

WHITE MONKEY BOOKS

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CARLOS SUÁREZ ÁLVAREZ

Ayahuasca, Love and a Troubled Soul



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Translation by Jimmy Weiskopf

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To my brothers, Santi and Javi

The shared taxi was a piece of broken-down junk that miraculously kept going. It went along a dirt road parallel to one of the banks of Yarinacocha lake, which we couldn't see, though it was close, because of the dense vegetation or slightly hilly terrain. Squeezed tight inside, we, the passengers, kept still to avoid raising the dust on the upholstery of the seats, which were soft and seemed to want to swallow us. I got a bottle of water out of my backpack and offered it to the people I was riding with, *mestizo* smallholders. It was passed from hand to hand among sips, "thanks" and smiles. On both sides of the road we passed isolated wooden houses where minimally dressed little kids sat and played in the shade. In some stretches, the crowns of the trees on either side touched each other, forming a dark green tunnel above us. I was even more amazed to see fields on the horizon where the trees had been cleared at many points of the jungle: it was the amazement of one who is disappointed. We passed monstrous timber trucks going along the same road. They

were carrying life and I carried death in a notebook where I wrote meaningless phrases about the absurdity of this life of lacerating contradictions, corny things like: “First lesson: wherever there is a highway, the trucks which take away the cedar and mahogany trees are sure to appear. For a few minutes, I yielded to the pleasure of cursing the same timber industry which allowed me to read in the light of a wooden lamp, put the book on a shelf which is oddly made of wood, and, oh, what joy!, stand on a floor of wood. The thing doesn’t end there but I won’t go on because you could extend the list to the point of boredom. I imagine the ecologists must keenly suffer from this contradiction when they make use of paper to write to each other and the rest of mortals. I ask myself how many trees will fall on their heads on judgment day”. That is what I wrote there.

Like an omen, when we reached the indigenous community of San Francisco, the clouds broke up to honor a very bright yellow light. On the left, a sign painted in garish colors announced a center for ayahuasca ceremonies. We wound around the main street of the community, which was crossed by others perpendicular to it where the village spread out. Scattered around the place, the houses, which sheltered in the shade of dense trees, had wooden walls and roofs thatched with palm leaves. The floors, which were also of wood, stood on pillars half a meter above the carpet of grass, in order to minimize the humidity of the rainy season. In most of the houses, a part of this rectangular platform served as a

porch. On one of them, a woman, sitting with the sensuality of a mermaid, was combing her long black mane with gentle movements.

The taxi stopped at the edge of a big plaza, now empty because of the intense heat. The driver turned around and announced that we'd arrived. The two of us got down and he helped me with my backpack, then stood around, waiting for something. "Thanks, see you later", I said. He started to gesture and I realized I hadn't paid him yet. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry", I said, as I handed him the money.

The car took off and drove out of San Francisco, with a plume of black smoke in its wake. I slung on my backpack, looked around and approached the nearest house, a health center run by a young, good-looking *indio*, dressed in a white coat, with short hair parted on one side. "Hi, good morning, I'm looking for Franky, he's a shaman". "Franky, of course, he is not at home just now, he'll be back in an hour for lunch, but I can take you to his house, his son is there". "Great, thanks a lot". The health aide was called Richard. I liked his friendliness and his smile. Leaving the center of the village and the lake, we walked along under a powerful sun which forced us to half-close our eyes. "Are you here to try ayahuasca", he asked, nearly confirming it. "Well, the truth is, I don't know. It could be". I did know it, I had already made up my mind. "I'm a journalist. I'm writing an article about the Ucayali and I wanted to know what it's like to live in a native community. A friend in the place where I'm living told me about you guys: José Ramón". "Oh, yeah,

Ramón, he was here with Franky a few months ago, doing ayahuasca”. “Have you ever tried it?”, I asked him. “Yes, twice”. “And how did it go?” “It was very pretty”.

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Ramón wasn't my friend, nor was the colleague who put me in touch with him, but both are as responsible as myself for this story. It began to come together two months before I arrived in San Francisco in one of the salons of the Hotel Lancelot in Lanzarote used for press conferences. The goatherds of the island were threatening to march to the center of Arrecife with their herds for the second time, their way of protesting against the local government. For me, the press conference was a distant and impersonal event, as though it were happening in another place and another time. Sitting around a table, I chatted with the other journalists. Someone told them that I was leaving the island in two days to spend three months in Peru and Ecuador. A photographer from the newspaper *Canarias* 7 turned to me: “As it happens, a friend of mine just came back from there and he was enchanted”. I asked for his friend's phone number and three hours later, I managed to speak to Ramón. I don't remember the details of the conversation, except for the enthusiastic way he urged me to visit a shaman in the Peruvian jungle. “He's called Franky and for a few dollars you can stay at his house and live with his family. It's near the city of Pucallpa. There, you catch a taxi and tell the driver to take

you to San Francisco”. He told me about other places, but that was the only one which awakened my curiosity.

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The eldest son of Franky, the shaman, was called Osvaldo. We met up while he was resting in the house of his maternal aunt, along with other relatives. He was a calm, introverted kid who always seemed to be having a conversation with himself, even when he was talking to other people. He had short hair, brushed to the back. His naked torso was still that of an adolescent, slender and flexible. The health aide introduced me: “He’s a friend of Ramón”, and added some words in Shipibo. My arrival made the *indios* excited and they looked at me. “I’ll take you to my house and we’ll wait there because my mom is playing a soccer match in Pucallpa and my dad is there to watch her”, Osvaldo said, with a timid look and a muffled voice.

He led me along a small path hemmed in by trees and after going through a gate, we reached the garden of his house. It was a rectangular plot, the size of a tennis court and protected by young trees. In the middle there was a wooden shack which served as a kitchen. Inside, a cupboard holding some kitchenware stood on the rammed earth floor. The room was dominated by a modern-looking, pearly white gas cooker, with a stove and three gas rings, like the kind you see in a lot of homes in Spain. “Norma wanted a gas cooker and I bought one for her”, Franky explained a few days later, proud of being

an up to date consumer. In the other half of the rectangle, and standing on a cement floor, was their recently built house, made of big planks of dark wood, crowned by a pitched roof of undulated zinc roof tiles. Inside, it was big and full of light, except for a bed, a mattress on the floor and some rows of shelves on the back wall where their clothes were kept. There was also a very simple wooden table which, as time went on, was moved back and forth between the kitchen, the house and the garden between them. The garden was a pleasant spot, recently planted, judging by the size of the trees in it, which cast a meager shade.

I leant my stuff along a wall, sat down, relieved by the freshness of the house, and began to get to know these extraordinary people. Osvaldo stayed beside me, attentive and silent. My questions were the vague ones of someone who doesn't know anything, and he answered them in monosyllables. I still felt the chaotic commotion of Pucallpa and he looked at me with the tranquility of the *indio*. Several minutes passed, I ran out of questions and the lengthening silence made me uncomfortable. Instead of talking, I got my pocket chess set out of my backpack. "You know how to play chess?", I asked him while I unfolded the miniature chess board on the table. "No", he said, and I could tell from his look that he was intrigued. "It's a game we play in Spain. Would you like to learn?" He nodded his agreement, along with an inaudible, hesitant "yes". Language was a problem, to say nothing of the complexity of the game, but after straining himself for an hour (his expression showed the effort he was

making, his hands too as he tugged at his hair), he managed to learn the basic rules. "Are you tired?", I asked him, but I was more tired of teaching than he of learning. "Do you want to stop now?" "No, play, play", he answered in his basic Spanish, avoiding my eyes and concentrated, with the persistence of someone who won't let go of his hopes and without letting the crowd of curious kids who surrounded us distract him from learning about a new world which seemed to fascinate him. "This piece is called...?", I'd say, letting him finish the sentence. "Pawn". "Very good". "And how does the pawn move?" At that, he took hold of the pawn, placed it in its starting position and correctly slid it along the board, though somewhat uncertainly.

One of the boys decided to learn too and did it quickly. Darwin, Osvaldo's brother, was ten, and as often happens with brothers, they had different natures. He was sharp. Whenever I asked his brother about a rule and he was doubtful or made a mistake, Darwin answered for him and burst into laughter, showing his uneven teeth and exhaling a spark of unusual shrewdness. Minor, the youngest in the family, also stood over us, wasting his energy in an unruly way: he'd come in, walk around, looking for a hug, and then go out with his cousin Lady, who was the same age and just like him.

Then there was Ana, Anita. Now, whenever I am intoxicated by saying her name out loud or by thinking about her without knowing why, I am filled with a bitter joy: the memory of our love, thwarted by the twenty years and ten thousand kilometers which separate us. Like all

the kids, she was also curious about me, but it was the special curiosity of an exceptional creature. The first time she communicated with me, she did it by drawing a childish heart on a sheet of paper, which she then showed me with embarrassment. Did it mean love? Yes, love: hope, light, meeting up, joy, surrender. The love which cannot be taught, the one of two energies which enfold and heal each other: that was what Ana was for me. That is why my soul was rent when, in my final days there, she no longer stayed at my side, troubled by a fear which I now understand. I implored her: “Are you angry with me, Ana? What’s come over you?”, and she turned away and became paralyzed when I drew near. I suffered.

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Moved by the nostalgia of remembrances, I have decided to call Franky after four months without hearing anything about him. It is an effort for me to go into the call shop and dial the number. The young man with the voice of a soprano who answers remembers me: “No, Franky’s not in, he’s in Pucallpa, he’ll be back later”, and while he is talking, a multicolor light illuminates me: that of the golden rays of the sun, of the radiant blackness of the hair of the kids, of the blue sky reflected in the drops of water when I went to bathe in the lake in the morning. “Give a really big hello to Franky, his family and everyone else in San Francisco. I’ll call back soon”, I tell him and he answers with the same exuberance. “Fine, a big hello to you and all your friends in Spain”.

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Osvaldo never got bored with learning but I did with teaching him, so I asked him to take me to the lake. “Ramón loved to bathe in the lake”, he recalled. The lake was a five minutes’ walk away. You had to go through the whole community to get there and along the way we were joined by a bunch of lively, curious kids, the prelude to the symphony of joy I witnessed on the banks. They were swimming as if it were the first visit to the beach in summer and not a daily ritual: most of them wore shorts, some girls, a blouse and skirt, taking advantage of an opportunity to scrub some stain off their clothes. Ana came by: “Take it, it’s for luck”, she said, as she handed me the precious shiny red seed which I still keep in my wallet. I remember the way she approached, with her bright eyes, round face and very black long and unruly hair, and the timid, tight grin of embarrassment which she could barely hold back as she stiffly gave me the present and then, in a burst of freedom, ran like mad to the lake and plunged into the water. “Take it, it’s for luck”: other children came by and presented me with more seeds. My wallet was filled with luck and they enjoyed being so nice and smiled, they always smiled. I swam around with them, first with that vague fear of muddy water we Westerners have, then I was infected with their childish enthusiasm for splashing around and later, with the delight of a discovery: Sam, another precious human creature with the crooked teeth of a young rascal, was fishing only with the aid of tee-

shirt. I tried to copy him and he was amused by my clumsiness. “No, not like that”, he said, and took hold of an edge of the tee-shirt, asked another boy whose face I can’t recall to hold the other and got me to stir up the water over the submerged garment and when he thought the time was right, brusquely lifted it, and there were four or five little fishes thrashing around in the improvised net.

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It was around four in the afternoon when Norma arrived. I was resting on a mattress on the grass of the garden. She was disheveled and in a sweat, with the numbered shirt of her soccer team and the close-fitting shorts of a cyclist, a woman with broad shoulders, broad hips and a broad waist, muscular legs and a solid stride. She said hello and treated me with a certain indifference, as if I weren’t there. She took off her sneakers, changed her clothes and we sat down in the house on a reed mat placed on the ground. With a lot of difficulty, we pieced a conversation together: her Spanish was very poor. “You want to drink ayahuasca?”, she said. “Well, I don’t know. It could be. Have you done it before?”, I asked her. “Yes, twice”. “And how did it go?” “Very pretty”. She opened her eyes really wide when she spoke, so much so you mostly saw the whites of them and it made her look a little strange. “What did you see?” “The jungle, very pretty, a lot of colors. You drink too. It’s good”, she explained, always with the same tone of someone who is happy with their life, as if nothing or everything were important. When I asked

Norma how much they would charge me for staying there, she said that Franky, who was still in Pucallpa, would be back for dinner and I could talk to him then. “Now, I’m going to make something to eat”, she said, as she went to the kitchen.

A child’s cry interrupted my thoughts, which were calmer now as they flowed under the mantle of that atmosphere of harmony. Lady, one of their little cousins, wept disconsolately because the garish little electric toy car of Minor, the youngest brother, had got stuck in her thick head of hair, which they were using as a test track without much success. Norma didn’t seem upset about her crying and I felt the call of responsibility. I went to the bench in the garden where five or six kids were bending over the victim as they loudly laughed. I sat beside her and played the role of the calming adult: I stroked her face and told her not to worry. A lock of her hair had got twisted in one of the wheels. I asked for a screwdriver. When they brought it and I gripped it to remove the casing, Lady burst into tears again, opening her mouth to show her small rows of teeth, which were crooked and immature, and the sad dark hole of her throat. “Buaahh!”, she cried. Some minutes passed and I was the one who began to feel nervous because the capable adult was no more than a bungler with shitty hands. “Buuuaaahh!”, she cried, and the kids around her found it funny and joked in Shipibo, which made her even more flustered. After a futile half hour, I told them to take her home so that her mother could cut off the lock of hair. Then Norma said it was time to eat.

I'll always remember my first sight of Betsy, the eldest daughter of the shaman. Betsy went around with the stoicism of her mother, although she seemed much more sensitive to her surroundings. Her movements were suave, like the roundish shape of her body. She looked you straight in the eye but it didn't make you uncomfortable. She worked a lot in the house, taking care of the youngest children. It was she who put an end to her little cousin's sobbing, with scissors, doing it crudely with a light heart. The little girl ran out of the place, with a smile on her lips. It was now the turn of Minor, who bawled because his snazzy little car, which I had dismantled for nothing, no longer worked.

Very neatly, my hostess set three dishes of food on the table in the garden. One spilled over with white rice, cooked to perfection. The other was covered by long strips of fried ripe plantain. On the third, to my surprise, half a dozen of the little fish which I'd helped Sam to catch in the morning were spread out on top of some plantain leaves, waiting to be devoured. The colors of the food, the way it was served, the still life it formed on the table and the kindly wink of the cook, reminded me that I was not dining in a restaurant. Like a grandmother, Norma had made sure that the abundant food would appeal as much to one's sight and sense of smell as one's palate. She didn't serve me as though I were a client, but neither as a guest. The fish had strong flavor of lake water and it was a job to finish it. "You cook very well, Norma", I complimented her, with sincerity. "Yes, thank you". The sun was setting and I felt fortunate to be sitting at a

wooden table, eating a meal of sheer magic and listening to the cries of birds and crickets in a tranquil garden tinged by the last red rays of the sun.

When night fell, Franky, the shaman, arrived. I clearly remember that moment because it caused a big uproar among his children, who got up to greet him, capering around their father and crying “*Papá, papá!* Daddy’s arrived!”, with joy. I too had been impatiently waiting for him all afternoon, trying to imagine what his face and body looked like and what kind of man he was, with little success, of course. I was enchanted by the strong energy he emitted. Having been told I was there, he went through the gate and headed towards me. I waited, standing in the middle of the garden on a dark night softened by the light bulbs inside the house. He wasn’t very tall, but his body, which was broad and muscular, was flexible and agile. He went straight up to me, without hesitation or beating around the bush but without rushing either. “Hello, friend, how are you?”, and it was almost useless to say, “Fine, thanks”, because he launched into a heartfelt speech of welcome. “Welcome to my home. My home is your home, friend. You’re a friend of Ramón? How is he anyway?” “Well, the fact is that I only spoke to him on the phone but he was the one who recommended coming here, and here I am”. I think he was too euphoric to fully take it in. “Have you come to try ayahuasca?” We were still standing and facing each other, with a short distance between us, and I felt a little intimidated. “Well, the truth is I don’t know”. He assumed that I did want to and in fact, I already knew I was

going to drink it. “Tonight’s no good, but tomorrow is alright”. His Spanish was fluent. “I’m a journalist. I’m writing a story about the Ucayali and I wanted to see how people live in an indigenous community”. “You’re a journalist? Well, I’ll help you and explain what you need for a good article about the Shipibos and ayahuasca”. His excitement about my arrival hadn’t waned and I was pleased by his cordiality, but I was a little suspicious of his composure, the way he declared we were friends and his unconditional hospitality. For a moment, it seemed like his attitude was calculated.

The only thing I didn’t like about the Franky I first knew were his eyes, small and rather hidden. For the rest, he struck me as an attractive man, with manly and harmonious features, framed by a nice head of hair, cut short and parted on one side. As the days passed, I confirmed that he was intelligent and enjoyed a mystical sense of life. During the week I spent in his house, he shared his way of life with me and made an effort to help me understand the jungle and his philosophy of life. He unveiled his illusions and his despair, shared his family life, food and bedroom with me and spoke about his love for his children, the secrets of ayahuasca, the bitterness of being misunderstood and the steps along the path, always in words of friendship. In return, he asked me for money and at times I felt like I was paying for sex, that he was offering up his soul as a prostitute offers you sex. “How long are you going to stay with us?” “I don’t know, we’ll see. It depends on how much it costs”. Fucking money. “Good, don’t worry about *that*”.

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Franky, Norma and I were sitting in the garden. There was no electric light except for two bulbs inside the house, which were fed by a small solar panel. Darwin had brought me a tee-shirt which I used to brush away the mosquitoes around my naked back and legs. The conversation followed the muffled and monotonous rhythm of the shirt slapping against my body, which seemed to have acquired a life of its own, independent of my arm. I wasn't getting tired and could have gone on like that all night, as in a trance. Franky told me about his world, and his wife softly murmured in Shipibo along with her husband, perhaps saying he was right to prop up his discourse. The shaman's energy stirred up trust and placidity. Their company was pleasant and peaceful, like the moonlight, which gently flowed through the night. I couldn't see their faces when they spoke because the rays of moonlight were at their backs. "I teach children in Saposo, a little community up along the Ucayali. It's not like here. There's no road, you can only get there in a launch. It is very small, very poor. If you like, you can go there with me to see it, it's real jungle". The repetitive swinging of the shirt. His words. The unintelligible murmurs of Norma. "I don't know if I'll have the time". The words accentuated by each movement of the cloth. "It is very poor, but they conserve the customs of the *indios* more than here. Since you're a journalist, I can arrange a traditional reception for you, with the children wearing their native dress and the traditional dances, so you can

see what the Shipibos are like”. Their two voices merging in the darkness. The pleasurable itch on my bitten ankles. “I’d love to”. Another slap. “They’re very poor there, more than here”. The money. “The children don’t have notebooks or medicine. When I can, I take some notebooks to my pupils and I tell them: ‘Here, take it’, and they are very pleased. We *indios* are very poor”. The fresh air on my face stirred by the shirt. The soft feel of cotton on my skin. His sincerity. “Óscar, it’s great that you’ve come here. At times, when things are really bad, God helps you. When I got back from Pucallpa, I was worried because I need money and I don’t have it and then God sent you here to help me, friend”. The on-off of the tee-shirt: left shoulder, right leg, right shoulder. Norma murmuring in Shipibo. The calmness of the night. “I’d very much like to help you”. The beat of the jungle in the conversation. Crickets singing. Strange birds. “I’m building a center for the ayahuasca ceremonies so tourists can come and learn about it. We’re going to see it tomorrow and then we’ll go to Yarina to watch Norma play in the soccer match. Norma’s laughter and finally, her voice, in Spanish. “Win the match”.

When we went back to the house to sleep, things had been rearranged a lot. Four rectangular mosquito nets were hanging from the walls, which created a pleasant feeling of intimacy. Only the big bed at the back, which was for me, was without one. On one of the mattresses on the floor, I could see the figures of Osvaldo and Darwin through the little holes in the white mesh, bent over the chess board. They were excited about the

game. At times, they had a friendly quarrel because one thought the other was breaking a rule. At times, they looked at me and timidly smiled. Franky's cousin and his wife were also there, but only for that night. We sat down on the floor, with our backs against the bed. The light above us was cold. The room had been invaded by mosquitoes. Not ready to sleep, the children bustled around us. "Tomorrow, when we drink ayahuasca, we've got to buy some Baygon spray so the mosquitoes won't bother us. The first time Ramón drank it, we didn't buy any and they bit us to death. When you're in ayahuasca it doesn't hurt but it's better if they're not around". I got up and took some insect repellent out of my toilet bag. I showed it to him. "Yes, it's good, give me a little. Thanks, Ramón". "No, I'm Óscar". "Oh, of course, I'm sorry, Óscar". He smiled, a little ashamed, and rubbed a lot of it on the exposed skin of his body with the same satisfied expression of someone who drenches himself in cologne after a shower. The children looked at him with longing, until their father passed the insect repellent to them.

The shaman sat up and went to a small wooden cupboard, where he got out a folder with drawings and magazine clippings. First, he showed me some reproductions of drawings which tried to show what a voyage through the world of ayahuasca was like: they were done in the psychedelic style of the 1960's with lurid colors and simple shapes made of streaks. "The one you see sitting here is the shaman and the others are the people who are drinking ayahuasca". The drawing had two well-defined parts: the central area where the people were resting

against an orderly background, and around them, a chaotic mass of figures and colors. “The ones on the outside are evil spirits who want to harm those who are drinking ayahuasca, but here is the shaman who chants and with his chanting, erects these barriers which you see, which protect the drinker so that his *mareación* is a good one and the evil spirits are kept far away. That’s why I am here, to make sure you have a good *mareación*. So you can enjoy it without getting worried”. Then he got a pencil sketch out of the folder which he’d drawn himself with almost childish strokes. It depicted two anacondas with bright colors coiling around an ayahuasca plant, with a fantastic bird on its branches. “When I’m in ayahuasca, I see things like this. You’ll see it tomorrow too”. While we spoke, the kids were getting ready to go to bed.

The shaman looked for a bottle of cologne and some tobacco in his wardrobe. “Every night I do a little spray with this cologne, *Agua de Florida*, and smoke my pipe so that the bad spirits sent by my enemies cannot attack me or my family when we’re asleep. I have many enemies”. He sat down again and began to pray in Shipibo. Some words in Spanish stood out in the bewitching monotony of his prayers: he repeatedly said “Jesus Christ” and “the medicine”, which sounded a little incongruous. He first held the bottle of cologne, blessed it, swallowed a mouthful and sprayed it with his mouth over different parts of my body. It had a penetrating fragrance, like those shaving lotions you’d find in old-fashioned barber shops. Then he lit up the pipe he had filled with shreds of tobacco he crumbled from a wide, compact

wad of leaves. He smoked with delight, inhaling with quick and labored breaths, like a runner after a long-distance race. He stood beside me, held my head delicately but firmly and blew a long, deep puff of smoke over me. I felt the freshness of the expelled air on the crown of my head, ashamed that my incipient baldness was exposed. I liked the aroma, which was not very intense, and felt, or wanted to feel, a tranquility of spirit. He also blew over his family and himself, then went out and blew over the house. "I have very powerful enemies, but with this, they won't be able to attack me. This is how I protect myself from their evil spirits when I'm asleep".

It was time to sleep but I first had to drape my mosquito net over the bed they assigned me, the only one in the house. They gave me a strange look when they saw the little packet in which it was wrapped. "I brought it from Spain", I explained, trusting that the article I had bought in a store which specialized in things like that would be useful. But when I tried to unfold it over the bed, I saw it was ridiculously small. The children stared at my explorer's gear with astonishment and Franky shot me a sardonic smile. He said something to Betsy, who went out and came back with a real mosquito net five minutes later. "We'll buy one in Pucallpa tomorrow", he told me. "Now, get some rest, because you have to be strong for the ceremony". They put out the lights. I heard a couple of farts and a belch. I thought how lucky I was to be witnessing the life of these people, which was so different to mine. Without intending to, I was disturbed by the thought that their kindness was calculated. But I

brushed it aside and thought about Blue and the words he had said when we were sitting in front of a bonfire on a very distant beach: “Ayahuasca changed my life”.

I plunged into a deep sleep.

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Blue's eyes were blue and they had the calm and wise gaze of cows. When I got to know him better, I learned that he was indeed tranquil and wise. Blue would walk around Máncora, a small fishing town in northern Peru, with his hand stuck into a small plastic bag full of coca leaves, which he chewed all the time. “It's the energy of the Incas. It's very good, I think better”, he'd mutter in his poor Spanish, which was meager and nasal. In the evening, when the sun went down, he'd plant himself before the sea and give free lessons in Tai-Chi to craftsmen and tourists. Only then did he take off the cap which covered his premature baldness, and it made him look vulnerable. He had spent ten months wandering around South America and would soon have to return to Los Angeles and earn some money so he could travel again. “One year of slavery, one year of freedom”, he'd often explain. During the week I spent with him on the beach, smoking marijuana together, I came to feel a great sympathy for him. In Máncora, the days seemed to be congealed by the burning weight of the sun and the nights went by in a blur of joints and bonfires. On one occasion, sitting in front of the bonfire, someone asked Blue about ayahuasca. “It changed my life”, he said, without pretentiousness. He'd

also been with the Shipibos in Yarinacocha. Before we parted, he gave me a present of a plastified coca leaf, which now hangs on a black cord in the Pacific Ocean of my bedroom in Madrid.

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What would happen to us if we were to forget our first love? Or that special moment on that journey of initiation, or that colossal conversation, enlivened by weed and beer, we once had with that person who was so understanding, or that warning of the sorrow that would always remain in our spirit? We would surely turn into a shrunk version of ourselves, a tip of the iceberg. Up to now, four months after I stayed there, I had forgotten the sweetest awakening I ever remember (how many as sweet will I have lost?). It is owed to the magic of writing down your memories.

It may have been a hand on my cheek, or a slight shove of the mattress or a word – I’m not sure – but when I opened my eyes, I saw her. Ana smiled in that timid, clenched way again to stop herself from flying towards me. “Breakfast”, she said, almost trembling, in a low, serious voice and I don’t know if I gave her a pat on the cheek or if she ran away before I could react, or if she stayed with me, frozen, and took my hand. An unreal light filtered through the windows and my defenseless heart was flooded with the beautiful, pure energy of a girl of seven.

It was like one of those Saturdays when you are a

child and you have the illusion that everything is possible. A clear sky, plans for the day, the family together, breakfast on the table, the uproar of kids, the complacent adults, a knowing look at the sleepyhead. Then the delight of the meal, the chickens in the garden, the voices of the children, “Óscar, Óscar”, Franky politely asking me if I slept well, Norma working, her bare feet on the fresh ground, the bowl of water and soap for washing myself and finish my return to this new world.

And also the money. “Now, my sister’s house, so that you can see the craftwork she makes. Shipibo crafts”, said Norma when we finished breakfast. “Ramón spent a lot of money buying those things as gifts for his friends in Spain”, Franky explained, sweet-talking me and using Ramón as a model I should follow. We went through the gate and there, at ten meters, Norma’s whole family was waiting for me, sitting in the doorway behind a table which was full of necklaces, pottery and clothing. I met her sister, “my sister, the Fatty”, and everyone laughed at the fatness of her sister. “My fat sister”, Norma said again, in her precarious Spanish and the fun went on as the restless children ran about, always smiling. She also introduced me to her mother. “Sick, my mother is sick”, and she looked it when I saw her slumped on a hammock, lacking the energy to balance it, listless, with one eye half-closed due to what I thought was a severe case of conjunctivitis. It didn’t matter that they wanted to sell me because I already knew that I was a potential buyer for them, almost more than a person. I chose a small bowl for my

grandmother, two necklaces and something else, surprised that they all had the same price, when it was obvious that some had needed more work than others. There were so many of them waiting for me to buy something, but without pushing me, so many bucking each other up that I thought I wasn't buying something from the sister but the whole family, all of the *indios* of San Francisco.

Among them all, shyly looking at me, there was another person who would tag along with me in those days: Mel, a girl whom everyone called the Cat, because of her bright, speckled eyes, of an indefinable color – maybe honey, maybe gray – which were very sensual, like her expression, modest yet flirtatious. “It’s because her mother ate crocodile eggs when she was pregnant”, Norma said and the Cat, became even shyer when she understood that they were talking about her.

When we finished, we went, in a procession, to look at a dream: Franky’s center for the ayahuasca ceremonies. It took us a few minutes to get there, leaving the houses of the community behind, which were ever more scattered as we advanced. Ana, who was a few steps behind, ran to catch up with me and took hold of my hand while Darwin took hold of the other: a symbol of their esteem and mine. The path narrowed and we had to go in Indian file: I stayed behind Franky, with his sinewy calves and the machete he used to skillfully clear the way. Acting like a journalist, I asked him about the details of the manioc plots we were passing through or the pretty flowers beside the track. He answered them attentively but wanted to talk about his ceremonial center: “I want

to build a place so that foreigners can come here and learn about the world of ayahuasca". While he was walking along, he focused his gaze ahead and cut down the branches which were blocking the path. At times, he turned around and I noticed how his expression was transformed by his determination to turn his dream into a reality: features sculpted in stone, chiseled ones. "I am going to build two houses: one where people can sleep and do the ceremonies and another for ourselves. And there are also going to be children wearing our traditional Shipibo dress and Shipibo dances and craftwork, so that our culture won't disappear and there will be employment for my people. Everything is going to be pure Shipibo", he explained, his eyes lighting up. We finally reached the piece of land the community had given to him. It was as big as a soccer pitch and surrounded by a stream of still, brown water where only trees and useless weeds grew. The shaman explained his project to me in detail. It was very ambitious and not very realistic, I thought: the idea of a visionary.

In addition to being a visionary and perhaps for that reason, Franky had the makings of a businessman, and like a good businessman, he was clear about his strategy. The idea was to turn his center into a typical tourist trap, like the ones which attracted so many tourists to Spain in the 1960's. In this case, it would be located beside a lake deep in the jungle and the *sombrero cordobés* of the folkloric Spanish *caballero* would be replaced by a feather crown, and the ruffled dress of an old-fashioned Spanish lady by an indigenous outfit of blouse and skirt

in garish colors. In my opinion, the whole setup wouldn't appeal much to foreigners who thought of ayahuasca as a "spiritual quest" (though it would need some research to find out how many foreign tourists thought that way).

The shaman had got Norma and Betsy to dress up in their "traditional" gear that morning, so I could take some photos and I didn't want to disappoint them. I did a bucolic portrait of them standing beneath a tree. I followed in the footsteps of Franky, while the friendly crowd of his children, nephews, brothers and in-laws continued to prance around us. Everyone was curious about me, each with his or her own sense of the relationship between us. Before we went back, he stopped for a few minutes to bathe in the stream. "This water is better than the water in the lake, because it's running water", Franky explained, but it looked stagnant to me and I didn't relish trying it. We sat down by the side of a stretch where the channel was no more than a meter wide and thirty centimeters deep. The muddy water awakened my suspicions. They got hold of some pails and bowls they'd brought along, filled them with water and poured it over themselves over and over again: they seemed to enjoy it a lot. To be polite, I did the same and I was surprised by how fresh the water was and the way it recharged the energy in my body. "Fantastic!", I said, with surprise. "Tomorrow, after we've done ayahuasca, we'll come here to rest. This water is good", he said again. I surrendered my wash basin and privileged spot on a little bridge made of tree trunks to Darwin, who, from his indelible smile and tranquil air, was also enjoying it, I could tell. "You like

it?”, I asked him. “Yes”, he said, his mouth wide open and his body shaking with slow chuckles. A few minutes after that, I couldn’t hide a fleeting glance at the place where Darwin was drenching himself with water from the basin and everyone understood that I wanted to do it again: they handed me the big bucket and surrendered the spot to me, so attentive and perceptive were they. The turbid water was as opaque as earth, it flowed freely and was delightful. While I was pouring the water over myself, I noticed that the shaman was looking at my body in an analytical way.

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It was still before noon when we sat down and waited for the arrival of a taxi to take us to Yarina to watch the semifinals of the little Shipibo-Conibo World Cup, the one Norma would be playing in. She and the littlest kids had gone ahead to make sure they wouldn’t be late. Franky and I sought the shade while we waited for the taxi, along with a *mestizo* man of around thirty-five, who, apparently exhausted, was resting a few meters away. His energy was out of tune with the place. He looked out of it and I had the feeling that his mere presence embarrassed the shaman. I was wrong. We got into the shared taxi and started to talk. “What are you doing around here?”, Franky politely asked him, and I think he already knew the answer, from the introverted air of the man. “I’ve been drinking ayahuasca with Mateo”, he answered in a

daze. "My friend Óscar, here, is also going to drink tonight". Franky always included me. The man, who had short hair and a moustache, nodded again with wavy movements, almost in mournful way. "Was it the first time you drank?", Franky asked. "Yes, yes, the first. I came with two girl friends. We've been here three nights. The three of us have drunk the medicine, he said slowly, as if it were almost too much of an effort to talk. "And how did it go?", I asked him. He looked at me, nodded again and said: "Incredible. A wonderful experience. It puts everything in the right place: your family, your job, the people you love", and he nodded again, self-absorbed. I liked him and I was moved by what he said. "What happens", he continued, "is that while they explain it to you, you won't be able to understand it until you drink it yourself, because it is so...". Franky looked at the two of us in turn, pleased by what he had just heard. "My friend Óscar is a journalist and he is doing a story on the Shipibos". "I'm also a journalist", the Peruvian guy said. "I have a t.v. program in Pucallpa about tourism and culture. We're now trying to publicize the Shipibo culture among the people of Pucallpa, because it doesn't make sense that people aren't aware of the treasures we have here". Franky lit up: "I am building a ceremonial center for ayahuasca. There are going to be traditional dances there, displays of craftwork and there will also be ceremonies. I think that would suit your program very well". "Yes, of course", he said condescendingly and began a long speech about how the Shipibos should attract foreign tourists. He also liked the notion of the children

dressed up in the traditional manner, the little cup of refreshing ice cream, the attractive craftworks and other of Franky's favorite ideas, but seeing how he didn't stick to the point, Franky tried to get him focused again. "Well, what I would like...", but the man didn't seem very interested, interrupted him and turned to me. "Where are you from?" "I'm from Spain. I do t.v. programs there too. I had one on art, but I got tired of it and I'm spending a few months in Peru and Ecuador to do some stories". "Our studio in Pucallpa is downtown. If you like, come around and see us". Tireless and determined, Franky took advantage of a gap in the conversation: "If you like, Óscar, we could go there this week so you can have a look". I nodded "yes", feeling used and he noted down the address and phone number.

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When the Shipibo girls who were playing soccer kicked their opponents, it hurt me as well, also the fact that they were barefoot and the field was of hard earth, with barely any grass. Their expressions were sullen and their shouts shrill and threatening. They were Indian women on the warpath but did not resemble the slim Pocahontas in the Disney movie. As their younger sisters would one day, they had surrendered their bodies to breeding and suckling lots of kids and keeping tough in order to work in the fields or their homes.

The spectators joined in the match too. They gave advice to their teams, analyzed the plays, got happy, got

sad, cheered, cursed at the referee and when not busy with that, ate ice creams, drank soft drinks and pissed against the fence. The children were the only ones who preferred to surrender themselves to their own fantasies, worlds where they were the ones who made the rules and ran and ran without ever getting tired.

We stayed sitting at one end, under the sun, which was especially hot that day. We refreshed ourselves with an iced bottled soft drink, which fought off the numbing effect of the heat. I waited for the right moment to ask him how much he'd charge me for staying in San Francisco. I was worried that he'd twice changed the subject and I was afraid that it would cost a fortune. "So, Franky, how much are going to charge me?", I timidly asked him, with the feeling that I was offending him. There was a cloud of nervous tension between us. He avoided my glance and said he had to talk to Norma first, who was waiting on the sidelines for her match to begin. He went up to her and after talking for a couple of minutes, returned: "Well, for my services as a guide I won't charge you anything. Whatever you want to pay me is fine". That was cunning of him. "Norma told me that she'll charge you twenty soles a day for food. For your lodging, it'll be another ten soles a day and for each ayahuasca session, ten dollars, that is, thirty-four soles". It was expensive compared to what I had paid in restaurants and hotels in Peru and Ecuador up to then, but I accepted it. "Ah, very well". "What do you think?" "A little expensive, but it's o.k.". Franky was upset by my answer or perhaps I was the one who looked upset. He explained that Mateo, the

shaman the man we'd just met drank with, charged much more. Then he went away and I remained seated on the side of the soccer pitch, and I was overwhelmed by the feeling that my attitude had been stingy. I was afraid of having insulted him, but I'd been sincere and had needed to check his crazy illusions by mentioning my limited resources. It hadn't been easy and there, under the hot sun, my sweaty head began to invent an absurd conflict that would prove to be very harmful for our relationship.

The girls' soccer team of San Francisco beat its rival and classified for the finals, in two days time. I suppose that Norma was happy, but it was hard to tell, because her eternal half-smile was always shadowed by a rictus of absentmindedness, as if reality were far away.

Franky and I left his family behind and went to the nearby city of Pucallpa. We had to buy a number of things for the ceremony: tobacco, Baygon insect spray, a mosquito net, *Agua de Florida* and above all, the ayahuasca, which the shaman wouldn't be able to prepare himself as he usually did, because he was short of the plants. When we got to the city, I noticed a change in Franky's character. The man who was kind to his children, joked with his friends, was solicitous with his wife, attentive to myself, the visitor, and firm about life gave way to one who was now insecure, crude, brusque and downcast. When he went into a store, he spoke in a cutting way, very different to the calm, sincere tone of voice I was used to. I think he felt threatened by the city and what it represented: the home of the colonizers who had crushed his society, with its reminders of oppression and