

THE LAST BATTLE ON EARTH

the same thing about everything you do. You've been trying your best for years to no avail. Something must be done to remedy that."

I felt compelled, as usual, to defend myself. Don Juan seemed to aim, as a rule, at my very weakest points. I remembered then that every time I had attempted to defend myself against his criticisms I had ended up feeling like a fool, and I stopped myself in the midst of a long explanatory speech.

Don Juan examined me with curiosity and laughed. He said in a very kind tone that he had already told me that all of us were fools. I was not an exception.

"You always feel compelled to explain your acts, as if you were the only man on earth who's wrong," he said. "It's your old feeling of importance. You have too much of it; you also have too much personal history. On the other hand, you don't assume responsibility for your acts; you're not using your death as an adviser, and above all, you are too accessible. In other words, your life is as messy as it was before I met you."

Again I had a genuine surge of pride and wanted to argue that he was wrong. He gestured me to be quiet.

"One must assume responsibility for being in a weird world," he said. "We are in a weird world, you know."

I nodded my head affirmatively.

"We're not talking about the same thing," he said. "For you the world is weird because if you're not bored with it you're at odds with it. For me the world is weird because it is stupendous, awesome, mysterious, unfathomable; my interest has been to convince you that you must assume responsibility for being here, in this marvelous world, in this marvelous desert, in this marvelous time. I wanted to convince you that you must learn to make every act count, since you are going to be here for only a short while, in fact, too short for witnessing all the marvels of it."

I insisted that to be bored with the world or to be at odds

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with it was the human condition.

“So, change it,” he replied dryly. “If you do not respond to that challenge you are as good as dead.”

He dared me to name an issue, an item in my life that had engaged all my thoughts. I said art. I had always wanted to be an artist and for years I had tried my hand at that. I still had the painful memory of my failure.

“You have never taken the responsibility for being in this unfathomable world,” he said in an indicting tone. “Therefore, you were never an artist, and perhaps you’ll never be a hunter.”

“This is my best, don Juan.”

“No. You don’t know what your best is.”

“I am doing all I can.”

“You’re wrong again. You can do better. There is one simple thing wrong with you—you think you have plenty of time.”

He paused and looked at me as if waiting for my reaction.

“You think you have plenty of time,” he repeated.

“Plenty of time for what, don Juan?”

“You think your life is going to last forever.”

“No. I don’t.”

“Then, if you don’t think your life is going to last forever, what are you waiting for? Why the hesitation to change?”

“Has it ever occurred to you, don Juan, that I may not want to change?”

“Yes, it has occurred to me. I did not want to change either, just like you. However, I didn’t like my life; I was tired of it, just like you. Now I don’t have enough of it.”

I vehemently asserted that his insistence about changing my way of life was frightening and arbitrary. I said that I really agreed with him, at a certain level, but the mere fact that he was always the master that called the shots made the situation untenable for me.

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"You don't have time for this display, you fool," he said in a severe tone. "This, whatever you're doing now, may be your last act on earth. It may very well be your last battle. There is no power which could guarantee that you are going to live one more minute."

"I know that," I said with contained anger.

"No. You don't. If you knew that you would be a hunter."

I contended that I was aware of my impending death but it was useless to talk or think about it, since I could not do anything to avoid it. Don Juan laughed and said I was like a comedian going mechanically through a routine.

"If this were your last battle on earth, I would say that you are an idiot," he said calmly. "You are wasting your last act on earth in some stupid mood."

We were quiet for a moment. My thoughts ran rampant. He was right, of course.

"You have no time, my friend, no time. None of us have time," he said.

"I agree, don Juan, but—"

"Don't just agree with me," he snapped. "You must, instead of agreeing so easily, act upon it. Take the challenge. Change."

"Just like that?"

"That's right. The change I'm talking about never takes place by degrees; it happens suddenly. And you are not preparing yourself for that sudden act that will bring a total change."

I believed he was expressing a contradiction. I explained to him that if I were preparing myself to change I was certainly changing by degrees.

"You haven't changed at all," he said. "That is why you believe you're changing little by little. Yet, perhaps you will surprise yourself someday by changing suddenly and without a single warning. I know this is so, and thus I don't lose sight

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of my interest in convincing you.”

I could not persist in my arguing. I was not sure of what I really wanted to say. After a moment's pause don Juan went on explaining his point.

“Perhaps I should put it in a different way,” he said. “What I recommend you to do is to notice that we do not have any assurance that our lives will go on indefinitely. I have just said that change comes suddenly and unexpectedly, and so does death. What do you think we can do about it?”

I thought he was asking a rhetorical question, but he made a gesture with his eyebrows urging me to answer.

“To live as happily as possible,” I said.

“Right! But do you know anyone who lives happily?”

My first impulse was to say yes; I thought I could use a number of people I knew as examples. On second thought, however, I knew my effort would only be an empty attempt at exonerating myself.

“No,” I said. “I really don't.”

“I do,” don Juan said. “There are some people who are very careful about the nature of their acts. Their happiness is to act with the full knowledge that they don't have time; therefore, their acts have a peculiar power; their acts have a sense of . . .”

Don Juan seemed to be at a loss for words. He scratched his temples and smiled. Then suddenly he stood up as if he were through with our conversation. I beseeched him to finish what he was telling me. He sat down and puckered up his lips.

“Acts have power,” he said. “Especially when the person acting knows that those acts are his last battle. There is a strange consuming happiness in acting with the full knowledge that whatever one is doing may very well be one's last act on earth. I recommend that you reconsider your life and bring your acts into that light.”

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I disagreed with him. Happiness for me was to assume that there was an inherent continuity to my acts and that I would be able to continue doing, at will, whatever I was doing at the moment, especially if I was enjoying it. I told him that my disagreement was not a banal one but stemmed from the conviction that the world and myself had a determinable continuity.

Don Juan seemed to be amused by my efforts to make sense. He laughed, shook his head, scratched his hair, and finally when I talked about a "determinable continuity" threw his hat to the ground and stomped on it.

I ended up laughing at his clowning.

"You don't have time, my friend," he said. "That is the misfortune of human beings. None of us have sufficient time, and your continuity has no meaning in this awesome, mysterious world.

"Your continuity only makes you timid," he said. "Your acts cannot possibly have the flair, the power, the compelling force of the acts performed by a man who knows that he is fighting his last battle on earth. In other words, your continuity does not make you happy or powerful."

I admitted that I was afraid of thinking I was going to die and accused him of causing great apprehension in me with his constant talk and concern about death.

"But we are all going to die," he said.

He pointed towards some hills in the distance.

"There is something out there waiting for me, for sure; and I will join it, also for sure. But perhaps you're different and death is not waiting for you at all."

He laughed at my gesture of despair.

"I don't want to think about it, don Juan."

"Why not?"

"It is meaningless. If it is out there waiting for me why should I worry about it?"

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"I didn't say that you have to worry about it."

"What am I supposed to do then?"

"Use it. Focus your attention on the link between you and your death, without remorse or sadness or worrying. Focus your attention on the fact you don't have time and let your acts flow accordingly. Let each of your acts be your last battle on earth. Only under those conditions will your acts have their rightful power. Otherwise they will be, for as long as you live, the acts of a timid man."

"Is it so terrible to be a timid man?"

"No. It isn't if you are going to be immortal, but if you are going to die there is no time for timidity, simply because timidity makes you cling to something that exists only in your thoughts. It soothes you while everything is at a lull, but then the awesome, mysterious world will open its mouth for you, as it will open for every one of us, and then you will realize that your sure ways were not sure at all. Being timid prevents us from examining and exploiting our lot as men."

"It is not natural to live with the constant idea of our death, don Juan."

"Our death is waiting and this very act we're performing now may well be our last battle on earth," he replied in a solemn voice. "I call it a battle because it is a struggle. Most people move from act to act without any struggle or thought. A hunter, on the contrary, assesses every act; and since he has an intimate knowledge of his death, he proceeds judiciously, as if every act were his last battle. Only a fool would fail to notice the advantage a hunter has over his fellow men. A hunter gives his last battle its due respect. It's only natural that his last act on earth should be the best of himself. It's pleasurable that way. It dulls the edge of his fright."

"You are right," I conceded. "It's just hard to accept."

"It'll take years for you to convince yourself and then it'll take years for you to act accordingly. I only hope you have time left."

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"I get scared when you say that," I said.

Don Juan examined me with a serious expression on his face.

"I've told you, this is a weird world," he said. "The forces that guide men are unpredictable, awesome, yet their splendor is something to witness."

He stopped talking and looked at me again. He seemed to be on the verge of revealing something to me, but he checked himself and smiled.

"Is there something that guides us?" I asked.

"Certainly. There are powers that guide us."

"Can you describe them?"

"Not really, except to call them forces, spirits, airs, winds, or anything like that."

I wanted to probe him further, but before I could ask anything else he stood up. I stared at him, flabbergasted. He had stood up in one single movement; his body simply jerked up and he was on his feet.

I was still pondering upon the unusual skill that would be needed in order to move with such speed when he told me in a dry tone of command to stalk a rabbit, catch it, kill it, skin it, and roast the meat before the twilight.

He looked up at the sky and said that I might have enough time.

I automatically started off, proceeding the way I had done scores of times. Don Juan walked beside me and followed my movements with a scrutinizing look. I was very calm and moved carefully and I had no trouble at all in catching a male rabbit.

"Now kill it," don Juan said dryly.

I reached into the trap to grab hold of the rabbit. I had it by the ears and was pulling it out when a sudden sensation of terror invaded me. For the first time since don Juan had begun to teach me to hunt it occurred to me that he had never taught me how to kill game. In the scores of times we had roamed in

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the desert he himself had only killed one rabbit, two quail and one rattlesnake.

I dropped the rabbit and looked at don Juan.

"I can't kill it," I said.

"Why not?"

"I've never done that."

"But you've killed hundreds of birds and other animals."

"With a gun, not with my bare hands."

"What difference does it make? This rabbit's time is up."

Don Juan's tone shocked me; it was so authoritative, so knowledgeable, it left no doubts in my mind that he knew that the rabbit's time was up.

"Kill it!" he commanded with a ferocious look in his eyes.

"I can't."

He yelled at me that the rabbit had to die. He said that its roaming in that beautiful desert had come to an end. I had no business stalling, because the power or the spirit that guides rabbits had led that particular one into my trap, right at the edge of the twilight.

A series of confusing thoughts and feelings overtook me, as if the feelings had been out there waiting for me. I felt with agonizing clarity the rabbit's tragedy, to have fallen into my trap. In a matter of seconds my mind swept across the most crucial moments of my own life, the many times I had been the rabbit myself.

I looked at it, and it looked at me. The rabbit had backed up against the side of the cage; it was almost curled up, very quiet and motionless. We exchanged a somber glance, and that glance, which I fancied to be of silent despair, cemented a complete identification on my part.

"The hell with it," I said loudly. "I won't kill anything. That rabbit goes free."

A profound emotion made me shiver. My arms trembled as I tried to grab the rabbit by the ears; it moved fast and I missed. I again tried and fumbled once more. I became des-

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perate. I had the sensation of nausea and quickly kicked the trap in order to smash it and let the rabbit go free. The cage was unsuspectedly strong and did not break as I thought it would. My despair mounted to an unbearable feeling of anguish. Using all my strength, I stomped on the edge of the cage with my right foot. The sticks cracked loudly. I pulled the rabbit out. I had a moment of relief, which was shattered to bits in the next instant. The rabbit hung limp in my hand. It was dead.

I did not know what to do. I became preoccupied with finding out how it had died. I turned to don Juan. He was staring at me. A feeling of terror sent a chill through my body.

I sat down by some rocks. I had a terrible headache. Don Juan put his hand on my head and whispered in my ear that I had to skin the rabbit and roast it before the twilight was over.

I felt nauseated. He very patiently talked to me as if he were talking to a child. He said that the powers that guided men or animals had led that particular rabbit to me, in the same way they will lead me to my own death. He said the rabbit's death had been a gift for me in exactly the same way my own death will be a gift for something or someone else.

I was dizzy. The simple events of that day had crushed me. I tried to think that it was only a rabbit; I could not, however, shake off the uncanny identification I had had with it.

Don Juan said that I needed to eat some of its meat, if only a morsel, in order to validate my finding.

"I can't do that," I protested meekly.

"We are dregs in the hands of those forces," he snapped at me. "So stop your self-importance and use this gift properly."

I picked up the rabbit; it was warm.

Don Juan leaned over and whispered in my ear, "Your trap was his last battle on earth. I told you, he had no more time to roam in this marvelous desert."