

“What happened when you grabbed your ally, don Genaro?” I asked.

“It was a powerful jolt,” don Genaro said after a moment’s hesitation. He seemed to have been putting his thoughts in order.

“Never would I have imagined it was going to be like that,” he went on. “It was something, something, something . . . like nothing I can tell. After I grabbed it we began to spin. The ally made me twirl, but I didn’t let go. We spun through the air with such speed and force that I couldn’t see any more. Everything was foggy. The spinning went on, and on, and on. Suddenly I felt that I was standing on the ground again. I looked at myself. The ally had not killed me. I was in one piece. I was myself! I knew then that I had succeeded. At long last I had an ally. I jumped up and down with delight. What

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a feeling! What a feeling it was!

"Then I looked around to find out where I was. The surroundings were unknown to me. I thought that the ally must have taken me through the air and dumped me somewhere very far from the place where we started to spin. I oriented myself. I thought that my home must be towards the east, so I began to walk in that direction. It was still early. The encounter with the ally had not taken too long. Very soon I found a trail and then I saw a bunch of men and women coming towards me. They were Indians. I thought they were Mazatec Indians. They surrounded me and asked me where I was going. 'I'm going home to Ixtlan,' I said to them. 'Are you lost?' someone asked. 'I am,' I said. 'Why?' 'Because Ixtlan is not that way. Ixtlan is in the opposite direction. We ourselves are going there,' someone else said. 'Join us!' they all said. 'We have food!'"

Don Genaro stopped talking and looked at me as if he were waiting for me to ask a question.

"Well, what happened?" I asked. "Did you join them?"

"No. I didn't," he said. "Because they were not real. I knew it right away, the minute they came to me. There was something in their voices, in their friendliness that gave them away, especially when they asked me to join them. So I ran away. They called me and begged me to come back. Their pleas became haunting, but I kept on running away from them."

"Who were they?" I asked.

"People," don Genaro replied cuttingly. "Except that they were not real."

"They were like apparitions," don Juan explained. "Like phantoms."

"After walking for a while," don Genaro went on, "I became more confident. I knew that Ixtlan was in the direction I was going. And then I saw two men coming down the trail towards me. They also seemed to be Mazatec Indians. They

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had a donkey loaded with firewood. They went by me and mumbled, 'Good afternoon.'

"'Good afternoon!' I said and kept on walking. They did not pay any attention to me and went their way. I slowed down my gait and casually turned around to look at them. They were walking away unconcerned with me. They seemed to be real. I ran after them and yelled, 'Wait, wait!'

"They held their donkey and stood on either side of the animal, as if they were protecting the load.

"'I am lost in these mountains,' I said to them. 'Which way is Ixtlan?' They pointed in the direction they were going. 'You're very far,' one of them said. 'It is on the other side of those mountains. It'll take you four or five days to get there.' Then they turned around and kept on walking. I felt that those were real Indians and I begged them to let me join them.

"We walked together for a while and then one of them got his bundle of food and offered me some. I froze on the spot. There was something terribly strange in the way he offered me his food. My body felt frightened, so I jumped back and began to run away. They both said that I would die in the mountains if I did not go with them and tried to coax me to join them. Their pleas were also very haunting, but I ran away from them with all my might.

"I kept on walking. I knew then that I was on the right way to Ixtlan and that those phantoms were trying to lure me out of my way.

"I encountered eight of them; they must have known that my determination was unshakable. They stood by the road and looked at me with pleading eyes. Most of them did not say a word; the women among them, however, were more daring and pleaded with me. Some of them even displayed food and other goods that they were supposed to be selling, like innocent merchants by the side of the road. I did not stop nor did I look at them.

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“By late afternoon I came to a valley that I seemed to recognize. It was somehow familiar. I thought I had been there before, but if that was so I was actually south of Ixtlan. I began to look for landmarks to properly orient myself and correct my route when I saw a little Indian boy tending some goats. He was perhaps seven years old and was dressed the way I had been when I was his age. In fact, he reminded me of myself tending my father’s two goats.

“I watched him for some time; the boy was talking to himself, the same way I used to, then he would talk to his goats. From what I knew about tending goats he was really good at it. He was thorough and careful. He didn’t pamper his goats, but he wasn’t cruel to them either.

“I decided to call him. When I talked to him in a loud voice he jumped up and ran away to a ledge and peeked at me from behind some rocks. He seemed to be ready to run for his life. I liked him. He seemed to be afraid and yet he still found time to herd his goats out of my sight.

“I talked to him for a long time; I said that I was lost and that I did not know my way to Ixtlan. I asked the name of the place where we were and he said it was the place I had thought it was. That made me very happy. I realized I was no longer lost and pondered on the power that my ally had in order to transport my whole body that far in less time than it takes to bat an eyelash.

“I thanked the boy and began to walk away. He casually came out of his hiding place and herded his goats into an almost unnoticeable trail. The trail seemed to lead down into the valley. I called the boy and he did not run away. I walked towards him and he jumped into the bushes when I came too close. I commended him on being so cautious and began to ask him some questions.

“‘Where does this trail lead?’ I asked. ‘Down,’ he said. ‘Where do you live?’ ‘Down there.’ ‘Are there lots of houses

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down there?’ ‘No, just one.’ ‘Where are the other houses?’ The boy pointed towards the other side of the valley with indifference, the way boys his age do. Then he began to go down the trail with his goats.

“ ‘Wait,’ I said to the boy. ‘I’m very tired and hungry. Take me to your folks.’ ”

“ ‘I have no folks,’ the little boy said and that jolted me. I don’t know why but his voice made me hesitate. The boy, noticing my hesitation, stopped and turned to me. ‘There’s nobody at my house,’ he said. ‘My uncle is gone and his wife went to the fields. There is plenty of food. Plenty. Come with me.’ ”

“I almost felt sad. The boy was also a phantom. The tone of his voice and his eagerness had betrayed him. The phantoms were out there to get me but I wasn’t afraid. I was still numb from my encounter with the ally. I wanted to get mad at the ally or at the phantoms but somehow I couldn’t get angry like I used to, so I gave up trying. Then I wanted to get sad, because I had liked that little boy, but I couldn’t, so I gave up on that too.

“Suddenly I realized that I had an ally and that there was nothing that the phantoms could do to me. I followed the boy down the trail. Other phantoms lurched out swiftly and tried to make me trip over the precipices, but my will was stronger than they were. They must have sensed that, because they stopped pestering me. After a while they simply stood by my path; from time to time some of them would leap towards me but I stopped them with my will. And then they quit bothering me altogether.”

Don Genaro remained quiet for a long time.

Don Juan looked at me.

“What happened after that, don Genaro?” I asked.

“I kept on walking,” he said factually.

It seemed that he had finished his tale and there was nothing

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he wanted to add.

I asked him why was the fact that they offered him food a clue to their being phantoms.

He did not answer. I probed further and asked whether it was a custom among Mazatec Indians to deny that they had any food, or to be heavily concerned with matters of food.

He said that the tone of their voices, their eagerness to lure him out, and the manner in which the phantoms talked about food were the clues—and that he knew that because his ally was helping him. He asserted that by himself alone he would have never noticed those peculiarities.

“Were those phantoms allies, don Genaro?” I asked.

“No. They were people.”

“People? But you said they were phantoms.”

“I said that they were no longer real. After my encounter with the ally nothing was real any more.”

We were quiet for a long time.

“What was the final outcome of that experience, don Genaro?” I asked.

“Final outcome?”

“I mean, when and how did you finally reach Ixtlan?”

Both of them broke into laughter at once.

“So that’s the final outcome for you,” don Juan remarked.

“Let’s put it this way then. There was no final outcome to Genaro’s journey. There will never be any final outcome. Genaro is still on his way to Ixtlan!”

Don Genaro glanced at me with piercing eyes and then turned his head to look into the distance, towards the south.

“I will never reach Ixtlan,” he said.

His voice was firm but soft, almost a murmur.

“Yet in my feelings . . . in my feelings sometimes I think I’m just one step from reaching it. Yet I never will. In my journey I don’t even find the familiar landmarks I used to know. Nothing is any longer the same.”

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Don Juan and don Genaro looked at each other. There was something so sad about their look.

"In my journey to Ixtlan I find only phantom travelers," he said softly.

I looked at don Juan. I had not understood what don Genaro had meant.

"Everyone Genaro finds on his way to Ixtlan is only an ephemeral being," don Juan explained. "Take you, for instance. You are a phantom. Your feelings and your eagerness are those of people. That's why he says that he encounters only phantom travelers on his journey to Ixtlan."

I suddenly realized that don Genaro's journey was a metaphor.

"Your journey to Ixtlan is not real then," I said.

"It is real!" don Genaro interjected. "The travelers are not real."

He pointed to don Juan with a nod of his head and said emphatically, "This is the only one who is real. The world is real only when I am with this one."

Don Juan smiled.

"Genaro was telling his story to you," don Juan said, "because yesterday you *stopped the world*, and he thinks that you also *saw*, but you are such a fool that you don't know it yourself. I keep on telling him that you are weird, and that sooner or later you will *see*. At any rate, in your next meeting with the ally, if there is a next time for you, you will have to wrestle with it and tame it. If you survive the shock, which I'm sure you will, since you're strong and have been living like a warrior, you will find yourself alive in an unknown land. Then, as is natural to all of us, the first thing you will want to do is to start on your way back to Los Angeles. But there is no way to go back to Los Angeles. What you left there is lost forever. By then, of course, you will be a sorcerer, but that's no help; at a time like that what's important to all of

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us is the fact that everything we love or hate or wish for has been left behind. Yet the feelings in a man do not die or change, and the sorcerer starts on his way back home knowing that he will never reach it, knowing that no power on earth, not even his death, will deliver him to the place, the things, the people he loved. That's what Genaro told you."

Don Juan's explanation was like a catalyst; the full impact of don Genaro's story hit me suddenly when I began to link the tale to my own life.

"What about the people I love?" I asked don Juan. "What would happen to them?"

"They would all be left behind," he said.

"But is there no way I could retrieve them? Could I rescue them and take them with me?"

"No. Your ally will spin you, alone, into unknown worlds."

"But I could go back to Los Angeles, couldn't I? I could take the bus or a plane and go there. Los Angeles would still be there, wouldn't it?"

"Sure," don Juan said, laughing. "And so will Manteca and Temecula and Tucson."

"And Tecate," don Genaro added with great seriousness.

"And Piedras Negras and Tranquitas," don Juan said, smiling.

Don Genaro added more names and so did don Juan; and they became involved in enumerating a series of the most hilarious and unbelievable names of cities and towns.

"Spinning with your ally will change your idea of the world," don Juan said. "That idea is everything; and when that changes, the world itself changes."

He reminded me that I had read a poem to him once and wanted me to recite it. He cued me with a few words of it and I recalled having read to him some poems of Juan Ramon Jimenez. The particular one he had in mind was entitled "El Viaje Definitivo" (The Definitive Journey). I recited it.



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. . . and I will leave. But the birds will stay, singing:  
and my garden will stay, with its green tree,  
with its water well.

Many afternoons the skies will be blue and placid,  
and the bells in the belfry will chime,  
as they are chiming this very afternoon.

The people who have loved me will pass away,  
and the town will burst anew every year.  
But my spirit will always wander nostalgic  
in the same recondite corner of my flowery garden.

“That is the feeling Genaro is talking about,” don Juan said. “In order to be a sorcerer a man must be passionate. A passionate man has earthly belongings and things dear to him—if nothing else, just the path where he walks.

“What Genaro told you in his story is precisely that. Genaro left his passion in Ixtlan: his home, his people, all the things he cared for. And now he wanders around in his feelings; and sometimes, as he says, he almost reaches Ixtlan. All of us have that in common. For Genaro it is Ixtlan; for you it will be Los Angeles; for me . . .”

I did not want don Juan to tell me about himself. He paused as if he had read my mind.

Genaro sighed and paraphrased the first lines of the poem. “I left. And the birds stayed, singing.”

For an instant I sensed a wave of agony and an indescribable loneliness engulfing the three of us. I looked at don Genaro and I knew that, being a passionate man, he must have had so many ties of the heart, so many things he cared for and left behind. I had the clear sensation that at that moment the power of his recollection was about to landslide and that don Genaro was on the verge of weeping.

I hurriedly moved my eyes away. Don Genaro’s passion, his supreme loneliness, made me cry.

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I looked at don Juan. He was gazing at me.

“Only as a warrior can one survive the path of knowledge,” he said. “Because the art of a warrior is to balance the terror of being a man with the wonder of being a man.”

I gazed at the two of them, each in turn. Their eyes were clear and peaceful. They had summoned a wave of overwhelming nostalgia, and when they seemed to be on the verge of exploding into passionate tears, they held back the tidal wave. For an instant I think I *saw*. I *saw* the loneliness of man as a gigantic wave which had been frozen in front of me, held back by the invisible wall of a metaphor.

My sadness was so overwhelming that I felt euphoric. I embraced them.

Don Genaro smiled and stood up. Don Juan also stood up and gently put his hand on my shoulder.

“We are going to leave you here,” he said. “Do what you think is proper. The ally will be waiting for you at the edge of that plain.”

He pointed to a dark valley in the distance.

“If you don’t feel that this is your time yet, don’t keep your appointment,” he went on. “Nothing is gained by forcing the issue. If you want to survive you must be crystal clear and deadly sure of yourself.”

Don Juan walked away without looking at me, but don Genaro turned a couple of times and urged me with a wink and a movement of his head to go forward. I looked at them until they disappeared in the distance and then I walked to my car and drove away. I knew that it was not my time, yet.