

# HONGHI, MEESTER?

Nat Finkelstein

**A memorable visit to Huautla de Jimenez, encounter with the magic of the Mexican mushroom and the curandera Maria Sabina.**

Huautla de la Jimenez is many things to many people. To the casual observer flying south from Mexico City it is a haphazard collection of shacks spilling over a mountain 9,000 feet high in the Sierra Mazateca range of Mexico. The pilot doesn't bother to announce it. It is pronounced "what la." To the tourist, if he ever heard of it, it is a place to be avoided at all costs—inaccessible, squalid, possessing no hotel, no spa, no native industry, no shopping save innumerable 5 and 10 peso straw hats and has nothing to offer other than discomfort, dirt, dysentery and a non-Spanish speaking population of money grubbing Gringo haters. To the Mazatecan, it is a combination battleground and goldmine. It is, to him, a bastion against the encroachments of a civilization and religion he neither wants nor understands. He is besieged by an ever increasing invasion of "Meesters" who arrive on the once-a-day bus dressed in everything from pith helmets to bandanas, business suits to chinos, Madison Avenue to Delancey Street. They are all seeking one thing—Honghi. They are all carrying one thing—money. It is a goldmine for digging that money out of those pockets by charging exorbitant prices for bad food and dirty, uncomfortable lodgings on mud floors, for selling warm coca-cola and rotgut mescal and for acting as guide, too, and supplier of Huautla's only home-grown product, an improbable fungus called Teonanacatl. And so, to a host of psychologists, mystics, philosophers, scientists, visionaries, and beatniks, it is the new mecca—for Teonanacatl is the world-famous magic mushroom, the hallucinogenic plant that, for millenia, has served the Central American Indian as the mediator between man and god, the keys to extra-sensory perception, the repository of knowledge hidden from men in their normal minds.

It was at Huautla in 1936 that Roberto Weitlander became the first white man in



modern times to obtain or even see Teonanacatl; two years later, his daughter became the first white person to witness a mushroom rite there. Still, the mushroom remained a secret guarded by the Mazatecans and a handful of esoteric ethnologists and anthropologists. Since pre-Columbian times, the Indians kept the mushroom a secret hidden away from the repressions of church and state. Led by their "curanderos" (doctor-priests), who gathered the mushroom, officiated the re-

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Maria Sabina and one of her grandchildren, photo by Nat Finkelstein

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ligious ceremony, healed the sick, and presided over this holy communion of man, god, and plant, the Indians kept their rites away from the desecrating eyes of the outside world.

Then, in 1953, R. Gordon Wasson and his wife Valentina heard of the existence of a 16th century mushroom cult near Oaxaca, Mexico and came to investigate. On June 29, 1955, Wasson and Allan Richardson, under the supervision of Maria Sabina, the

head curandera of Huautla, became the first Americans to partake of the magic mushrooms. Coincidentally, in 1953, Aldous Huxley, in not so primitive Berkeley, California, drank a potion containing mescaline, a powerful consciousness expanding drug. In 1954, Huxley published his essay, "The Doors of Perception," recounting that experience. In 1957, the news of Wasson's work burst on the world with the publication of their book, "Mushrooms, Russia

and History” and an article in LIFE magazine.

The stampede was on, and the mushroom was the goal. Alan Watts called it “instant Zen,” Huxley, “the gateway to the antipodes of the mind,” the beatniks regarded it as the newest kick, and the “Harvard Group” psychologists hailed it as one of the great, mystico-psychological discoveries of the western world. It became the shortcut to the supreme transcendental experience, a cleansing of the soul and a healing of the mind.

I had started out alone but in Oaxaca I met a young American couple, Sam and Jill Rashow. Sam was an electrical engineer, studious and analytical; Jill was a graduate in Latin American economics and, like too many American women, was bossy and prone to histrionics. They had never turned on to anything before but had met another American writer who had taken the mushroom and they had become intrigued by the idea. When I explained to them the purpose of my trip, they asked whether I would take them along and volunteered the use of their Volkswagon. In Oaxaca, we met 2 girls from California who had been to Huautla and told us how to get there: Oaxaca to Teohaucan, bus to Teotlatlan, 4:00 AM truck to Huautla. We also met Mark, a young Englishman who had read of the mushrooms and started his own hunt. Finally, just before leaving Oaxaca, we met Alan Watts who warned us of trouble in Huautla caused by a beat who tried to eat a live turkey on the main street, after an orgy of unsupervised mushroom eating. We took the Volks from Oaxaca to Teohaucan, a rather fashionable resort-spa populated with all sorts of European tourist types who come to drink the mineral water.

We checked into the bus station. The ticket vendor looked at us, smiled, “Honghi” and wrote out tickets to Teotlatlan. When we reached Teotlatlan, we made our way to the Huautla bus station and were informed that four other Americans were in town. The waiting room was packed with Mexicans sleeping on the floor, so the ticket vendor trotted out a cot for Sam and Jill. I contented myself with some burlap bags stretched out on the street. All night long I was

awakened by Huautlans who came to tell me of the wonders of Huautla and its mushrooms, the hallucinations I would undergo, the colors and forms I would see.

At 4:00 AM, the bus pulled in and our four paisanos came running up the street. The girl was tall, lean, blonde, and somewhat good looking; the other three looked like Salvation Army “before” ads. They wore the tribal costume of jeans, T-shirts and dirt, and carried a figurative banner reading, “Death to Squares.” Gats, the ring leader, was tall, thin, blond, mustachioed, and bore an old duffle bag. Cherokee was negroid, large, muscular, silent, and covered with tattoos. Rob wore a blue banadana on his head a la Mississippi pirate and immediately made himself at home by rolling a joint, which they gaily passed around. They started the party off by calling Sam and Jill squares and bumming cigarettes from me. The Mexicans chilled up against us and there was no more friendly conversation. We were lumped together in one unhappy “gringo” group, and it seemed apparent that the turkey episode was causing repercussions.

At 4:15, the '49 Dodge started on its 40 mile trip, and at 12:20 we reached Huautla. On the way, we had to travel a one lane mud road that dipped 3,000 feet in five miles and then climbed 5,000 feet in six miles sans brakes, sans tire tread and sans all hope of survival. Waves of heat and hostility greeted us as we disembarked from our rolling sauna. We asked about a hotel but there was none. We went into the restaurant but they were “out of food.” Half of the people we approached couldn't speak Spanish but out of every other door we heard the cry, “Meester, Honghi . . . .Meester. Honghi . . . .” We would charge for the source, always an imp's face beckoning through the white noon heat out of a cool mud house and always the same end to the expectations, “Honghi? No hay ahora. Manana.” There were no mushrooms, there were no curanderos. There were only the federales who came to town after the turkey-eating episode.

“Maria Sabina . . . where is she?”

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A finger points to a mountain in the distance: "She's far away... muy lejos. She charges 100 pesos for the consultation, 50 pesos for the mushrooms and no one knows where she lives."

It was more money than we could afford. We asked where the other curanderos were.

"Very far away. They all left. There are no others."

We asked where we could buy the mushrooms.

"There are no mushrooms. It's the full moon. You can't pick mushrooms till the new moon. It hasn't rained. There are no mushrooms without rain."

"But, look... it rained yesterday...."

"That wasn't a good rain."

We were haunted by every gringo oppressor, from Cortez and the Inquisition, TR and United Fruit, all the way to the looney who ate a turkey on the street and always a maddening, tantalizing Greek chorus of "Meester, Honghi, Meester." Finally, after hours of searching, we were able to rent an empty house for the night—no beds, no light, no water; but mats, a roof, and a place to stay. Sam and I went out and bought some coconuts and tomatoes, as well as dysentery in the form of cantaloupe juice. When we got back, Rob and Gats had smashed the only closet so that they could use the nails to hang a hammock.

"Hey, man, look... Cherokee's rolled 14 joints. That's better than mushrooms, man. We don't need no mushrooms."

I told them that we were going out to find a curandero and offered to take them along.

"Look, man. You can go for that curandero shit if you like but it's not in my bag. I don't need an old hag mumbling in Mazatecan to turn me on. I don't dig this Indian doctor jazz. I turn myself on. It's not my culture. You just score the mushrooms... we'll do the rest."

I reasoned with Sam and Jill that the best thing for us to do would be to wander up in the general direction of Maria's to see if we could find someone who would sell some mushrooms to us. In the back of my mind was the hope that once started in that general direction inertia would carry us along and I could cozen them into going the rest of the way. Somewhere in this excuse for a town I knew there were both mushrooms and curanderos and I wasn't going to be stopped by three miles of mountain. From every other run-down mud shack and hat store came the familiar "Honghi, meester." Kids followed us down the street chorusing, "Honghi... tee hee hee... honghi, honghi..." but every time we stopped to question we were answered with a giggle and a blank stare. Then, after about a mile, we met one of the Indians who had spoken to me in Teotlatlan. Yes, he knew where we could get mushrooms — a kilometer up the road there was a tailor who also sold mushrooms. As if we were in a Bogart movie, he was called "El Gordo," the fat one. We tramped on asking for El Gordo and then we found him. Maybe it was nature imitating life, maybe it was my fertile imagination or tired mind, but he did look like Sidney Greenstreet. Yes, he did have some mushrooms; they were old, black, and shriveled, and looked as appetizing as the rest of the town, but they were the first tangible sign that we were getting somewhere. Then he reached under the counter and picked out an old copy of Life magazine with an article on Huautla and the mushrooms. He showed me some illustrations and told me to come back the next day for "fresh mushrooms of the best variety." There was a customer in his store who offered to guide us to Maria's for 10 pesos.

"Is it far?"

"No, no, soon. Maybe two kilometers."

We, four this time, started off again. I trotted beside our guide. Sam and Jill started to give out; the heat and strain were too much for her. They fell further and further behind.

"Don't fall too far behind; these people are hostile. Stick close to me. If this guy

pulls a knife, we'll both jump him."

They caught up quickly. We were out of town marching up a small dirt path through a cornfield.

"How much further?"

"Soon . . . . soon."

The cornfield turned to forest, the sun was almost gone and the early evening rain was falling.

"How much longer?"

"The top of this mountain."

The top looked very far away indeed. Jill was crying; Sam looked like he was about done in. I was about to give up myself; my feet just wouldn't listen to my brain.

"Soon," he said, "soon."

I was gasping for breath. I was going to give up and then . . .

"There it is. Over there. Maria's house."

Revitalized, we ran through a web of chickens and pigs and banged on the door of the wood frame shack teetering at the edge of the mountain.

"Maria Sabina?"

The woman could have been 50 or 150. Constant taking of the mushrooms tends to speed the aging process. Her face was an incredible maze of lines. It was dark, possessed two of the deepest eyes I've ever seen, and was framed by knee-length jet black hair. She looked at us as if she had been expecting us all along, always knew we'd be there at precisely that time. I felt awed, as if I were in the presence of a very wise witch or a very holy demon. The one-room house was lit by four candles. It appeared spotlessly clean yet happily lived in. There were a number of mats spread out on the floor on each of which there appeared to be between three and five bundles, which in turn became people of various ages and sexes. Maria couldn't speak any Spanish so she

called over her son, Marcellito, who could speak enough Spanish to act as our interpreter. I explained the purpose of our visit (which, of course, they already knew) and Marcellito walked over to the cupboard and produced a handful of "psilocybe mexicana," the pink umbrella-shaped mushroom most highly prized by the Indians. He waved them under our noses and allowed me to hold them in my hand. These unimpressive looking parasites were what we had searched all over Mexico to find and my mouth was drooling like one of Pavlov's dogs.

"Maria says it will be 125 pesos for the consultation and 50 pesos for the mushrooms."

Sam and Jill blanched; they were on short budget.

"We don't have that much money. It's too expensive."

"Maria says that is her price, nothing less. The mushrooms are very difficult to find."

We argued for about a half an hour, then I gave up. We couldn't afford it; we were beat. Then, like a second wind, it came rushing out of me. I was going to tell them off for every god damn Mexican who came following us down the street yelling, "Mee-ster, honghi . . .," for every gringo who was overcharged for being a gringo, for the maddening attitude of every idiotic Mexican that every gringo he ever saw was a rich man, voted for Teddy Roosevelt, killed Pancho Villa, and owned stock in United Fruit.

"Look, Marcellito. Ten years ago Maria was a poor, humble curandero. Her only desire was to treat the sick. Then Prof. Wasson came and then Dr. Hoffman and others. Maria showed them how to heal. They went away and wrote of Maria, the mushroom and her work. They made her a very famous woman. She didn't charge them 175 pesos. She was content only to heal the sick, to be a good woman. Now she is famous. Now people come from all over the world to see her and take the mushroom but Maria is no longer interested in them. She is no longer a woman of San Pedro and San Martin. She



"Annunciation" by Mati Abdoul Klarwein

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is no longer a woman of God, a giver of good. She is only a gatherer of money. We are poor people, like many others who came here. We didn't fly here; we came by bus. We didn't come to be entertained, to make jokes, to vacation. We came to be healed. I have been sent by my magazine so I could write of Maria and her work. Should I write that Maria treats only the rich, not the poor? We are gringos, that is true, but why do you think that all gringos are rich? We are poor people like you. There are many other poor people like us who come here but they are forced to wander those hot streets to take the mushrooms without supervision and get into trouble. The federales are here now. More will come and possibly the taking of the mushroom will become illegal. We will go now but we are not proud to have met you."

As we reached the door, Marcellito said, "Maria will treat you for 50 pesos plus 25 for the mushroom. Come at 1:00 tomorrow."

We made our preparations and started out at 11:00 the next morning. Rob and Gats came along with us to buy some mushrooms for private consumption. The way seemed shorter this time and we weren't bothered by the "Honghi meester" kids. It was as if the town knew of our appointment. Sam and Jill were quiet, their fear and nervousness manifesting itself in a strangely silent yet affectionate bond. They held hands like a couple of teenagers sneaking off to their first tryst. Rob and Gats marched in a clique of their own and I was alone up front leading the parade. About three-quarters of the way there we came upon Marcellito perched on a large flat rock, grinning and elvish he was missing only a flute. He led us the rest of the way via a new but extremely roundabout and tortuous path. Maria was out gathering mushrooms and the bundles on the mats of the previous night had metaphorphosized into about 15 young kids and 4 young women. I asked Marcellito whose they were. He proudly said, "mine." We asked about what time we would be taking the mushrooms. He said about 8:30.

"Why did you ask us here so early?"

"To make sure you wouldn't eat."

So we settled down for the 7 hour fast which was going to precede the ceremony and found ourselves the prizes in a happy game played by the kids. They pulled at us, played with us, jabbed at us, and continually competed with one another for our attention. As the hours passed, hunger and tension grew. They got more and more annoying until we found ourselves disliking them and each other intensely. At about 5:00 Maria returned, sold some mushrooms to Rob and Gats, and sent them on their way. The tension was getting unbearable. Then, one of the kids, Benito, proudly presented me with a small sprig of flowers. My tension broke. Someone cared. At 8:00, Maria, now in a ceremonial dress with her hair brushed and combed, clapped her hands and the kids disappeared for food and bed. The smell of the food tortured and teased our empty stomachs and I understood why that guy tried to eat the live turkey. At 9:00 Marcellito motioned to us to sit on a bed in one corner of the room. He pulled a bench up in front of us, separating us from the rest of the household and Maria came in carrying four large plates of mushrooms. She lit four candles and placed them on the altar. She started chanting in Mazatecan but I could make out invocations to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. San Pedro and San Martin, the patron saints of curanderos, were also called upon. The house, which only an hour before had throbbled with children, was death-silent now, filled only with that eerie Catholic-pagan-Spanish-Mazatecan-Latin wail. Then it stopped and she brought us the mushrooms. Maria sat with her back to us eating from her plate.

Marcellito instructed, "Eat them one at a time, very slowly. Chew very carefully."

They had a gritty, slightly rancid taste but were not at all bad. Jill bawled out, "Oh, I can't eat them. They're disgusting."

"Shut up," I snapped.

Sam comforted her, "Easy, honey. Eat them a little at a time."

We chewed on until they were all gone. Then Maria began to chant, slowly, lowly at first but with increasing speed and volume

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fast until the chant filled the room and dominated the universe. Suddenly, Jill screamed and fell on her side, writhing, "Oh, oh it's horrible...oh, oh it's beautiful...look at those colors. Oh, you're not with me. I'm alone...alone...it's wonderful." And then she started to cry. Maria reached back and touched our cheeks to test our temperatures. She patted Jill on the rump and continued her chant. Sam started questioning me incessantly. His engineer's mind had to analyze everything going on around him;

"How does it feel? Do you see colors? What colors? Do you hear the music?"

Everytime I felt myself starting to get high, his questions would interfere and bring me back down. I complained to Marcellito that it wasn't working.

"Un poco?" he asked.

"Poco, poco," I said.

"Poco, poco?" he replied.

"Si-i-i-i-i....."

...and a great feeling of well being came over me. Still, I felt cheated, duped. It wasn't working for me. I wanted to be alone, away from Sam's constant questioning. I wasn't seeing weird visions, I wasn't entering cathedrals of color, and everytime I began to feel good, another of those damned questions would come to shatter the spell. The room seemed greatly enlarged. Time slowed down considerably. It was like a hashish high but less soporific. Then I realized that my fingers, detached from the rest of my body, were running up and down my pants' leg. The texture of the material was furrowed by deep grooves, mountains and valleys. A swirling overlay of color was on my eyes. I was being borne away on Maria's chant. Then I felt myself leave my body and I was floating on Maria's voice. Marcellito became very large in my presence and I began to laugh. I knew that this imp was leading me; he became my brother and my best friend.

I felt a strong feeling of attachment to everybody in the room. The room changed

to a wondrous castle of brotherhood, love and warmth.....and the chant.....always that chant. I looked at my watch but it smashed into crystals and patterns and time no longer had any existence. Waves of energy coming from all of us were mingling and merging until we had no earthly forms. We were composed of energy waves of pure love. Jill started to scream. I reached over and tried to comfort her but she floated away by herself. My soul watched my body sitting on the bed. It got up, floating once around the room, and settled on my shoulder.

"Marcellito, my brother, you look sad. Marcellito, compadre, eat mushrooms..." and the galaxies burst into laughter. The chant stopped; Marcellito turned the portable radio on. I had entered a state of no-mind, no-body. The music solidified and filled the room. I could see the notes dancing in the air and my soul climbed aboard. My no-body mind observed my no-mind body shaking and quivering gleefully in time to the music. Then my no-body mind merged with the rhythm and became a no-mind of song. Jill screamed and cried again. Sam moved close to her and they embraced as he comforted her. They merged into one, as two people in love should. I was alone again. Maria's youngest daughter floated to me. She was infinite beauty. Marcellito was infinite kindness. We all became one person. We all had one god. We all were love. Jill and Sam sat on the bed huddled together. I felt apart from them in a way that was tender and good. I wanted them to savour their love and I felt that my place was with Maria. I was close to God but not close enough. I was still somewhere between heaven and hell, not quite reaching heaven, not quite falling to hell. I needed her help to leap that final barrier. I asked Marcellito if I might sit next to her. He nodded his assent and I got up. My legs turned rubber. The swirling mass of colors flooded my eyes. From out of the brilliant maze came Sam's voice:

"Nat, don't leave us. We want you here with us. Please."

"I must go my way, Sam. I must go to Maria."

I kneeled in front of Maria as a knight to his lady. I looked into her face, a face that was the Garden of Eden lined with rivers and valleys, etched with the ineffable landscape of Heaven. I entered her eyes and found God sitting on his throne. She was that essence of woman, kindness, and love that Dante followed on his journey. She smiled her understanding and I assumed the Yoga lotus position, she my Buddha; I, awaiting death and transfiguration. My eyes never leaving hers, I held out my hands. Energy waves were swirling from both our bodies. The cosmic emanations from her eyes met mine and we became one. She reached out and grasped me firmly by the elbows. Her fingers were probing and giving strength as they kneaded their way down my arms until she reached my fingers. Then she pulled my fingers one by one and my soul shed my body as if it were a glove. She grasped my hands firmly and the cosmic emissions from our eyes and our hands merged. They mixed in the swirls of color and our bodiless souls now transcended all plastic substance. We became a crystalline tinkling and we reached the gates of Nirvana together. A nothing like nothingness of bliss and contentment. An eternity of peace and always that face, those eyes, leading me on. Bright light becoming steadily brighter and brighter until finally a cataclysm of light and warmth and peace and then sublime darkness. Her daughter's voice.

"He is San Pedro."

Marcellito:

"San Pedro has entered him; he has become San Pedro."

And I floated back to earth bearing no regrets. Our eyes met again and we started to laugh, pure mirth, our laughter filling me and the room with a more earthly sort of joy. Maria's daughter and Marcellito broke into beams of light which later re-formed as their faces, Marcellito's, wise and happy; the girl's, sensuous, alluring and, at the same time, purely beatific. We roared and surged in an ocean of laughter, our bodies joyously convulsed in an orgasm of glee. I looked at Sam and Jill; he started laughing

with us and we five became a stormy Atlantic of mirth until Jill, still within her own manufactured hell, broke the spell with:

"Sam, he's down there and we're up here. We're much higher than he is."

"No," Sam said, "we're all together. We're with him; he took us here. He, as much as Maria and the mushrooms."

We sat stonily silent for awhile. My eyes were still locked with Maria's. Again, I gave her my hand. Again, she squeezed strength into it. I asked Marcellito if I might take pictures. He handed me a camera and I pointed it at Maria:

"I am a curandero now. With a camera I become the curandero."

I pointed the camera at Maria's eyes and began to shoot.

"What's he doing, Sam?"

"Taking pictures but I can't imagine why."

And we all burst out laughing again. I took out my light meter but the blues and greys of it melted in my hand and became a river. The plastic became like a chunk of melting butter flowing down my arm. I sat for what seemed to be an hour watching the numbers on the dial doing their own private dance. Marcellito and Maria's daughter were standing over my shoulder admiring the meter. The meaninglessness of the whole thing suddenly struck me. The meter became not an instrument or a tool but a pretty artifact with a life of its own:

"What in God's name am I doing with this stupid thing?" I yelled. "Here, Sam. You're an engineer. You have fun, now..." and threw it to him. I broke into hysterical laughter again. I stood up:

"I'm going outside."

Sam stood and fell flat on his back. He tried again, wobbled, stumbled, and exclaimed:

"It's like being born again. It's like learning how to walk."

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We bumped into each other like a pair of drunken sailors and fell laughing and rolling on the floor. We got up; I looked at his wife on the couch and for the first time I could see her with compassion. "That poor thing. She needs the attention. It's no fun being a plain looking little girl." Sam shook my hand and we walked out of the shack, brothers.

The moonlight was blinding. I blinked my eyes and color swirls returned. When they cleared, I was standing in a large enchanted painting. The trees were pillars, the rocks gems. Sam was bubbling with excitement and running aimlessly around...

"Look, Nat. The stars! The trees! The corn!"

He was seeing for the first time in his life.

"Oh, Christ. Now I know why people believe in God."

The stars were hanging from the branches of the trees like translucent crystals imbedded in water. The mountains had a two-dimensional quality and I realized that we had walked into a Vermeer.

"That's it, Sam. We're part of a Vermeer now. He was the greatest artist. He knew everything."

"Sam ..... Nat ..... it's beautiful! It's magic!" .....

Jill had appeared. I turned to her:

"Of course it's magic, honey. It's Oz. Look down the path."

Sure enough it was Oz right around the bend of the path and I had to take them.

"Here. Take my hand. I'll lead you."

Jill looked to Sam...

"Sam, should we?"

"Yes, honey. Let's go to Oz."

I took their hands and we started skipping

down the path...

"we're off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz, a wonderful whiz of a whiz he was, the wonderful Wizard of Oz."

We skipped down the path, turned the corner and ran straight into an outhouse. Then we fell to the ground in a laughing exhilarated mass. I felt hungry now and asked them if they'd like to go home and eat. It was 1:30; the hours had flipped by like cards riffled in a pack but the day of fasting was beginning to take its toll. Jill decided she was feeling too weak as yet and went back into Maria's house. Sam and I wandered outside a little while longer communing with nature, God and each other. He pointed at the window:

"Look," he said, "there's a scene going on in there."

Painted in the yellow of the candlelight, we could observe a silent Noh play unfolding in the shack. At 2:00 a.m., we stepped back inside. Sam and Jill said goodbye to Maria. I shook Marcellito's hand, thanked him and then, going to Maria, I knelt, took her hands in mine and kissed them. She lifted my hands to her lips and we started back down the mountain. Our trip wasn't finished yet. The mushroom high comes in waves and we were just in the trough of one. The landscape was still an eerie, magical painting and the town far below looked like a giant collection of white marbles embedded in the mountainside. We felt very grave and daring to attempt a trip back at this point but, still bound by the fellowship of the mushroom, reasoned that we could do anything. We started down the path which was muddy and slippery, it having rained heavily while we were at Maria's. Every so often one of us would discover a new and beautiful vision to share with the others: a rock, a stalk of corn, a ray of light or the stars; each assumed a new importance, a new beauty. We carefully stared at each new discovery for immense periods of time, each one yielding new delights. Suddenly, Jill started to whimper.

"I'm sick... I'm sick... I'm going to throw up..."

She walked over to the side of the path and doubled over retching.

"Honey," I called, "you have nothing to puke. We haven't eaten for 15 hours. Don't worry. We'll pay more attention to you. You don't have to play at that game so straighten up and come along."

She looked up and smiled, "You're right. It is a silly game."

We continued our trip back. We got lost several times but were never afraid; each new path led us to a new garden of delights, a new adventure. The town's numerous stray dogs and pigs were barking and grunting at our heels. We found them a constant source of amusement. At length, we came to some houses on the outskirts of town and sat down to rest. I found a wall which was constructed of a corrugated stucco-like material. Its pattern was the same as that on the ancient Mayan and Zapotecan ruins at Mitla and Monte Alban. I studied the zig-zag furrows and weaves. Then, I felt myself drawn to the wall. I stood next to it. The wall became my entire existence, became cosmos, universe. Fingers feeling texture cool rock inviting. Each stone, each pebble had a life of its own. I was a part of it, it was a part of me. I clung to the wall by my fingers and toes. I pressed my mouth against it and sucked in its texture and taste. My tongue explored its field. There was nothing but the wall. The wall was earth, the wall was heaven, the wall was love, the wall was God, the wall was me, the wall was everything. Love! Rapture! Revitalization! Birth! Rebirth! I knew there was one thing more. I felt that my death was accomplished; now I must be reborn and could only do this alone.

"Look, people. Please forgive me. But I must leave you now. I must go on alone. There's something I must do."

And I walked off, leaving them behind. I've always had a fear of loneliness. I've always been afraid to do things by myself. There have been other fears mixed in: fear of strangers, fear of darkness, fear of failure and fears of my own capacity to make do. I knew that only by conquering these could I prove myself a man. This would be my test,

my initiation, my proving ground. The first 100 yards were difficult. I kept looking back, hoping somehow that they would call out and catch up to me. I turned a bend and was really alone. The dogs were barking furiously. The perspective became exaggerated; ominous...

"Now if you'll let it, the Vermeer will become de Chirico. Don't let it."

I willed myself to be brave. "Dogs will always bark; they bite only cowards." And I walked on, unbitten. I decided to look at the stars, to use them as my guide. I fell into a puddle of mud. "One must remember the stars but keep your eyes on the road." I threw away the star crutch. Then I saw two Indians approach me, machetes in their hands. "Now you must face this test; they fear you; fear breeds violence."

"Buenos noches..." I called out.

They looked startled. "Buenos noches..." they called back.

I was free; I had no fear. Now you must find your way home. "If you lose your way you must not panic but think it out and find the right path." I lost my way but straightened myself out. I found the house; my fears had obeyed my will; I was home, free.

The room was a shambles; holes in the walls, litter on the floor. The four beatniks were smoking pot again and lying around in various states of semi-consciousness. There was a large bowl of flowers on the floor.

"Hey! The other people are back."

"No, it's only me."

"Hey, it's Nat. Where did you leave your little square children?"

"They'll be along soon."

"What happened? Did they flip out?... Did she go into a crying-bag....Tell us."

"Look man they took their trip, I took mine, you took yours; leave them alone, right?"

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Sam and Jill came in. The Beats started to roust them. I felt protective; they were my wards. I picked a hunting knife up from the floor, and stationed myself between the Rashows and the Beats. I started digging the knife into the floor. Rob put his bare foot into the bowl of flowers.

will

“You people think you know what’s real, huh? Like the flowers are real, my ugly, dirty foot is real. Look at it, squares. That’s reality. We didn’t need a curandero. That’s phony. Gats was our curandero. We danced and Gats chanted in English. That woman is a whore. She’ll take anyone who’ll come with money. But we’re selective. We curandero in English. Everyone can understand. No religion, no crap, nothing but reality, selected clientele only.” I was fed up and ready to kill if I had to but I had to shut these morons up. Thump! went the knife, into the floor.

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“These flowers are beautiful because they are...(Thump!)...you’re ugly because you fear. Your foot wasn’t born ugly. It wasn’t born dirty...(Thump!)...it was born in pain but you’re afraid of pain. It wasn’t born ugly. It wasn’t born dirty...(Thump!)...it’s dirty because you just don’t choose to wash...(Thump!)...no other reason.....(Thump!)...you don’t dig Maria. You don’t dig me...(Thump!) You don’t dig these people ... (Thump!) ...Well, that’s your bag. Stay in it. We pay our dues, you don’t...

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(Thump!). So we’ll play our gig and if you choose to play a solo riff, go ahead...(Thump!)...but I dig flowers and comfort and cleanliness...(Thump!)...I want to belong to that union, you don’t...(Thump!) So stay outside, baby, if that’s where you belong. Just don’t bug us. And don’t throw rocks and dirty feet at those inside...(Thump!)”

By the time I had finished, the floor was a chopped-up mess but they left Sam and Jill alone. I crawled over to my mat. A beam of moonlight coming from the window formed a solid purple cube of light next to my head. I curled inside of it and went to sleep.

We woke next morning an hour before the bus was ready to leave. We said goodbye to the other four and stopped off at our landlord’s to pay our rent.

“You people are good. We like you. But the others. Why did you bring them? They make noise, they make trouble. Why do they come?”

The bus pulled in. Mark, the English boy from Oaxaca, got off. I gave him advice on where to stay and how to reach Maria. We made a date to meet in New York. He trudged off into the noon heat. As he walked the street, I could hear the kids calling after him, “Honghi, meester, honghi?”



your

The evolution of the higher animals and of man, and the awakening of consciousness at a particular level. The picture is something like this: though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

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