch: a powerful thrust of gray-white-pink, dripping and mottled, which looked like the flank of an enormous pig but I instantly knew was a dolphin.

The first I'd ever seen and not one of your huggable, communicative Sea-world performers either, judging not only by its size, scars and the killer reputation of the breed but its' simply being there, at ease, in such a noisy, crowded and polluted channel, as if, like one of those fishermen's legends, it had chosen the worst possible place on purpose: to defy its human enemy and grow fat on sewage, spent motor oil and discarded tampons.

The shock instantaneously led me to exclaim (to myself): "Big mother, wasn't he!"

Just then, however, the monster didn't have any significance apart from being something to boast about and an annoying reminder of what I'd hoped my wife had forgotten. It was only afterwards that we understood it to have been a shared epiphany of the Amazon.

That night, I was sitting in a deck-chair by the pool, and as happens when reflections go the way of what's around you, hit a mental bump that got me up and beating the bounds as if the answer to something were hidden in the undergrowth. But why, when it was so trivial, a linguistic enigma only a writer would get obsessed about. Was the "big mother" the "he" for the *ayahuasquero* the apprentice had mentioned before, who could have been anyone? Or the Portuguese "it" for the tube or a jaw-breaking pipe!

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[From Pedro's diary]

*"Lodge" really little huts for hippy travelers. Don't pay much, but spreading the word, done three sessions since getting here, and as it's a cool scene, less strain than I'd*

*thought, able to concentrate on my own trip in moments. Great medicine or that and peaceful vibe of this place, visions rich, deep, spectacular colors, mixture of Mapiá, Ashaninkas, Wilmer, Tabatinga, the Tikuna gig. Meeting more of the ecological crowd, possibility of a session in a proper hotel, tourists here for Easter week, straights not freaks, can charge more . . .*

*Too busy setting session up to write past few days. Finally happened Friday night. Owner warned me that ayahuasca only part of a holiday for his guests, expect jungle to be comfortable, worried medicine might be pagan, so I made it more Catholic, Daime hymns they'd relate to. Effect on me too, as if I was in Mapiá, in the temple, shaking the maracas, doing the shuffle, girls in sashes and Mary crowns in front, lines turning into colors spinning around, melting into music. Visions of the girls, pulling my arms, flushes of anger and tears. Building up past few sessions anyway. Saw Jimmy too at times, no surprise since he was part of the family then, only he was there and maloca at same time, like Daime had moved to Wilmer's. Safe berth at last, nice company, yet stupidly worrying about my "future" here. Have to renew visa first, can't just cross to Tabatinga and come back again, need a few days in Brazil for the paperwork, also score more medicine from the old man, and while waiting round might as follow up this tip I got from the eco-tourist people about doing kambó. Say it's pretty common in the communities around Benjamin Constant. Step back a little to leap forward again with added energy to make this set-up solid. Plan is to leave on Monday, when consul in Tabatinga opens after Easter, and from there the launch to Benjamin in the afternoon. Not risking much money, might run into travelers who'll tell me best place to do the frog poison dawn Tuesday morning.*

\* \* \*

Puerto Nariño, ecological paradise! I'd been hearing this for years and the more people raved about the place, the less I liked it. Which was curmudgeonly, since I'd never been there; it was backed, first hand, by people I trusted and I was theoretically in favor of a community-based, low-tech development plugged into globalized networks of sympathy, information and funding.

Nevertheless, I was following instincts, later proved right in part, which originally drove me to choose Colombia as a refuge from the developed world's obsessive "organizing" of everything till nothing was real anymore, or not as it was, say, to the Elizabethans, who lived what they did, good and bad, directly, in all its rawness, color and intensity. And, in a way, it was the benevolent side of the system I found most oppressive, that protecting you for own good that kills fun or adventure. Diving forbidden, follow the signposts, don't feed the bears.

It was not Puerto Nariño itself but the rhetoric around it that disturbed me: a possible presage of the one-two punch of the techno/consumerist spirit of the age, which, after razing the forests and semi-urbanizing wildernesses like the Amazon, did not discard the remnant as an inevitable waste product, but exploited the chic of its aggregate value.

In short, my bugbear was that the Amazon itself would be commodified—the brand name of it, I mean—and as a consequence, the little that was left of its authenticity would no longer be accessible to me. A sane, responsible, eco-friendly solution to logging, cattle farms and jungle *favelas*: great . . . so long as *you don't touch anything*.

Now that dolphins had literally leapt onto their agenda again, however, I couldn't resist the pressure of my wife and son, and my phobia seemed silly when, waiting for the launch for Puerto Nariño to chug off, I noticed that the passengers were indigenous, if not in every case by race, then by lifestyle.

Apart from the sight of a metallic tower rising out of the bush that looked even more science fiction than the one at Mapiá and some monkeys in the trees on the edge of the island of the same name, the two-hour voyage was likewise uneventful until we entered the channel which screened Puerto Nariño from the river. At first sight, it was captivating: a village of little houses on a gentle rise, crowned by a wooden lookout tower and set back from the river by a common I guessed was floodable. To size up a place we might spend the night in, we did a walkabout, easy enough since the whole area was no more than four or five square blocks, not of streets but lanes demarcated by footpaths, some paved, some not, with wide grassy verges adorned by palms and shade trees.

Modest dwellings, many of wood, open to their surroundings; tin roofs, a little thatch; bright colors; a cocoon of greenery: as in Atalaia but qualitatively more so, because its trademark was its exclusion of cars, hence paved roads, hence the facility of plunking down cement plaque and rebar any which way in any available gap. And, further, this was a quasi-indigenous reserve, which, however it worked in practice, put certain limits on modern intrusions and went with a civic pride I sensed in its litter-free, fresh-paint neatness.

But even as some defenses dropped, others rose out of the sight of a backpacker hostel here, a jungle lodge notice there, looks of appraisal from the locals we passed, and formed into questions. What paid for this prettiness? Why did it seem too good to be true? And, what exactly was I doing here?

After circling back to the stores fronting the green, we met up with a young man with indigenous features who offered to guide us to the dolphins. Just then, some Aussies on the balcony of a bar above us drunkenly shouted out a recommendation of the fellow in English, which strengthened my suspicion of a nascent ghetto of banana tourists

Once in the *peque-peque*<sup>43</sup>, my mood was lifted by silence, openness and a literal perspective on Puerto Nariño which revealed that the river was its essential fact and gave it a functional magic that wouldn't be spoiled that easily.



Like other riverside settlements, it straggled along the bank and imperceptibly merged into the forest. I noticed a school (envying its intimacy and closeness to nature after the prisons I'd attended), an upscale tourist lodge and, set back in a clearing, some round, traditional-looking thatched huts. It wasn't an indigenous community, as I'd thought, the guide explained, but a hostel of the Amazon on five-dollars-a-day kind, where you could string up your hammock and use the communal kitchen and showers. Despite not wanting to be taken for a wanderer on the hippy trail, I considered the possibility of staying there, since it was closer to nature than anything in the town and would be a nostalgic return to the plain living and high thinking of Mapiá.

The channel which already made you forget that the Amazon was just over there was a basin before the town which, as we advanced, swelled into what was more like a lake, then contracted to the conviction that you weren't on an inlet, but a classic feeder stream, like the one that gave Mapiá its name: narrow, motionless, and confined by a thick growth that created a glassy penumbra made more eerie here by a kind of mangrove bursting out of the banks in harsh, impenetrable knots. Somewhere in there, the guide said, was a Tikuna settlement a lot of tourists visited. Half an hour along, the channel unexpectedly opened into a grand oval of water, surrounded by a classic tall-tree silhouette, with a couple of dug-out canoes at the far end adding to its archaism. Our guide cut the motor, whispered that we'd reached their grounds and whistled to the dolphins.

We made a slow circuit of the water, stopping whenever he read hints in its texture or color before going on . . . to pause, drift, whistle, wait and paddle again. At first, I shared the expectancy of my wife and kid but it was a strain on both patience and sight, and after a few false alarms, I entered into the no-point nothingness of nature for its own sake, an unavoidable feature of the jungle, but this time it was less boredom than being bound by a spell, for the rounding of remoteness by place was like an entrapment of time itself. The whole atmosphere was tremulous, as if the Amazon was about to begin.

Even so, money hadn't changed hands only for me to meditate. We only had to retrace our route, the guide swore, but his optimism seemed more and more forced as we reentered the basin we'd started from, nearly as wide and remote there as the one we'd just left. After some more plaintive whistling, a rippling in the distance brought an eagerness to his hitherto impassive face but our path was blocked by a cabin cruiser of weekend partiers.

Sure that its loud music had blown our only chance at the dolphins, we swerved and hadn't gone far when the guide halted us again. There were some unmistakable wakes on either side but I was too tensely grasping the fact to take

in anything beyond a flurry of bubbles, splashes and oily mounds. Then, settling down, I realized that “seeing the dolphins” wasn’t what I’d imagined. Instead of full-body acrobatics, they needled their way through the surface in quick, flat arcs that only allowed glimpses of snouts and shoulders. The excitement was in contact, rather than sighting: a sense of intention on their part as the initially scattered roiling fused, fattened and tightened around us in a virtual whirlpool, to a chorus of snuffles.

The episode was relatively low on the scale of Amazonian thrills, we agreed afterwards, but the satisfaction we felt inclined us to spend the night in Puerto Nariño, though it was dented a little when, on thanking the guide, we learned that he was a Peruvian mestizo of that tri-national pool of surplus labor that drifted from one odd job to another in the Amazon and his native hunting call probably feigned.

We’d been recommended a hotel near the top of the hill and due to some wrong turns, made a closer inspection of the place that led to a tentative conclusion. As eco-tourism was usually run by emigrants from the big city, it implied the presence of a small émigré community of educated idealists. In fact, I was already acquainted with one, (a former colleague of the foreign press corps): the Englishwoman who’d founded the international dolphin foundation. They weren’t monsters, in short, and checking them out might be an activity for an otherwise tedious evening. We’d have *ayahuasca* in common, I guessed.

Though, given things to do, I was more open than before to the soft arrangement of simple houses for simple satisfactions of simple needs, a feeling of artificiality that still niggled at me made me ashamed of myself for not yielding to its charm as my family was. Then, with a little struggle, I set out to enjoy our stay.

The hotel, we’d been told, was near the corner of the footpath and lane where we now stood. Wondering whether to knock on a door gave us a hesitant air, noticeable to some kids on the summit, ten yards above us. Half a dozen of them, age eight to twelve, their dark indigenous faces contrasted by white blouses and always appealing to me for the way their stiff neatness leveled the differences between one culture and the other and at the same time brought out a boldly observant shyness which was theirs alone.

I’d been the butt of their name-calling many times and discovered that one solution was to engage them head-on, given a pretext like asking for directions. As I moved towards them, their pointing and shouting intensified, and nearly in the same instant my son grabbed my hand and gave me a hard backward tug. His face was white with an angry embarrassment I didn’t understand, because it was unusual for him and he’d never been taken for a gringo, anywhere. At his

clenched whisper that they were talking about him, I realized he was right and caught a nasty, jeering tone I didn't like at all but not precisely because of its underdog resentment. It was its fastening on *him*, for simply being a child like themselves and thus, for his white-kid detergent-ad looks, adding an internecine bitterness to the gap between their us and our them. The generic them that "saving the rainforest" left us no choice but to be.

Certain that my wife wasn't going to let a little adolescent pettishness spoil what she'd set heart on, I kept that to myself, until a questioning look from her activated that mysterious telepathy families have and we acknowledged our joint decision. We tumbled down the hill to the wharf, hastily boarded and got out of the wrong launch, and a few minutes forced contemplation gave me some second thoughts, brought on by the full luminescence of the hitherto fitful sun, washing the landscape with watercolors which coalesced into reveries about what might have been had we stayed. But I refused to let piquancy be regret and it went with the relief of broad waters again.

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[From Pedro's diary]

*So-called leap forward's landed me deeper in the shit. Set to leave early Monday, but delayed when promised another session two or three days later, never materialized, pissed with the owner of huts, counting on extra money, now have to pay a fine for overstaying the visa. First, kept it to myself, as he's put me up and there's enough bread from previous sessions. He'd been holding it for me, always thieves in these hippy hostels, now tells me there's a 'cash flow' problem, give it to me in a few days, either here or when I return from Leticia. And if I get stuck there? I ask. Send it with someone on the launch. Here, take this i.ou. Have a look, less than I thought, might be taking his cut, he collected money for sessions, can't remember price we set nor number of patients. Hassle really started with that ritual with the straights in Puerto Nariño, though. Called me "disloyal," as if he owns me. Arguing wouldn't get me anywhere, better to lose myself in the bush, think over the options. Safer to wait for the cash before leaving? Meanwhile fine's mounting up, but if I go now no guarantee I'll get it when I come back, even less that he'll send it on. Either way, might be trapping me into doing ayahuasca for him full-time. On the other hand, he's been decent so far, better to trust than be paranoid, otherwise might mess up the change I've been looking for: big river, real jungle, heads on the same path, traditional communities here and there, might make enough to set up on my own. Be responsible at last, as Carla says . . . girls will find me instead of me chasing them like a mangy dog.*

*Being alone with myself gets me going in circles even worse, till I'm choked for air, body telling me what my mind won't: trust the medicine! Doing it properly, I mean. Isolation, preparation, penitence. Suicide mission, cause when your neck's in the shit, only*

way out is to scarify yourself. Fasted beforehand, luckily place empty, perfect night. Began, like last time, movie of my recent life: girls, Mapiá, boat from Manaus, events since then, but heavier, flying plane over scenes, asking permission to land, fuel running out. Big, big cup, sediment different bottles, nearly blacked out from the puking. Another of the same, serpents strangling guts, demons black faces, screaming, biting, cursing, firmeza<sup>44</sup>, told myself, falling from sky, land in Tikuna ceremony, all dark but for tiny flame far end I go to, then in little hut with girl, angry cause I don't understand their language. Have to drink another to get message, rocket to outer space, then floating over jungle, land in same hut, only now I'm her father and she's Juana, Bea, same time, Carla there too, plus padrinhos<sup>45</sup> from Mapiá, elders of the tribe.

Why are you hurting me, daddy, get what she's saying now. Shut up, says this Tikuna woman who's Carla. All these months on our own, telling you traditions, still don't understand! To prepare you for childbirth, trials of a woman's life after that, not a baby anymore, don't dishonor us. Why are you hurting me, daddy, she whimpers, over and over again, till I can't take it anymore. Turn to padrinho, he's the payé, you're the father of the tribe, you do it. Calm down, he says, takes me to river, see he's king of ayahuasca, have to submit, pitiful turd to him. All the men in the tribe are her father, and you are the father of all our daughters, he says. But why do I have to hurt her? Laughs at me again. Who's hurting, her or you? That's your complaint, isn't it, little man. For your spirit to enter hers, her pain becomes yours. You have to make her suffer to tie that knot. Later, she'll move away, face hardships, you'll grow old, die. Doesn't matter, since once conjoined, your spirit will be there to protect her. Whenever she needs you, she'll call and you'll hear and your spirit will go to her. Hurting is the only way to purify her for that and no one but her father can do it.

All the while knew I was really talking to myself, always looking for a fight because the girls are suffering when enemy is myself for forgetting how they feel about it. Never expected all I had to do was turn it round, knot my suffering to theirs. Or if I did, just how. Gallons and gallons of ayahuasca over the years, no good, now, out the blue, the answer. Always inside myself, but something outside must have happened to bring it on.

Could hardly stand up when day came, didn't care, with this pure, godly purpose running through me like electricity. To hell with the money, saying goodbye, plans, visa and forth! Our love for each other would get me to the girls somehow. As if it was happening by itself, and me merely with flow, packed, caught early launch and got to Leticia before noon. 'Course still too spaced with the medicine to think things through, when I passed the money changers on way up from port to town began to sober up. Sat down to drink something, depressed after counting my cash, Milos walks by, Jimmy's been around for some time, he says, should have cheered me up, since I'm sure he'll help, as before, but thinking Milos could have told me before brought back the notion that we've been crisscrossing each other since I first got to Leticia, especially now, when I go looking for him and places he's supposed to be at, either's just left or about to come back, they tell me. Even swear I caught a glimpse of him, wife and kid when our launch passed the one heading for Puerto Nariño. Told myself at the time it must be a hallucination, given the distance and the daze I was in and his being in my mind anyway. Now, with that on top of everything else, I'm thinking the gods are playing a joke on us.

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Even if I'd been less narrow-minded about Puerto Nariño, staying there would only have postponed the reckoning of the next day, our last whole one in Leticia, though it looked like the opposite when we got up because there was no longer any pressure to "do" the Amazon. That morning, on our way to buying articles unavailable in Bogotá, like *farinha*<sup>46</sup> and *chuchuhuasi*<sup>47</sup> medicine, we got off the moto-taxis a block past the park in whose trees millions of parrots nested each night and entered the salmon-colored, windowless cubes of the Banco de la República, to my mind the most impressive building I'd seen in the Amazon for its unique resistance to the corrosion of the jungle: weed-free lawns, staunch railings, immaculate paintwork and within, air-conditioned halls of marble and glass worthy of a museum in Berlin.

I'd examined its superb ethnographical collection years before, when I was just as allergic to such things but less willing to admit it, and only meant to find out whether the library had a book Jhonny was interested in, but was mesmerized in the lobby by some enlargements of black and white photos of Leticia from the 1950's and 60's, I guessed. In one, what was now downtown was a daguerreotype of "republican" Santa Fe: a single street of mud with adobe stores, in keeping with another of a fuzzy religious procession. Then, an aerial view of the sector between the just mentioned park and the airport, the forest practically intact but for the big barracks of the army base, still in use and impressive as the Bank in its way for the revolution wrought well before that by white man's materials like plaster, planed wood and galvanized tin. Followed by shots of two steps even more gigantic: land being cleared for the airport and the installation of the first electricity plant. I wondered why they moved me so much, compared to another from the thirties, seen elsewhere, when Leticia was only two dozen thatched huts savagely hemmed in by a wilderness whose loss was worth my nostalgia. Why this regret for a tedious outpost of modernization run by a clique of reactionary priests, army officers and colonial officials? Schultes loved it then, though, and there was something about the bashful pride of those mechanics posing by the generator in white ducks and long-sleeved shirts that got me thinking that maybe its root lay in a sort of correspondence between their innocence and mine. They, edging out of stagnation into progress and me, at the far end, seeing what it had brought and envying their optimism, just as innocent of the edge I stood on in this age that was turning *everyone's* life into a tourism of one kind or another.

The point of museums is to enclose you in thoughts too solemn to survive in the open air, so my mind quickly got back to our errands, among which was the

purchase of two boxes of cereal, a tin of biscuits, scotch tape and glue to camouflage the *mambe* I was going to send by air cargo to Bogotá. My caution was excessive, I knew, since the bag checks at the airport were lax and the stuff not illegal, but it might be an excuse for them to hassle a gringo. It wasn't the rules and regulations I was returning to which depressed me so much as automatically having to think about them and once there, worry again about certain loose ends in Leticia. Unnecessarily, since there was no particular reason to say goodbye to Enrique, when I'd already guessed the Russians still owed him the money, nor open Fabricio's one-line reply to my tactlessly enthusiastic e mail about the frog medicine. Except that was my urban self, forever hungry for this guilt or that to chew on, and resenting the compulsion at the same time.

When we returned to the campus that afternoon, Wilmer, who'd been waiting for some time, was chatting with Santos. The wary familiarity between them was typical when Indian met Indian in front of the White Man: cheerful on the outside but different within, an unspoken discourse I'd never understand, though I sensed it was about accommodating oneself to defeat, shared but in opposite degrees. That Wilmer was a quick change artist of that "identity" was precisely what I identified with, what freed him from my need to classify and be a friend, like any other.

He'd brought the sticks of *yajé*, wrapped in wet newspaper, a little pot of *ambil* and a couple of leaf-fans, presents for friends who drank with me at home. Any solemnity about the end of my visit was lightened by our gentle irreverence towards each other: my misdeeds when drunk, his acting up to the tourists. It would have been mean to question his word that he'd have the *mambe* his son-in-law was preparing for me first thing in the morning.

That he might be late I was prepared for. I began getting worried at ten the next day and as eleven approached, was fuming. The flight was at two and if I didn't get the box to the air cargo office before it closed for the two-hour lunch break that was standard in Leticia, all would be lost. When he finally appeared, barely leaving me enough time for a breakneck moto-bike ride to the place, if I was lucky, I was furious with him and seeing that he'd delivered the goods, after all, and the delay was his son-in-law's fault, I tried, really tried, to hold what I'd been feeling in, but I've never been good at that. It was only a momentary flash, quickly larded over with a show of sorriness that he took at face value. And me, his pretending not to have noticed it in turn. We had to because, except when clearly called for, an anger so openly shown was shocking in indigenous society. That my outburst was all too human and Wilmer wasn't going to let it spoil things is beside the point. I was aware, as never before, of betraying the values I supposedly shared with a man I cherished as both guide and friend.

Once the stuff was shipped off, the backlash made me lighter of heart than usual, and unexpectedly running into Jhonny as we sat down for what was supposed to be a quick lunch turned into a send-off celebration.

For the first and only time in my life, my meticulous attention to airport routines was gone and up to the very last second, I was sure we'd miss the flight. But for my son's having to get back to school, I was happy about the idea of spending another night in Leticia. In my mind's eye, I was already on my way to Wilmer's that afternoon, not only to smooth things over but also for a final jolt of that good old jungle voltage.

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"A few weeks in the Amazon and I feel ten years younger; and now, after three days in Bogotá, ten years older than before I went." My pals must have been tired of hearing me make the same joke every time I returned but it had a poetic truth they didn't get. It was partly the effect of being hemmed in after being so free, mind following body in response to environment and after painfully shifting from one direction to its opposite, neither up to quickly shifting back again. In essence it was about illusions: knowing they were just that made an occasional bite of them that more satisfying, but it was a fragility of diminishing returns and dangerous when there was no other nourishment for me.

As landings from outer space go, it was a relatively soft one this time, which maybe explains why it was with sweating hands that I dialed the hotel in the Zona Rosa<sup>48</sup> Enrique had told me the Russians were at, three nights in a row without success. When I finally got through to Ivan, it was around ten on the fourth, the eve of their early morning flight to Paris, a guilt-free excuse if ever there was one, I was sure. In half an hour, however, he arrived in a taxi with the cash, which, as well as a relief, confirmed our guess that it had never been about the money with him. Or only as a reinforcement of other sides of his self, like a White Russian racialism or the "want-it-now" deservedness of the new generation of a new economic setup. It was embarrassing to concede that his Leticia was truer than mine: crowded, commercial, too easy to reach, able to trade on the little left of its original self because the tourists didn't know any better. To agree that they hadn't flown halfway across the globe for shamans with sneakers, cell phones and bank accounts for whom *icaros* or Christian hymns or myths made to order were all the same, a service to the "clients" they turned you into.

After the session with Wilmer, reasoning that they had to go farther afield for the real thing, they had traveled upriver and trekked quite a way into the forest to visit one or another healer the locals had recommended but this commercial-

ization was so evident by then they didn't even try. The disaster in Caballo Cocha only happened because the trip had left them desperate and disoriented.

To blame it on haste and the cultural barrier was too facile, I saw now. What most impressed me, in fact, was how fast Ivan had figured out things about the yajé scene (the one I knew anyway) which had taken me twenty years to face up to. Or the paradox of it, in that the thrusting, sophisticated opportunism of the new Russia I assumed was responsible must have meant he half-expected it from the start. When we discussed the possibilities for another visit to the jungles of Colombia—longer, better-researched, exploiting his remarkably quick learning curve—I got closer to an answer. It was the kind of wistful armchair exploration I indulged in myself with my pals on a rainy midday night in the city when, with one session past and the next yet to come, we would summon a taste of the exaltation we missed by fantasizing about the Pirá-Paraná<sup>49</sup> or some other lost realm where the vine was still pure, pristine and potent. The difference was that we knew it wouldn't be like that when you got there: in a few cases at first hand, and in mine and without denying it would be exciting in other ways, because I sensed that whatever I was looking for in yajé wouldn't be there either. That to go would merely transpose into geography the illusion that "illumination" was that which lies just beyond reach.

I remembered how years before I landed in Colombia, when I had no inkling that I would settle here and much less get into yajé, reading guys like Reichel-Dolmatoff and Schultes had hooked me on the same idea Ivan had about the inseparability of the exotic and the transcendental. In most ways, we were millions of miles apart, yet it was somehow significant that he was entering the same place at the very time I was leaving it (and partly my fault). Even if I knew little about him, Russia or the globalized quest for meaning in general, as a poet if nothing else I felt I was entitled to triangulate the Bronx, Bogotá and Moscow.

While we talked, the payment of one kind of debt led me to consider other obligations that would never be met: the unintended consequences of a proselytism for yajé that no longer interested me. I'd finally realized I was a writer no more, not its scholar or priest and the best I could do was to pass on the wisdom of the taitas: all you have to do is drink and keep drinking no matter what and the medicine itself will give you the answers.

As a professional healer himself, Fabricio understood that too. Unlike some white practitioners, he didn't make too big a deal out of the mambe and ambil he treated his patients with being "sacred plants." They were facilitators, he'd say, for the sacred "I am" in yourself that did the healing. When I met up with him again, I realized that worrying I'd "betrayed" him by doing the frog medicine on



my own was silly. And that nevertheless it was no more my fault than his that his approach to indigenous medicine made me feel like an adolescent. Like it or not, being emotional and subjective about that was what made me a writer.

I likewise absolved myself of cynicism for feeling that my duty to provide Santos' father with *mambe* wasn't that binding in the end. It was the workings of the self-protective armor you needed to survive in the city: an economizing of effort and altruism by common sense. It was scarce, as necessary to me as to him and he'd got by his whole life without my help. So, without over-exerting myself, the slate recently written on by the forest for me was wiped clean, leaving a few chalky smudges of nostalgia. Along with an after-image that caused an unease too ghostly and intermittent to be significant. It must have been another projection of my chaotic imaginings, I decided.

\* \* \*

Four or five months later there was an occurrence mildly miraculous insofar as the previous time was three years before and the otherwise unreliable public service actually delivered it to my door. I refer to the following letter from Pedro:

*Dear Jimmy,*

*How is it going? Forgive this miserable scrawl. You're the writer, not me, though, as a matter of fact, I have this notebook for the words of the hymns and a travel diary and I happened to look at it the other day and wondered what you've been up to. Night now, I'm alone in my rancho, and just drank some medicine they gave me at the feittio<sup>50</sup> to get going with this letter.*

*Maybe it's a surprise to know I've been back in Mapiá for a number of months. It's a complicated story. Remember that time just the two us drank the remedy at my rancho and got talking about strange things that had happened to us, like how I got sick from leshmaniasis and you'd heard it was a rare kind of leprosy and big problem for the Colombian guerrilla in the jungle but was amazed to know someone who'd actually had it and laughed when I explained how the specialist in the hospital in Buenos Aires I had to go used to show me off like a prize pig to the medical students.*

*What happened with you in Leticia? As planned, I got there a few weeks before Easter. For reasons you know, my relationship with the girls was getting screwed up and I had to put a good distance between me and Mapiá anyway. Whoever's fault it was—Carla, the double-standards there, not being able to earn money—it was up to me to be a man and assume the responsibility. To sort my head out, knowing the rest would follow.*

*As soon as I reached Leticia, it looked like the right move and got better and better, then it blew up on me. That there was a purpose behind it, alright, that's clear to me now but was no comfort at the time. I'd have to give you the details in person and sooner than later, I hope.*

*As I say, I'm not great at letters. To cut it short, I was in Puerto Nariño, setting myself up as a healer, when I ran into some problems and drank a lot of medicine one night on my own so Father Ayahuasca would give me the answer. The spirits from a Tikuna ritual I'd been at entered me with this incredible force, a power that had Daime and yajé behind it too and grabbed hold of me and said I had to get back to my daughters ASAP. I'm talking physically. I'd obviously been missing them but this was way beyond thinking or feeling bad or lonesome about it. Everything after that, it wasn't me who did it, they left me no choice.*

*Now here's where you come into it again. The guy who owned the place where I did the rituals owed me money but, due to this message I'd got, I couldn't wait around, so when I arrived in Leticia, I had to raise some for the next stage of the trip, Manaus, and was counting on you, especially 'cause the medicine had told me, several times by then, that you were definitely around and as the weeks passed, the feeling that you were close got stronger, along with the frustration! Finally went to Wilmer's maloca one afternoon and learned that you'd got on the plane a few hours before! Aching for my girls, as I was, almost gave up for a moment, taking it as sign that the spell some macumbeiro put on me a while before was really working, but just missing you turned out to be lucky, in a way, since there was no one to turn to but Milos, who had just told me there was a good chance of some work at his place. I went to his office, and a Dutch tourist he was talking to fell in love with that antique Japanese bamboo flute I've been trying to sell for ages and the money covered the whole trip back to Mapiá!*

*The spirits were in charge, so from the time I left Puerto Nariño I was living in a dream. That changed when the launch from Boca do Acre turned off the Purus. You know how narrow and dense it is after that: it felt like the forest was holding me back and the closer we came, the more nervous I got.*

*When I reached the house and saw it all shuttered up like they'd left for good, I knew something bad had happened and soon learned I was right, but in another way I was relieved now that I knew why the medicine had pulled me so hard. Because it meant me to help, in other words, I wasn't going to panic. Tough as the situation was, I had to be cool and practical.*

*I could have killed those doctors in Buenos Aires. Examining me made them happy, but leshmaniasis is no joke for the patient. I could hardly breathe or swallow, had night fevers and diarrhea, and sores that wouldn't go away, and was out of it half the time with the shots they gave me.*

*Thank God, things have improved since then. You can get it treated in Rio Branco<sup>51</sup> now, there are new drugs that are stronger and work quicker. Also, the form the girls have isn't the most dangerous.*

*Bea got it first, which meant that Carla had to stay in a hotel in Rio Branco practically full-time and leave Juana behind, though the arrangement wasn't so bad to begin with. Say what you will, Mapiá acts like a true family when there's a crisis like that. What my enemies there don't understand is that I believe in the community more than they do, it's their not living up to its ideals that drives me over the edge. The madrinha's<sup>52</sup>*

*always been like a grandmother to the girls and all the grandchildren living in her house like their brothers and sisters, so she didn't feel lonely. In fact, they spoiled her so much it was like a holiday.*

*Then, not long after Bea left the hospital, it was Juana's turn, they switched places, so to speak and that likewise worked, until, just when Juana's due back home, Juana has a relapse. Fortunately minor, so Carla was able to cope and didn't worry, since the doctors had explained that such up and downs were to be expected in convalescence but they'd definitely turned the corner. What they didn't say, not seeing it themselves, was that a sort of pattern had set in by then that got harder to break as it went along.*

*A diabolical see-saw, where when one of them got back to a normal life, the other had a relapse. Off to the hospital again for a week or so, the other back at the madrinha's and vice-versa for months: neither really sick anymore, but not right either. Meanwhile, Carla was becoming less and less convinced by that phony "reassurance" the doctors give you when they haven't a clue themselves. Finally, one who wasn't a robot like the rest wondered there might not be an "emotional factor" and asked her about the personal background. The situation was a little tough, she admitted, since the relatives on both sides of the family lived in Argentina, but stopped when she sensed he'd freak out about the rest and imagine that with ayahuasca, on the one hand, and her being a single mother, on the other, Mapiá was a weird commune of drop-outs into drugs and orgies. It wasn't just embarrassment but values, the doctrine she's committed to versus their materialism. The only solution was to keep to her discipline, relying on faith, fervor and the intercession of her godparents.*

*As a modern, educated woman, on the other hand, Carla recognized that the emotional part was a factor. If nothing else, she was too tired and stressed to give the girls the tranquility they needed, to the point where one or the other told her at times that she actually preferred living with the madrinha. And it was true that all the activity and company there was an escape from Carla's mood swings: now over-protective, now severe, now in a stupor. Yet despite the carefree exterior, the girls felt lonely, the madrinha confided, and Juana had even angrily cried once about being rejected. At the same time, they had a very mature understanding that the situation couldn't be helped. Something else must be upsetting them, she said, but being still kids after all, they were either too shy or bewildered to explain it to her.*

*God works in mysterious ways is the answer to what happened in the end, I'd say. When she thought it would be the opposite, doing Daime, heart and soul, forced Carla to agree with the doctor. The fact that the missing part of the picture was their father.*

*I wouldn't say that Christ came with the Great Reconciliation. Or I was the hero on a white horse for her. Remember, she'd been dealing with the practicalities on her own all along, as she keeps reminding me. But just being the pills unavailable before then to finish the treatment off is good enough for me 'cause I'm sure in her heart she knows as well as I do that the whole problem was meant as a lesson to all us we wouldn't have learned in a less drastic way. To accept each other and each accept he or she's far from perfect. The girls included, as the ideal father they dream about doesn't exist.*

*Things between Carla and me are the same, she's made that more than clear, only the laugh's on her because I didn't have any illusions about that, plus if she won't say out loud that it was meant to be, how does she explain sending the e-mails to you I never heard about at the very same time the message was reaching me on the old spirit telegraph!*

*Granted, once here there hasn't been much for me to do she wasn't doing already in the way of caring for the kids. But at least one or the other parent is at home for the girls all the time. When she takes one to the hospital, I stay with the other, and that's only for check-ups now, so it mostly means she has more time for the services, the classes she gives and so forth, which is obviously what she's been needing. To have a life of her own, instead of being a martyr, even if she won't admit to me she's human like everyone else. When Carla's at home, I'm five minutes away, in my rancho.*

*There were some who weren't overjoyed to see me back, but we stay out of each other's way and a lot more seem to be giving me more respect than before, specially since the madrinha, who's always been on my side, tells everyone I'm here on a mission and I can count on her to calm me down when my bloods starts to boil about this or that arsehole.*

*That said, I am gradually seeing it's not just accepting the way I am or Carla is, but this place which has been so beautiful for all of us and for so long that it really hurts me to face up to the fact that Mapiá is no longer right for me, maybe not forever but basically there's no possibility here for getting ahead with my life, both money-wise and in the interior sense and until I do that, my relationship with the girls won't change for the better the way I pray for. Nevertheless, with all the trials we've recently been through, I don't see leaving again as the end. A circle is how I see it, one I've been halfway round a number of times, going off to come back again without having accomplished anything, when I should be going all the way round, even if it takes centuries, to finally come back true and complete, to be the father they need and I want to be. So I might turn up on your doorstep anytime now. But whatever destiny has in store, the girls and me are one and Mapiá will be where I am, a place in the heart as much as the world, the way Leticia is for you.*

## Notes

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- 1 **CONSTANCY:** This mysterious ratio / Which brings what is different into harmony / Is called proportion; / Order and universal norm of created things... **SCIPIO:** But, so great a harmony: / Why does it not descend to us? / Why is it not heard by those who live on Earth? **CONSTANCY:** Because it goes far beyond / The capacities of your senses.
- 2 **Yajé:** Colombian name for ayahuasca.
- 3 **Maloquero:** Literally, a person who lives in a *maloca*, especially the head of the family who builds it. In this case, it refers to an indigenous person who keeps up with the traditional lifestyle.

- 4 *Ayahuasca*: Plant potion traditionally used by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin for divination, magic and healing.
- 5 *Chacrana*: A jungle bush, whose leaves are a common admixture in the *ayahuasca* brew.
- 6 *Taita*: Literally “dad,” term for a shaman of *ayahuasca* (or yajé) in Colombia.
- 7 Moto-taxi: Motorbike used as a taxi, carrying one passenger on the back seat.
- 8 Lagos: Literally “lakes,” but in this story referring to a district on the outskirts of Leticia.
- 9 *Maloca*: The palm-thatched “long house” of the indigenous cultures of the Amazon, especially in Colombia, and usually round in shape.
- 10 *Mambe*: Powder made from toasted coca leaves and the ash of the leaves of the *yarumo* (*Cecropia*) tree, held in the mouth as a stimulant for everyday work or aid in ritual colloquiums and healings by a number of indigenous groups in the Colombian jungle.
- 11 *Ambil*: Paste made from tobacco by some indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon, licked as a stimulant or for ritual purposes in combination with *mambe*.
- 12 Santo Daime: Spiritual group in Brazil whose rituals use *ayahuasca* and employ a syncretic mixture of Catholic, Afro-Brazilian, shamanistic and Western esoteric elements.
- 13 *Caboclo*: A person of mixed Brazilian Indian and European or African ancestry. By extension, poor settlers or colonizers in the Brazilian Amazon.
- 14 *Minga*: The traditional indigenous custom of forming a voluntary work gang of relatives and neighbors to build houses, clear land, harvest crops, etc.
- 15 *Blancos*: White men.
- 16 *Miraçao*: Term used by Santo Daime for the visions of *ayahuasca*.
- 17 *Chagra* (or *chacra*, in Peru): A jungle clearing where food and medicinal plants are grown.
- 18 *Cocha*: Quechua word for lake.
- 19 Portunhol: Mixture of Spanish and Portuguese, on the lines of Spanglish.
- 20 *Ayahuasquero*: Person who drinks *ayahuasca*.
- 21 *Gente do sul*: Literally, “people from the south,” but meaning, in Mapiá, educated practitioners of Daime from the big cities, as opposed to the *caboclos* who founded the community.
- 22 *Espiritista*: Popular healer in Latin America who serves as a medium for exorcisms and uses a combination of plant remedies, Catholic orations and folkloric amulets, spells and so forth.
- 23 *Initium Sapientiae Timor Domini* (Proverbs 1:7): “The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.”

- 24 Juramidam: A name used by Sano Daime as the esoteric personification or essence of its doctrine, fraternity, organization, spirit guides, etc.
- 25 To my Father I pray for courage / And do not leave my mind / I teach he who does not know / And counsel the innocent.
- 26 *Pinta*: Term used in Colombia for the visions of *ayahuasca*.
- 27 Puerto Maldonado: Jungle town in Peru.
- 28 *Macumbeiro*: A practitioner of *Macumba*, a term used in Brazil for any ritual or religion of African origin, but referring in this case to the black magic which employs *ayahuasca*.
- 29 *Ashaninka*: Indigenous group who live in the jungles of Peru and the State of Acre, in Brazil, and use *ayahuasca*.
- 30 *Payé*: Term for a shaman or traditional healer in the Brazilian Amazon.
- 31 *Rapé*: Snuff made from toasted tobacco leaves used by some Amazonian indigenous groups.
- 32 *Mochila*: An indigenous carrying bag made from different wild or cultivated fibers.
- 33 *Reais*: Plural of *Real*, Brazilian currency.
- 34 *Chicha*: A mild alcoholic drink made by peasant-farmers and Indians, generally from maize but cassava is frequently used in the jungle.
- 35 *Huito*: A black dye made from the fruit of the Genipa or Genipapo tree, traditionally used for ritual body painting by some indigenous groups in the Amazon.
- 36 *Cazabe*: A bread made from cassava.
- 37 Funai (Fundação Nacional do Índio): The Brazilian official agency responsible for protecting the interests, lands, resources and traditional cultures of the indigenous peoples.
- 38 *Kambó*: A toxin secreted through the skin of a small Amazonian frog, traditionally used by some indigenous groups for healing.
- 39 *Café da manhã*: Literally, "Morning coffee," typical Brazilian breakfast.
- 40 Purus: Tributary of the Amazon which flows through the region of southwest Brazil where Mapiá lies.
- 41 The home of my father / In the heart of the world / Where all of love exists / And there is a profound secret / / This profound secret / Is in all of mankind / If only all knew themselves / Here, within the truth.
- 42 *Cuatro*: Literally, "four." Four-stringed, guitar-like instrument used in traditional music in South America.
- 43 *Peque-peque*: The small, slow launch in common use in the Amazon, named for the sound its motor makes.
- 44 *Firmeza*: Portuguese for firmness, courage, fortitude, etc. In the context of Santo Daime, it refers to the quality or attitude the participant needs to weather the

purge of *ayahuasca* and fully enter into its illuminations: a combination of fortitude, concentration, patience and faith.

- 45 *Padrinho*: Literally “godfather,” term used in Santo Daime for the leader of a particular church or the head or a senior member of the national organization.
- 46 *Farinha*: A flour or meal made from cassava.
- 47 *Chuchuhuasi*: Amazonian medicine made from the bark of the tree of the same name.
- 48 Zona Rosa: A district in Bogotá with upscale stores, bars, restaurants, discos and so forth.
- 49 Pirá-Paraná: River and surrounding region in the jungles of the Vaupés (Colombia) whose indigenous societies still conserve many traditional customs.
- 50 *Feitio*: Term used in Santo Daime for the ritualistic preparation of *ayahuasca*.
- 51 Rio Branco: Capital of the Brazilian State of Acre, the point here being that it is the only city within a day or so’s reach of Mapiá.
- 52 *Madrinha*: Literally “godmother,” term used in Santo Daime for a woman who, either in her own right or with her husband, is the head of a church or a senior member of the national organization.

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