



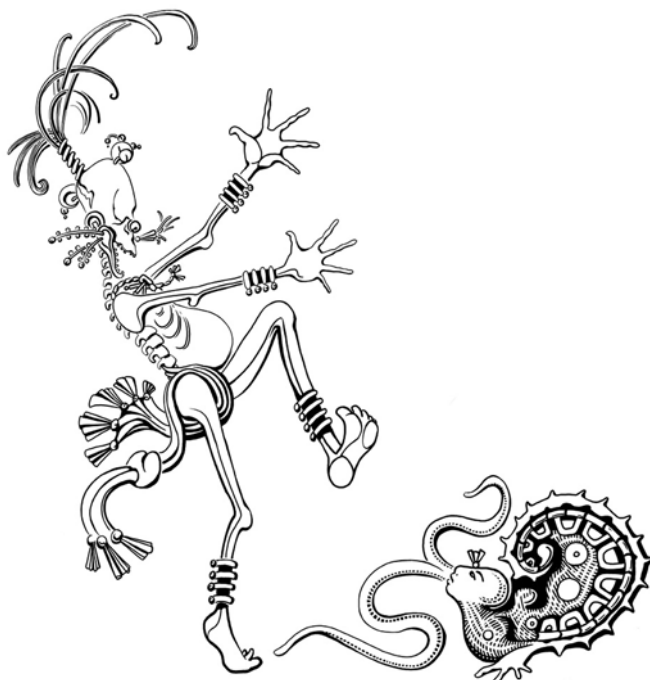


IN THE COURTS OF THE SUN



ALSO BY BRIAN D'AMATO

Beauty



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Brian D'Amato



DUTTON

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Dedicated to Anthony D'Amato,
author of *Jurisprudence: A Descriptive and Normative Analysis of Law*
and many other writings in law and philosophy
and composer of *RSVP Broadway*
and many other musical works



A percentage of the author's after-tax profits
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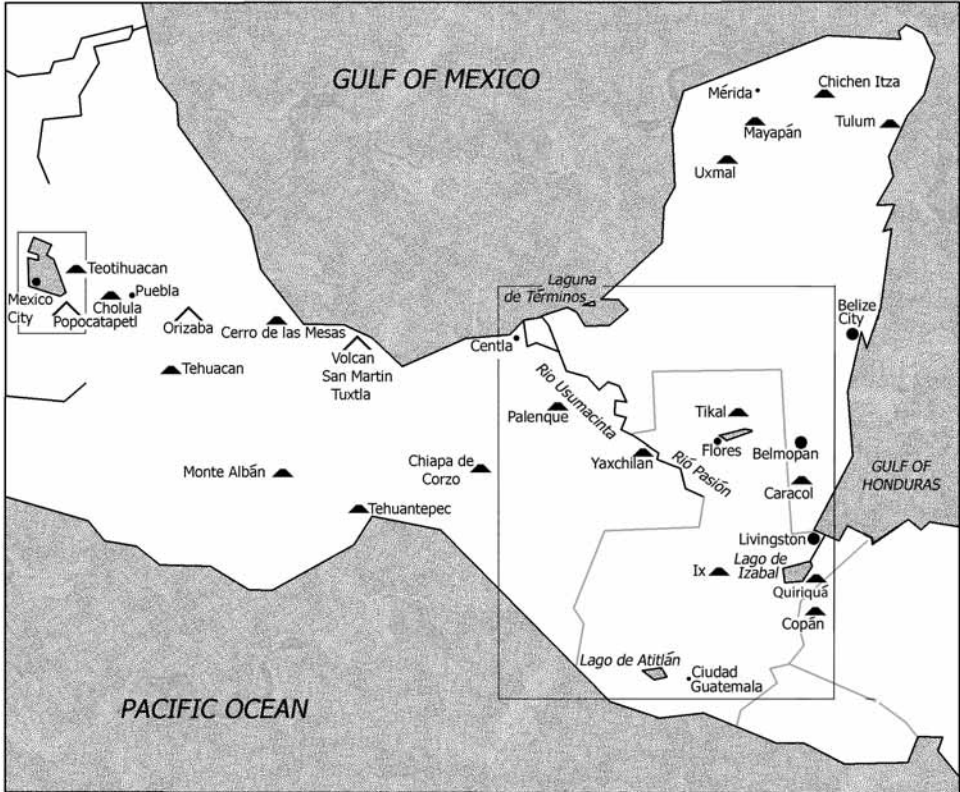
A NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

Most Mayan words in this book are spelled according to the current orthography adopted by the Academía de Lenguas Mayas in Guatemala. However, I've retained older spellings for a few words—for instance, the text uses *uay* instead of the now-preferred *way* in order to distinguish the word from the English *way*. Specialists may also notice that some words are spelled to be pronounced in Ch'olan, which usually means a *ch* takes the place of a *k*. I've italicized Mayan and most Spanish words on the first use and dropped the italics after that.

Vowels in Mayan languages are pronounced roughly like those in Spanish. *Ay* in Maya, *uay* etc., is pronounced like the *I* in "I am." *J* is pronounced like the Spanish *j*, that is, a guttural *h* with the tongue farther back than in English. *X* is like the English *sh*. *Tz* is like the English *ts* in "pots." Otherwise, consonants are pronounced as in English. An apostrophe indicates a glottal stop, which is like the *tt* in the Scottish or Brooklynese pronunciation of "bottle." All Mayan words are stressed on the last syllable, but Mayan languages are less stressed than English. Mayan is somewhat tonal, and its prosody tends to emphasize short couplets. There's a certain lilt to it which in some places I've tried to convey with dactyls, although readers may differ on whether this is successful.

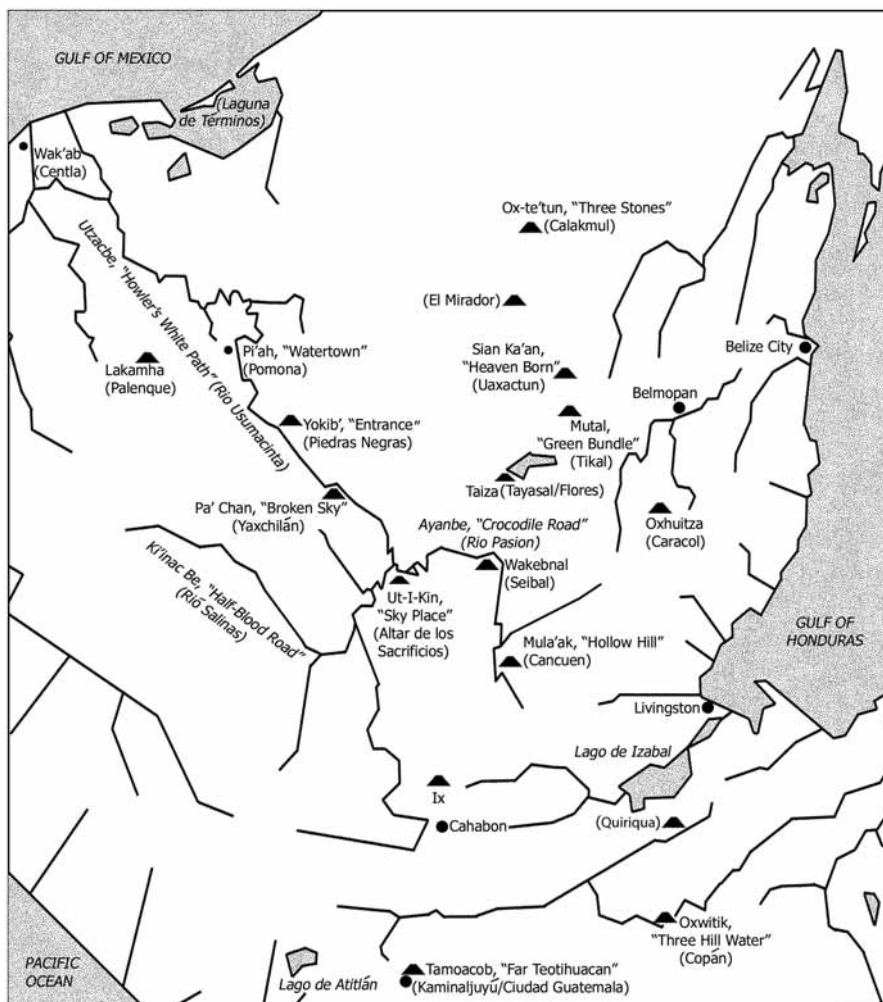
Words in the language of Teotihuacán are stressed, like the name of the city, on the penultimate syllable.

MESOAMERICA



▲ Mountains ▲ Ancient cities ● Modern cities and towns

Note: this map shows only sites mentioned in the text



Detail

▲ Ancient cities ● Modern cities and towns (Modern names in parentheses)

Please note: this map shows only sites mentioned in the text

ZERO





The first thing I saw was a red dot on a turquoise field. Then another dot appeared above it and to the left, and a third bloomed close below that one, and then there was another and another, five and then nine and then thirteen. The dots grew and spread, and where they touched they merged and flowed together, and I realized they were drops of my own blood, falling out of my tongue onto blue offering paper.

It worked, I thought. Holy *mierditas*.

It isn't 2012. It's 664. And it's March 20. Or in Maya reckoning, it's 3 Earth Rattler, 5 Rainfrog, in the eleventh *uinal* of the eleventh *tun* of the eleventh *k'atun* of the tenth *b'ak'tun*. And it's about 4:48 A.M. Sunday.

Hmm.

I guess it was like any other big life-mode change; you can only comprehend it after a drawn-out, unfunny double-take, like, oh my God, I'm actually being arrested, I've been stabbed, I'm getting married, I have a child, those buildings are really collapsing, I'm really having a triple bypass—and each time it feels like nothing remotely this serious has ever happened to you or to anyone else. *Hijo de puta*, I thought. I looked up and focused through the tiny trapezoidal doorway. The sky was violet now but somehow I could still see more stars than I ever had before, drifts and spatters of stars down to the fourth magnitude. They'd shifted, of course, but Taro had timed the download so that the tip of One Ocelot's cigar—Algenib, in Pegasus—was nearly in the same position in the trapezoid as before, framed just right of center. There was a new star to its left, halfway to Homam, that would have been bright enough to be listed as Gamma Andromedae. It must be within a hundred years or so of flaming out. Otherwise al-Khawarzimi would have named it.

Unbefarreakingoutlievable, I thought. They actually got it right. New bat

time, same bat place. Not that I was actually in the same place in the universe, of course, if that even means anything. The solar system moves a lot in 1,347 years. But I was in the same spot on Earth. I was still in a tiny room near the apex of the tallest pyramid in the city of Ix, in what would later be called Alta Verapaz, in central Guatemala. But now the sanctuary was orange with torchlight, and the columns of scarabesque glyphs on the walls were smooth and unpitted and polychromed in black, blue, and cochineal carmine. And now the city was alive. I could hear the crowds outside, or maybe, rather, I could feel their chanting through the stone. The point is that from my POV, I hadn't moved in space. But I had—

Hmm. I almost said I'd been sent back in time. But I wouldn't want to start out by dumbing down.

The sad fact is that time travel is impossible. Into the past, that is. If you want to go faster into the future you can just freeze yourself. But going backward is absolutely, unequivocally, and forever unworkable, for a number of well-known reasons. One is the grandfather paradox, meaning you could always go back in time and kill your grandfather, and then you'd presumably never have existed in the first place. Another is that even if you went back and did nothing, you'd almost certainly have some of the same molecules your younger self had been using incorporated into your body. And so the same molecule would be in two different places at once. And that can't happen. The third reason is just a mechanical problem. The only way into the past that anyone knows of is the famous wormhole route. But putting matter through a wormhole is like putting a Meissen vase through a pasta machine. Anything going through it is going to come out the other end crushed and scrambled and no good for anything.

But—but, but, but—there is a work-around.

The Warren Lab's insight was that even if you can't send matter into the past, that still doesn't rule out every possibility. If you can't send anything, that should mean that you can send nothing. And nothing roughly speaking, includes electromagnetism. They developed a way to send bursts of energy through a tiny, artificially created Krasnikovian tube. They figured the pattern of energy bursts might be able to carry some information. In fact, it could carry a lot of information. The signal they sent back encoded a lifetime of distilled memories, basically everything that creates the illusion called a sense of self. In this case my self.

Of course, the next problem is that there has to be a receiver and storage

on the other end. And in the era we were interested in, there weren't any radar dishes or disk drives or silicon chips or IF antennas or even a crystal radio. Circa 664 there was only one existing object that could receive and store that much information. A brain.

I began to be able to move my eyeballs. I started to make out how my right hand, the one holding the thorn rope, was broad and beefy and heavily callused on the palm heel. Its nails were long and sharpened and inlaid with T-shaped carnelian studs, and the fingers were tattooed with red and black bands like coral snakes'. A jade-scale bracelet stretched from the wrist almost to the elbow. Like the section I could see of my naked chest and my cauliflowerish left knee, it was crusted with bright blue clay.

Score one for the Freaky Friday Team, I thought. I really was in another person's body. Specifically, I was in the brain of someone named 9 Fanged Hummingbird.

We—that is, we at the Warren Project—knew a little about him. He was the patriarch of the Ocelot Clan and the *ahau*—that is, the king or overlord or warlord—of the city of Ix and of the roughly two thousand towns and villages in Ix's orbit. He was the son of the twelfth *ahau*, 22 Burning Forest, and Lady Cyclone. Today he was forty-eight years and sixty-one days old. He'd been sitting in here, fasting, for about forty-two straight hours. And he was about to emerge, at dawn, to be reenthroned for a second twenty-year period as the *ahau*.

There was a bowl of hot embers five inches to the north of my left knee, and without thinking about it I peeled the rectangle of blood-soaked paper off the reed mat and held it over the heat. For a moment the light of the coals glowed through the sheet and I could see glyphs on the other side, the phrase *Watch over us, protect us*, and then the profile of an eagle:



More specifically, it was a harpy eagle, *Thrasyaetus harpyia*. In Spanish it was *arpía* and in Mayan it was *hunk'uk*, "gold ripper." And the Aztecs called it the Wolf with Wings. It was the emblem of a clan, my clan—that is, the clan of the person whose brain I'd commandeered. The paper was a letter, my clan's petition to One Ocelot, at the womb of the sky. Automatically, I folded

the sticky sheet into a triangular bundle—it was a complicated set of motions, like making an origami crane, but I, or rather my body's previous owner, must have rehearsed it a hundred times—and set the paper down in the bowl. It must have been soaked in some kind of copper salts, because it sizzled and then sputtered into green flame.

My tongue throbbed. I pulled it in—no, wait. I pulled—
Huh. Nothing happened.

I tried to swallow and then just to close my mouth over my tongue. It was like my face was frozen. Nothing moved.

M'AX ECHE? I thought, in Ch'olan Mayan. Who are you?

No, wait.

I hadn't thought it. It was from somewhere else.

It was as though I'd heard a voice, but I knew I hadn't actually heard anything except the hum of the throng in the plaza below and the swallowed booms of cedar-trunk slit-drums, throbbing in an odd 5/4 beat. Maybe it was more like I'd read it, on some kind of news crawl across my eyes. And even though it was silent it was as though it was loud, or rather forceful, as though it was written in upper case. It was like I'd thought it, but without think—

M'AX ECHE?

Oh, hell.

I wasn't alone in this body.

I was alone in the room, but not in my brain.

Oh, *coño Dios*.

The thing is, the first part of the Freaky Friday process had been supposed to erase the target's memories, to give my consciousness a clean slate to work on, as it were. But evidently that part hadn't worked, or at least not very well. He still thought he was him.

M'AX ECHE?

My name is Jed DeLanda, I thought back.

B'A'AX UKA'AJ CHOK B'OLECH TEN? Roughly, "WHY HAVE YOU POSSESSED ME?"

I'm not possessing you, I thought. That is, I'm inside, I mean, my consciousness is inside you because, because we sent it into you—

T'ECHE HUN BALAMAC? ARE YOU ONE OCELOT?

No, I thought back, too quickly. I mean—

Damn it. Stupid.

Come on, Jed, I thought. It's like Winston says, when somebody asks if you're a god, you say yes. Got it? Okay.

Here goes.

Yes! I thought at him, more consciously. I *am* One Ocelot. Ocelot the Ocelotarian. I am Ocelot, the great and power—

MA-I'UJ TEC. NO, YOU ARE NOT.

No, I am, I thought, I—oh, *demonio*. It's not easy to lie to this guy. And no wonder. He's hearing everything I think. And even though he only spoke old Ch'olan and I was thinking in my usual mix of Spanish, English, and late, degenerate Ch'olan, we still understood each other completely. In fact, it felt less like talking with someone else than it felt like arguing with yourself, thinking, Jed, maybe you should do this, and no, Jed, you should do that, except that one side of the internal dialogue was effortless and self-assured, and the other side—my side—was having trouble getting its points together.

WHY HAVE YOU INFECTED ME, POSSESSED ME?

What? I said, or rather thought. I came to learn to play the Sacrifice Game. It was the truth.

WHY?

Well, because—because I come from the last days of the world, from the thirteenth *bák'tun*. Because my world is in big, big trouble and we need to learn the Game to see if we can save it.

GET OUT, he thought.

I can't.

GET OUT.

Sorry. I really, really can't. You're the one who—

IM OT' XEN. GET OUT OF MY SKIN.

I can't do that, I thought back. But, listen, how about this, I can—

THEN **HIDE**, he thought. STAY DOWN, STAY STILL, STAY SILENT.

I shut up. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

My hand rose to my open mouth and closed on a barbed cord, basically a rope of thorns, that ran through a hole in the center of my tongue. I yanked on it. Five thorn-knots squeezed down through the hole, spattering blood, before the rope popped out. Hmm, painful, I thought vaguely. Actually, it was enough to have made my former body scream for an hour, but now I didn't even squirm. More oddly than that, I didn't feel the Fear, the old *hæmophilic*'s fear of bleeding out that I'd never gotten rid of when I was Jed. I coiled the rope into the bowl, as automatically as an ejected fighter pilot wadding up his parachute. It blackened and curled and blood smoke filled the room with a coppery tang.

I swallowed a big gob of blood. Tasty. The chanting outside had grown

louder and I found I could pick out the words, and that even though the Ch'olan was more different from our twenty-first-century reconstructed version than I would have thought possible, I could still understand them:

“Uuk ahau K'alomte yaxoc . . .»

“Overlord, greatfather,
Grandfather-grandmother
Jade Sun, Jade Ocelot,

Captor of 25 Duelist of Three Hill Lake,
Captor of 1,000 Strangler of Broken Sky . . .”

Our legs uncrossed. Our hands straightened our headdress—it felt like a tall stiff pillow tufted with cat fur—but didn't wipe the blood off our face.

“Captor of 17 Sandstorm of Scorched Mountain,

Nurturer, watchkeeper,
Jade 9 Fanged Hummingbird:

When will you next
Reemerge from your sky cave
To hear us, to look on us?”

We crept forward to the tiny door, keeping our head down, and crouched through, out into the wide air. There was a sudden silence from the throngs in the plazas and then a collective gasp, breath rushing into so many lungs that I thought I could feel the drop in pressure. We stood up. Jade scales and spiny-oyster beads clattered over our skin. It seemed like whatever little blood we had left had drained out of our head, and I suppose on any normal day even this body would have fainted, but now some higher hormone held him together and we didn't even wobble on our high platform sandals, which were really more like stilts, with soles at least eight inches thick. I could feel I was smaller than Jed had been. And lighter and stronger. I definitely didn't feel forty-eight years old. I felt about sixteen. Odd. I looked up. Ix spread out below us and covered the world.

Our eyes only sucked it in for two and a half seconds before they looked up again at Algenib. But it was enough time to see that not one of us in 2012—or, for that matter, in any of the preceding five centuries—had had the slightest notion of what this place had actually looked like.

We were worse than wrong, I thought. We were dull. It was as though we'd been walking through the desert and found five bleached bones out of the 206 or so bones that make up your basic skeleton, and instead of just working out the dead person's sex and age and genetic heritage and whatever else you can legitimately get from a few ribs and vertebrae and just stopping there, we'd spun out this whole scenario about what her life was like, her clothes, her hobbies, her children's names, whatever, and then we'd gone on to write a full biographical textbook about her, complete with beige pie graphs and anemic illustrations in scruffy gouache. And now that I was actually meeting the living person, not only did she have very little physical resemblance to the reconstruction, but her personality and life story and place in the universe were utterly different from our pedestrian guesswork.

The scraps of granular ruins that had survived into the twenty-first century had been less than 5 percent of the story, just the stone underframes of a city that hadn't been built so much as woven and plaited and knotted and laced out of reeds and lath and swamp cane, a wickerwork metropolis so unlike what I'd imagined that I couldn't even pick out the monuments I knew. We faced due east across the river, toward Cerro San Enero, the highest peak of the cordillera that ringed the valley of Ix. Now it was erupting, spewing a fan of black ash against the mauve predawn . . . no, wait, I thought. No way, it's not a volcano. They must have built a rubberwood bonfire up there—but the other hills were wrong too, they'd been forested before and now they were all denuded, carved into terraces and nested plazas cascading down the slopes like waterfall pools, and they were crested with headdresses of canework spikes that radiated like liberty crowns. Shoals of spots or flecks or something bobbed above and in front of the hills and towers, and, for the first half of the second I had to look at the city, I thought the spots were an illusion of my own new eyes, migraine flashers, maybe, or some kind of iridescent nematodes swimming in my aqueous humor, but at the next beat I realized they were hundreds of human-size featherwork kites, all either round or pentagonal and all in target patterns of black, white, and magenta, floating on the hot breath of the crowd, reflecting the city like a lake in the air.

The crowd started a new chant, in a new key:

"Hun k'in, ka k'inob, ox k'inob . . ."

"One sun, then two suns, then three suns . . ."

De todos modos, I thought. Focus. Get oriented.

Find some landmarks. Where was the river? I had an impression that it had been widened into a lake, but I couldn't see any actual water. Instead there was a plane tessellated with what must have been rushwork rafts and giant canoes, with bright-yellow veins between the boats that might have been millions of floating marigold heads. I had an impression of tiers within tiers of interlocking compounds on the opposite shore, stegosaurus-backed longhouses and buttressed towers with gravity-disregarding overhangs that seemed so structurally unsound they had to be featherlight, maybe made out of lattice and corn paste . . . but like I said, it was just an impression, because every facet, every horizontal or vertical surface, from the hilltops to the plaza just below us, seethed with life. Serried ranks of the *ajche'ejob*, the Laughing People, that is, the Ixians, carpeted the squares and clung to poles and scaffolds and façades in a pulsing mass, like the layer of polyps that ripples over the skeleton of a thousand-year-old reef, straining gorgonians out of the sea. The only unpopulated surfaces were the steep-angled shoulder planes of the four great *mulob*, the subordinate pyramids, rising out of the turbulence like step-cut chunks of lab-grown Carborundum. And even those didn't show a single patch of their stone cores; everything was stuccoed over and dyed and oiled and petal-tufted, striated in layers of turquoise, yellow, and black, hard-edged and mischievous, an array of poisoned pastry. Each *mul* wore a gigantic fletched roof comb and spewed smoke from hidden vents. How many thousands of people were there? Fifty? Seventy? I could only see a fraction of them. Say there are two thousand in the Ocelots' plaza, that's about two and a half acres, then suppose there are thirty plazas that size in all—never mind. Stick to the mission. *De todos modos*. Where was 9 Fanged Hummingbird? Got to try to find him—

Wak k'inob, wuk k'inob . . .

"Six suns, then seven suns . . ."

Upa. Uh-oh.

Something was wrong.

That is, besides the way this guy was still in his head. There was something else wrong. Very ghastly wrong. What was it?

I tried to listen to his thoughts, the way he listened to mine. And I did hear something, and I got flashes of images, wrinkled toothless farmers' faces, naked, goitred children waddling out of twig huts, bloody footsmears on yellow sunlit pavement, big, heavy flaming rubber balls lobbing through violet air, arcing toward me, streaking away from me . . . well, they weren't the memories of a king. Somehow a sense of his sense of his identity percolated through, and I realized I knew his name: Chacal.

Not 9 Fanged Hummingbird. Chacal.

And he's not the ahau. No. I'm—he's—he's a hipball player.

Yep. Wrong. Something had gone really, seriously wrong.

This guy's *dressed* as the ahau, and he's up here in the ahau's special chamber, but he's not . . .

"Bolon k'inob, lahun k'inob," the crowd chanted.

"Nine suns, then ten suns . . .

Eleven suns, twelve suns . . ."

It was a countdown. Although they were counting up, to nineteen.

Okay, what the hell's going on with this guy? He's not the ahau, but he's going, he's playing . . .

The certainty descended around me like lead rain. He's taking 9 Fanged Hummingbird's place.

And this isn't a reenthronement, I thought. It's an offering. He's a sacrifice. A willing, happy sacrifice. They were counting up to a liftoff, or rather a jump-off. After nineteen, the count would go back to zero. And I'd go down.

Oh, cripes.

Stupid. Should've thought of that. Obvious possibility.

In fact, come to think of it, I even remembered reading something about this kind of thing. It was in an article in *JPCS* called "Royal Auto-Sacrifice by Proxy in Pre-Columbian America." The theory was that in the old days—that is, the really really old days even before this one—the ahau would only have been put in charge for one *k'atun*. A *k'atun* is a vicennium, a period of about twenty years. And then, before the ahau got old and feeble and spread that

weakness to the body politic, he would have turned the town over to a younger heir and then committed suicide. But at some point some genius ahau had decided he could make it all a little easier on himself and still keep up the formalities. So he'd put on a big ceremony where he'd transfer his name and regalia to somebody else—not even a look-alike or an impersonator but just a captive or volunteer or whatever—and that person would take on his identity and act as the ahau for five days. And when the five days were up, he'd sacrifice himself. It was like burning someone in effigy. A living effigy. And then when that was over the old ahau would have another ritual where he'd give himself a new name, and he'd stay in charge for another k'atun.

Well, great. At least I know what's going on. What's going on is I'm all the hell up here in this unfamiliar body, I'm utterly alone—in fact, nobody I know has even been born yet—and now it turns out I'm supposed to kill myself. What next?

Okay. Don't freak. You can still pull this off. So you're not in the right guy. *Ve al grano*. It's still just a minor setback. Right? Luckily, we have some contingency plans just in case of little glitches like this.

Along with the Chocula Team and the Freaky Friday Team—and I realize this is throwing a lot of jargon at once—Warren had also put together a linguistic research group called the Connecticut Yankee Team. Its job had been to create a menu of things for me to say and/or do when/if I came up against this sort of problem or something like it. They'd trained me to the point where I knew every one of them as well as I knew the lyrics to “Happy Birthday.” The appropriate action for this contingency was called the Volcano Speech. Okay. I ran through it a couple times in my side of my mind, adapting the words to the surprisingly unfamiliar version of Ch'olan. *Bueno*. Got it. No problem.

Ready? Just shout it out. “I am the blinder,” et cetera. They'll hear the prediction, they'll wait to see if it's true, and then, when the sucker erupts, I'll be too valuable to kill. In fact, they'll probably set me up with my own shop. A modest fifty-room palace, three or four hundred nubile concubines, maybe a pyramid or two. Or maybe they'll even make me the ahau. It'll be like Lord Jungle Jim crashing his plane in the jungle. Just flick your zippo and the cannibals'll pull you out of the stew pot and call you Bwana White. No sweat. Right? Right.

Estas bien. Deep breath. Go.

Go.

Nothing.

Okay. Go.

Nothing.

Again. Go. Shout. Now!

Frozen.

Oh, hell.

Come on, Jed, you know what to say. Spit it out. *I am the blinder of the coming sun*. Come on. Open the mouth. Open mouth. All I have to do is open my—

MY MOUTH.

Oh hell oh hell. ¡*Ni mierditas!*

Okay, come on, guy, come on—nnnnnNNNNMh!!!

I strained to pry my jaws apart but the only physical effect was a distant ache, like somewhere I was biting a rock.

Oh Christ, oh Christ. This can't be happening. Chacal *cannot* be in control of this body. It's mine. Come on. Move. Anything. Just *squirm*, for crying out god. Raise hand.

Nothing.

Raise hand.

Nothing.

Raise hand, raise hand! *Raise finger*—

Hell.

We screwed up, we screwed up. Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid.

We took five formal steps toward the lip of the staircase. I strained against his body. There was no effect. It felt as though I was strapped into an industrial robot, maybe like the one in *Aliens*, and it was just marching along pre-programmedly while I couldn't even find the controls. We stopped. Our toes projected just slightly out into the void.

I knew that we were exactly 116½ vertical feet above the surface of the Ocelots' plaza, or 389 diagonal feet by way of the two hundred and sixty steps. But it seemed twice as high now, and not just because I was smaller than I'd been. We looked down into the vortex of the receding planes. Vertigo pulled at us. The turquoise stairs glistened with pink suds, a mixture of maguey beer and the blood of previous sacrifices. The steps were edged with triangular stones that made them look serrated, like hacksaw blades. Architecture as weapon.

The idea was that I'd leap down the stairs, with as much grace as possible, and by the time I got to the bottom I'd be in several different pieces. And they'd all grab up my parts and then, probably, mix me into tamale meat and distribute me throughout the tri-pyramid area.

Well, hell. That's some really bad luck. Maybe I'd been expecting too much.

I'd thought I'd just cruise back here and be all set, curled up in a nice clean brain inside the big chalupa of the whole place, and that since I was in charge I could do roughly whatever I wanted, I'd have a decent chance at getting the dirt on the Game, I'd build my tomb just the way I wanted, I'd live it up a little, no problem. If that had—

Stop it, I thought. Stick to the reality. The reality was that I was simply *not* in control of Chacal's motor neurons. I was just along for the ride, just hanging out somewhere in his prefrontal cortex. And he was totally, reverently, imbecilically determined to kill himself—in spectacular and heroic fashion—in only a few seconds.

“Fourteen suns, fifteen suns . . .”

The pitch of the chanting rose higher. They were cheering me, egging me on, and I felt the urge to leap floating higher on the wave of their expectation. They were so hopeful, so eager, and they only wanted one little thing from me. It felt like anybody in this position might jump just because he was caught up in the excitement. Maybe it is the right thing to do—

No. Squelch that thought. Come on, Jed. Just push this doofus out of the driver's seat, grab the wheel, and turn the damn car around. The locals'll fall right into line. No sweat—

MA! Chacal snarled around me. NO!

I felt a constriction tightening on my thoughts, a kind of mental lockjaw, and for an indeterminate amount of time I was all just the plain panic of claustrophobia and suffocation. At one point I thought I started to scream, and then I noticed my lips weren't opening, my lungs weren't pumping, nothing was happening. I was just standing there, looking cute, flipping up inside, just sheer terror, repeating myself, oh God, oh God, oh God, and then I thought I could hear or sense Chacal's consciousness laughing, almost cheering, almost, in fact, orgasming.

Well, this is it. Old Jed's last moment before the click of oblivion, which in fact was seeming more and more attractive.

Estoy jodido. I'm fucked. This is it, this is what it's like, death—

Waitwaitwait. Snap out of it. Get back on track. *Think!*

En todos modos. Bad break. Regroup. New tactic.

What we need to do here is . . . uh . . . what we have to do is get old Chacal here on our side.

Right. Okay.

Chacal? I thought at him. Let's just cool out for a second. *Prenez un chill pill.* You don't have to do this.

Silence. That is, mental silence.

Chac man? *Compadre?*

Let me tell you something. Okay? Okay. All this around here isn't everything. There's a whole lot more to the world. Just take a peek in my memories. You can see in there, right? Check it out, Europe, Asia, computers, marshmallows . . . you see how relative everything is? Look into my memories. Bet you didn't know the earth was ball-shaped. Cool, huh? And there's other stuff. Doesn't this maybe provoke a few tiny second thoughts?

YOU ARE A SCAB CASTER'S MAGGOT-UAY AND THESE ARE YOUR USUAL LIES, Chacal thought.

Huh? I thought back. I didn't get all that. At least we've got a dialogue going, though. That's good. Okay. Chacal? Listen. You *know* I'm not lying. We're a team now. We're in this together. And I, for one, am just fine with that. What do you think? I think we'll do very well together. Chacal?

YOU ARE POLLUTED AND YOU ARE AFRAID. I WILL NOT LET YOU DEFILE THIS PUREST OF PLACES.

Fine, I thought. Whatever. Look, come on, Chaco dude. Wake up. You're being used.

IT IS TOO LATE FOR YOU. I HAVE MADE THE DUTIFUL DECISION.

Oh. Okay. Well, good, I respect that. At least you do realize there isn't any One Ocelot, right? Not in any Womb of the Sky or anywhere else. That's just propaganda. You know what propaganda is? Anyway, the thing is, even if it was the right decision at the time, the right thing to do now, even in terms of helping out your family, say, may be to at least see what I have to offer and then—

SILENCE FROM THE MAGGOT-UAY.

“Seventeen suns, eighteen suns . . .”

Okay, look, Chaco, let's just give it a shot, why don't you let me just say what I have to say and then see what happens. I promise that for both of us, things will improve dramatically—

NO MORE FROM YOU.

One second. I really have some ideas here. A few days and you'll be in charge. Crush your enemies, reward your friends. Live it up. I have magic. I'll just say a few really powerful—

NO!

It was his last word on the matter.

There was another constriction around me, tighter. Can't breathe. Can't think, even.

Nnn.

Come on. Resist. Have to get him to say the thing, one way or another. Think of something.

Nnnnn.

Okay. Come on, Jed. It's still quite possible that you can control this guy's movements. Maybe he's not really the dominant consciousness. Maybe he just thinks he is. It's probably just a matter of point of view. It's all about strength of character. Taking charge. Be a mensch for once.

Come on. Just show him you're tougher than he is. Say it! *I am the blinder of the coming sun*. Say it. Come on, Jed, assert your *chingado* self for once. *I am the blinder of the coming sun*. Come on, *TWIST THE WHEEL!* Get it out. *I am the blinder of the coming* . . .

Nnnnt.

"Nineteen suns . . ."

Come on, Jed old guy. Resist this jerk. Resistance is *not* useless. I strained.

Nnnnnnnnn.

Jed! Hey! **Now!**

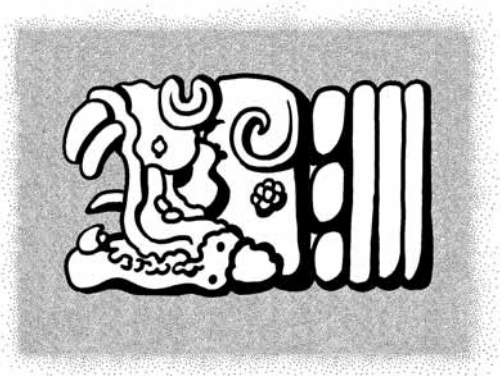
You *must* do something. Talk, scream, grunt, anything . . .

NnnnnmmmmNNNzzznnkk. Fuck! It was like being hopelessly constipated, straining and squeezing and getting nothing, nothing coming out, nothing—

"Zero suns."

Come on, Jed. Save the Project, save the planet, save your ass, come on, just this one time, got to do something, something, come on do something cleve—

ONE



The Qarafa of Megacon



(1)

But hold on a second. Maybe we're getting a little too cute here.

Maybe I'm throwing too much out at once. Maybe we need to answer some basic questions. After all, this is a deposition of a kind. I have a whistle to blow. So maybe I should take it a little seriously and not get coy, and briefly run through how the hell I got here. Maybe you can't escape at least a smidgen of backstory any more than you can escape, say, the future.

My full name is Joaquín Carlos Xul Mixoc DeLanda. Unlike most Maya Indians I was born in a real hospital, in a small city called San Cristobal Verapaz, in the Alta Verapaz area of southeastern Guatemala and thirty miles west of the Gulf of Honduras. SCV is about ninety miles northeast of CG, that's Ciudad Guatemala, or Guatemala City, and ten miles west of T'ozal, the village, or really the hamlet, where I grew up. My naming day, which is more important than my birthday, was three days later, on November 2, 1974, or, in our reckoning, 11 Howler, 4 Whiteness, in the fifth uinal of the first *tun* of the eighteenth k'atun of the thirteenth and last b'ak'tun. This was exactly one million eight hundred and fifty-eight thousand and seventy-one *k'inob*—suns, or lights, or days—since the first day of the Long Count calendar on 4 Overlord, 8 Dark Egg, 0.0.0.0.0, or August 11, 3113 BCE. And it was a mere thirteen thousand nine hundred and twenty-eight days before the last sun, on 4 Overlord, 3 Yellowribs, on the last day of the last k'atun of the thirteenth b'ak'tun. That is, before December 21, 2012 AD. Which, as you probably already have heard, is the day they say time stops.

My father was a half-Hispanic K'ekchi speaker and something of an intellectual by local standards. He'd gone to the Santiago Indigenous Institute in Guate City and ran the area's rudimentary school system. My mother spoke Ch'olan, which, of all the living Mayan dialects, is the closest to the ancient

southern Maya language. Her family had been displaced from Chiapas in the 1930s and was now part of a small Ch'olan enclave south of their main concentration. I learned more than most of the local kids did about who we were and the history of the country and whatever. But I still didn't know much. I knew that in the old days we had been architects and kings, but that now we were poor. Still, I didn't know our culture was dying. I thought our *akal*, that is, a house with cinder-block walls and a thatched roof, and—Jesus, I grew up under a *thatched roof*, for God's sake, it's like I'm Grout of the Cave Sloth Clan, I can hardly believe it myself sometimes—and our *jon-ka'il*, the town plaza, was the center of a very small universe. When I look back on it, it seems pretty benighted. But really I suppose I didn't know much less about history than the average U.S. public-school kid does today. Most people probably have an idea there are all these odd-looking ruined pyramids somewhere down south. A smaller group would be able to tell you there were ancient people down there called the Aztecs, the Toltecs, the Inca, and the Maya. A lot of people might have seen the Maya in the Mel Gibson movie about them, or they might have been to Mexico City and seen the ruins of Teotihuacán. But it would be unusual to just run into someone in the U.S. who could tell you, say, what the differences were between the Aztecs and the Toltecs, or who would know that there were a lot of other equally accomplished but less famous people, like the Mixtecs and Zapotecs and Tarascans, in the area from Central Mexico to Honduras that we now prefer to call Mesoamerica, or that the Inca lived thousands of miles to the southwest, on a whole other continent, so that as far as we Maya were concerned, they might as well have been on Neptune.

There are also huge stretches of time between the flowerings of these different civilizations. The Toltecs hit their peak around 1100. Teotihuacán was largely abandoned sometime between 650 and 700. What they call the Maya's Late Classical Period lasted from about AD 600 to 850, and by the time the Aztecs were getting started, about six hundred years later, the Maya were in an advanced state of political decline. The old saw in introductory Mesoamerican studies is that if the Maya were like the Ancient Greeks, the Toltecs and Aztecs were like the Romans. Except that the only thing the Maya really had in common with the Greeks was genius.

Now, of course, these days you have to say each culture or whatever is outstanding in its own way. When I was in school there was a day when they went around and changed all the labels in the university art museum so that instead of reading, say, "Dung Fetish, Ookaboolakonga Tribe, Nineteenth

Century,” they’d read “Dung Fetish, Ookaboolakonga Civilization, Nineteenth Century.” Like five huts and a woodcarver and it’s a civilization. But the sad fact is that cultures are like artists: Only a few of them are real geniuses. And of all the world’s genius cultures the Maya seem most to have bloomed out of the blue. Phonetic writing was only invented three times: once in China, once in Mesopotamia, once by the ancestors of the Maya. Zero was only invented twice: once near what’s now Pakistan, and once, before that, by the Maya. The Maya were and are special, and that’s all you need to know.

Not so many people know even this much, probably for two reasons. One is plain prejudice. The other is that it’s probably fair to say that probably no other civilization, and certainly no other literate civilization, has ever been so thoroughly eradicated. But there are more than six million living speakers of Maya languages left, more than half of whom live in Guatemala, and a lot of us still know something about the old days.

My mother, especially, knew something. But I had no sense there was anything remarkable about her, beyond being the most important person in the world. And I suppose you could say there wasn’t, except for one little thing she taught me about in 1981, during the rains—when I got sick, as our padre charmingly put it, “unto death.”



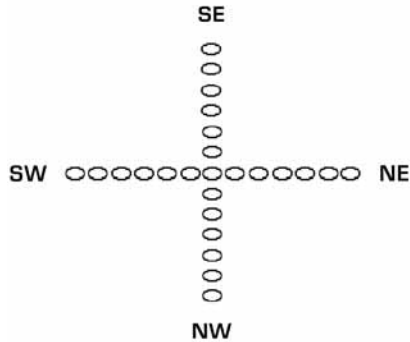
(2)

I got what they now think was dengue fever. It was more dangerous than it is these days, and on top of that I was hemorrhaging in my lungs and sneezing up blood because of what turned out to be a factor-8 deficiency, that is, hæmophilia B. I spent three months lying rolled up behind the hearth, counting the bright red stitches in my cotton blanket and listening to the dogs. My mother mouth-fed me corn gruel and Incaparina milk substitute and told stories in our quiet singsong style, sometimes in Spanish and sometimes in Ch'olan. Everyone else, even my youngest sister, was working down in the fincas, in the lowlands. One evening I was lying on my side, trying not to vomit, and I noticed a tree snail crawling up a wet patch on the cinder-block wall. It was a blue-green balled cone, like a plumb bob, striped with orange and black, a *Liguus fasciaticus bourboni*, as I learned much later. My mother told me the snail was my second *chanul*, a “*chanul de brujo*,” that is, a warlock’s familiar.

All traditional Maya have a *chanul*—or, to use the Classic Mayan word, a *uay*. It’s generally outside your body, but it’s also one of your souls. If you’re hungry, it gets hungry, and if someone kills it, you die. Some people are closer to their *uays* than others, and a few can morph their own body into the body of their *uay* and prowl around as an animal. It’s a little bit like the animal familiars in the *His Dark Materials* books, except it’s more part of you. I already had a normal *uay*—a *sa’bin-’och*, which is sort of like a hedgehog—but according to my mother the snail was going to be just as important. It’s an unusual *uay* to have and seemingly not very powerful. But a lot of *brujos’* *uays* are small and secretive.

Around this same time my mother started playing a counting game with me. At first, I guess, it was just to teach me numbers. Pretty soon we played it

every afternoon. She used to roll the rush mat aside from next to where I was lying. Underneath she'd spooned twenty-five little holes out of the clay floor, in a cross shape. The idea is to visualize the cross as though it were in the sky and you were lying supine on the ground, with your head at the sun's current azimuth in the southeast:



She used to spread a thin white cloth over the square and push it down a bit into each of the depressions, and chew up a bit of tobacco and smear some of the juice on the inside of her left thigh. When I learned to do it, she had me rub it on my right thigh. Peeling open one of her prized Tupperware containers, she'd take out her *grandeza*—which is a pouch of amulets and stones and things—and pour out a mound of red *tz'ite* beans, which are really these hard seeds from a coral tree—and set out her quartz pebbles, which I would hold up to my eye and look for bouncing lights inside. I never understood why she did this next bit—she'd smear a line of wet black across her face, starting from the crown of her left ear, running under her left eye, across her upper lip, and down her right cheek to the right mandibular angle. The routine was that we'd each take a random handful of seeds out of the mound and empty it out on the margins of the cloth, to the east and west of the depressions, while we each asked for help from the protector of the day. Then she'd tap the ground five times and say,

"Ixpaaayeen b'aje'laj"

That is,

“Now may I borrow
The breath of the sun

Of today, now I borrow
The breath of tomorrow's.

Now I am rooting
And now I am centering,
Scattering black seeds
And scattering yellow seeds,
Adding up white skulls
And adding up red skulls,
Counting the blue-green suns,
Counting the brown-gray suns."

In Ch'olan the word for "skull" is also a word for "corn kernel." Next we'd take turns counting out the seeds into the bins in groups of four and use the beans to mark today's date on top of that. Then she would bring out a single thumbnail-size crystal of carnelian quartz. This was the runner.

Just like the pieces in Parcheesi, the runners move through the game board based on a randomizer. Instead of dice we use corn kernels that have a black dot on one side. You throw them up and count how many land with the black side up. Unlike Parcheesi, though, the number of kernels you throw varies on the basis of where you are in the Game. There were different counting protocols applied, like if your last group had three counters in it you'd sometimes break it up into two and one and count it as one even number and one odd one.

And the Game is complicated in other ways. There's a whole set of question-and-answer jingles, starting with one for each of the two hundred and sixty day-name-and-number combinations in the ritual calendar. Each of those names intersected with another three hundred and sixty names for the solar days. Combinations had their own attached proverbs and their own shades of meaning, depending on other aspects of the position. So—a little like in the *I Ching* or like African Ifa—the Game generates little phrases, which you could read as sentences. And because there are so many possible combinations, it can seem like it's conversing with you in a pretty unpredictable way. Usually my mother said it was Santa Teresa, who was something like the goddess of the Game, interpreting for us. When something bad came up, though, she said it was Saint Simón who was talking. He was a bearded man who sat at the crossroads, at the center of the Game, and whom some people still called Maximón.

So anyway, the Game is like a combination of a map, an abacus, and a perpetual calendar. Movements of the quartz pebble, the “runner” piece, give you variables depending on how far ahead you want to read and how much you want to rely on intuition. Sometimes out of two reasonable moves one just looks better. There’s also a special way to press intuition into service. My mother taught me to sit still and wait for *tzam lic*, that is, “blood lightning.” It’s a kind of a twitch or fluttering feeling under the skin, maybe some kind of a miniature muscle spasm. I guess you could call it a frisson. When it came, its intensity and its location and direction on your body told you things about the move in question. For instance, if it were on the inner edge of your left thigh, where the tobacco stain was, it might mean a male relative was coming to see you from the northeast, and if it were the same feeling but on the outside of the thigh, it might suggest that the visitor was a woman. Usually my mother would try to find out—I don’t want to say “predict”—just basic things, most often about the crops, like whether the squash beetles were getting ready for another attack. Nearly as often it was about the weather, with the red runner representing the sun and the others standing in for clouds or marking mountains. Sometimes she’d use the runner to represent relatives or neighbors, to try to help them with big events in their lives like marriages or, if they were sick, to find out when they’d get better. One time I remember I’d asked her to play for my maternal cousin’s paternal grandmother, who had a bad stomach worm, and my mother stopped the game in the middle. Much later on I got wise to the fact that it was because she’d seen that the old woman wasn’t going to recover.

As my mother said, the Game didn’t work so well for little things. There were times when I said I wanted to guess when my father was coming home that day. She’d resist it at first because it was too trivial, but finally she’d let me move the quartz pebble around as a stand-in for Tata, and she’d kind of play against him. So my counter had to stay ahead of my mother’s seeds as they came after me. If at the end she finally trapped my counter in, say, the northwest bin, that would mean he was coming home to us very late, by way of the town northwest of us. If he fell in the south bin, that meant he was still at the school. If he ended up in the center bin, that meant he was just about to come home. And he always did. Within a few minutes he’d crouch through the door.

None of this seemed at all like fortune telling or astrology or any of that *disparate*. It was more like the Game—or just for continuity, let’s call it, prematurely, the Sacrifice Game, although I realize I haven’t properly introduced

this idea yet—it was like the Sacrifice Game was helping you realize things consciously that your mind had already noticed. One time one of my uncles said that in the old days the original people had owls' eyes and could see up through the shell of the sky and through mountains into the caves of the dead and the unborn. If someone was sick you could look through his skin and into his organs to find the problem. You could see your birth behind you and your death in front of you. But since then our eyes had become clouded and we could only see a tiny fraction of the world, just what was on the surface. I practiced a lot. On the first day of my twelfth *tz'olk'in*—that is, when I was about eight and a half years old—my mother initiated me into life as a *h'men*.

The word's been translated as “daykeeper,” “timekeeper,” “sun keeper,” and even “time accountant.” Most literally, in Ch'olan it would be “sun totaler” or “sun adder-upper,” or let's say “sun adder.” A sun adder is basically the village shaman, a pagan alternative to the Catholic priest. We figure out whether a client is sick because some dead relative is hassling her, and if so what little offerings she should make to him to shut him up and which herbs to hang around her house for a faster recovery. When should you burn off your *milpa*, that is, your family cornfield? Is this a good day to take a bus trip to the capital? What would be a lucky day to have the christening? It's all blended up with Catholicism, so we also use bits of liturgy. If you wanted to be a bastard about it, you could say we're the local witch doctors. The reason we're called sun adders is that our main job is to keep track of the traditional ritual calendar. All the little ritual offerings that we do, even all the Sacrifice Game stuff—which, if you wanted to be a bitch about it, you could call fortune telling—is pretty secondary.

For the Ch'olan, things come in pairs, especially bad things. Two years after I got my adder bundle, that's how it happened with us.

One thing about places like Guatemala is that the Conquest is still going on. In Guatemala—just for the barest smidge of history—things had settled down for most of us indigenes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by the early fifties, things weren't all that bad. But in the summer of 1954 the CIA, at the behest of the United Fruit Company—the Chiquita banana folks—engineered a coup against the elected president and set up Carlos Castillo Armas as a puppet dictator. Besides doing everything the Pulpo—that is, the Octopus, as we called the UFC—wanted, he immediately began an unofficial ethnic cleansing policy against the Maya. UN estimates list about two hundred thousand Maya massacred or disappeared from 1958

to 1985, which gives Guatemala the lowest human rights rating in the Western Hemisphere. For us it was the worst period since the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century.

The U.S. Congress stopped official aid to the government in 1982, but the Reagan administration kept it going secretly, sending weapons and training Guate army officers in counterinsurgency techniques at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning. Maybe a few of them were sincere anti-Communists who actually thought the guerrillas were a threat, but 97 percent of everything is real estate and by '83, when the genocide peaked at around fourteen aborigines per day, the war wasn't anything but a real-estate grab. They'd roll in, say, "You're all guerrillas," and that'd be it. A year later any producing fields would be occupied by Ladinos.

In the U.S. most people seem to think of the CIA as some kind of sleek, efficient secret society with good-looking employees and futuristic gadgets. Latin Americans know it as just another cartel, big, bumbling, but better financed than most, running errands for the big drug wholesalers and shaking down the small ones. In the seventies and eighties the military built thousands of little airstrips all over rural Guatemala, supposedly to help us disadvantaged types move products to nonlocal markets but actually so they could drop in anywhere, anytime they needed to goose a deadbeat. There were more than a couple around T'ozal. One of my father's many uncles-in-law, a *parcelista* named Generoso Xul, marked out and burned off a few milpas on common land that turned out to be a bit too close to one of them. By late July Generoso was missing, and my father and a few others went out looking for him. On the second day they found his shoes tied up and hanging in a eucalyptus tree, which is a kind of sleeps-with-the-fishes warning sign.

My father talked to this person he knew from the local resistance, who was a Subcomandante Marcos-like figure called Teniente Xac, or as we called him, Uncle Xac. Tío Xac said he guessed that the Soreanos "*habian dado agua al Tio G,*" that is, that they'd killed him. After that my father got all these kids and parcelistas and their kids to watch for the airplanes and write down their registration codes on cigarette papers and bring them to him, and he compiled a pretty long list. A friend in CG checked them with the AeroTransport Data Bank—Guatemala was so much these people's backyard that they hardly ever even bothered to change the numbers—and it turned out a bunch of them were operated out of Texas and Florida by Skyways Aircraft Leasing, which, it came out much later, was a shell corporation, and had flown out of John Hull's estate in Costa Rica. Hull—and this could sound a little conspiracy-

kookish if it weren't well documented in, for instance, the 1988 Kerry Congressional Subcommittee paper "'Private Assistance' and the Contras: A Staff Report" of 10/14/86, easily available at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, 40 Presidential Drive, Simi Valley, California, under "White House Legal Task Force: Records, Box 92768"—was a U.S. citizen who laundered money and shipped uncut cocaine for Oliver North's crew. Most of the money went to the contras in El Salvador, but the North cartel, the Bush cronies, and the Ríos Montt group—Montt was the puppet president of Guatemala at the time—all took home millions. My guess is that Uncle Xac was hoping to go wide with the list at some point, either just to focus some attention on the Soreanos, who were a big local family whom everybody hated, or to try to discredit the generals in the next election, which shows you how naïve he was.

On Christmas Day of 1982 I had another episode of pneumonia following blood loss and my parents took me to the Sisters of Charity Hospital at San Cristóbal. Supposedly I was ranting and raving. There was one of the younger nuns, Sor Elena, who kind of looked after me and kept asking how I was doing, and I thought she was really great. I'm sure I've thought about her every day since then, maybe even every hour, at least when I'm not in one of my fugue states. *Todo por mi culpa*, all my fault. Four days after I got there, on *la fiesta de la Sagrada Familia*, December 29, 1982, Sor Elena told me that government troops had surrounded T'ozal and were interrogating the Cofradías, that is, "cargo bearers" or "charge holders," who are a kind of rotating committee of village elders. Later I found out more. It had been a market day, when almost everybody had come into the village. A white-and-blue Iroquois helicopter with loudspeakers materialized and circled around and around like a big kingfisher, telling everyone to assemble in the plaza for a town meeting, where they were going to give out assignments for the next year's civilian patrols. By this time the soldiers had already marched in on two barely used dirt roads. According to my friend José Xiloch—or, as we called him, No Way—who saw some of it from a distance, hardly anybody tried to run or hide. Most of the soldiers were half-Maya recruits from Suchitépéquez, but there were two tall men with sandy hair and USMC-issue boots along with them, and the squad was commanded, unusually, by a major, Antonio García Torres.

Only two people got shot to death in the plaza that day. My parents and six of their friends got loaded into a truck and taken to the army base at Coban. That evening the troops burned down the community center with eleven

of the more resistant citizens alive inside it, which at that time was the terror tactic of choice. It was also the last time anyone I know of saw either of my brothers, although it's not clear what happened to them. Much later I found out that my sister had eventually made it to a refugee settlement in Mexico. The troops spent two days forcing the citizens to level the village and then loaded them onto trucks for relocation.

T'ozal is one of the four hundred and forty villages the Guatemalan government now officially lists as destroyed. The final count names thirty-eight people as confirmed dead and twenty-six disappeared. I figure it's about 90 percent certain that my parents would have been tortured by what they call the *submarino*, suffocation in water, and probably kept in these tall barrels they have where all you can do is squat (*todo por mi culpa*) and look up at the sky. One witness said that my father died when they were trying to make him talk by putting an insecticide-soaked hood over his head. Whether this was what killed him, or whether it even really happened, is still not clear. My mother, supposedly, was, like most of the women, forced to drink gasoline. Their bodies were almost certainly dumped in one of the eight known trench grave sites in Alta Verapaz, but so far the Center of Maya Documentation and Investigation hasn't matched any remains to my DNA.

Retardedly enough, it took me years to start wondering whether my parents might have sent me away because they guessed there'd be trouble. Maybe it was just my mother's idea. She'd used the Game before to find out whether there was any current danger from the G2, that is, the secret police. Maybe she saw something.

A week later the nuns got an order to ship me and four other kids from T'ozal—including “No Way” José, who became my oldest remaining friend—to *la capital*, that is, Ciudad Guate, where, eventually, we'd be sent on to relocation camps. I barely remember the Catholic orphanage because I escaped the first day, although it wasn't much of an escape since I just walked out the door. I found my way across town to a much better-funded children's hospital called AYUDA that was administered by the LDS, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or, as they don't like to be called, the Mormons. There was a rumor they were sending kids from there to the U.S., which at the time I visualized as a garden of earthly delights with french-fry bushes and rivers of dry-ice-cold Squirt. There was a hugely tall woman with bright hair at the back door who hesitated for a minute and then, against regulations, let me in. I only saw her a couple times after that and didn't learn her name, but I still think about her when I see that shade of chrome-yellow hair. Later, when I

was listed as a probable orphan, they transferred me to something called the LDS Paradise Valley Plantation School, outside of town.

It took a long time for me to get any idea of what had happened to my family, and in fact I still don't know. There wasn't any one moment when I knew my parents were dead, just an endlessly swelling blob of revolting acceptance. Saturdays at the PVPS were free and relatives, if any, were allowed to visit with inmates in a back classroom, and every Saturday morning I'd borrow a math book from the upper grades and go in there and just lurk in the back in the cool hug of two pea-green cinder-block walls and a pea-green linoleum floor and just keep an eye on things. Nobody ever showed up trying to find me. *La mara*, the gang, made fun of me about it but I was already getting oblivious. I still have trouble with Saturdays, in fact; I get antsy and catch myself looking out the window a lot or rechecking my e-mail ten times an hour.

I was at PVPS for nearly two years before I got into their Native American Placement Program—which is partly a refugee-adoption foundation—and, just after my sixteenth *tz'olk'in* nameday, that is, when I was eleven, a family called the Ødegårds, with a little financial help from the Church, flew me to Utah.

To give the devils their due, the LDS actually do a lot of good things for Native Americans. For instance, they helped the Zuni win the biggest settlement against the U.S. government that any Indian nation has ever gotten. And they run all these charities all over Latin America, and this is all despite the fact that the Church was still officially white supremacist until 1978. They believe that some Native Americans—the light-skinned ones—are descendants of a Hebrew patriarch named Nephi, who's a main character in the Book of Mormon. But who cares what their motives are, right? They looked after me and many others. I couldn't believe how rich the Ødegårds were. Running water was one thing, but they even had an unlimited supply of *angelitos*, that is, marshmallows in both the semisolid and the semiliquid forms. I kind of thought the U.S. had conquered us and I was a captive being raised in a luxurious prison in the imperial capital. It took a long time for me to learn that by U.S. standards they were lower middle class. I mean, these are people who say *supper* instead of *dinner* and even *dinner* instead of *lunch*, and who have a wall plaque in the kitchen with a recipe for "Baby Jesus's Butter 'n' Love Sugar Cookies," with ingredients like "a dollop of understanding" and "a pinch of discipline." And out there they're considered intellectuals. So it's taken some work for me to become the jaded sophisto I pretend to be today.

Still, Mr. and Mrs. Ø were nice, or rather they wanted to be nice, but they had to put so much energy into retaining their delusions that there wasn't a lot of time for each individual child. Also, my stepbrothers were horrible—deprived of mainstream TV and video games, they'd relax by torturing small animals—but of course the parents thought they were God's chosen cherubs.

Needless to say, I never converted to the LDS. Or got “helped to understand,” as they put it. That is, made to realize that one had been a Latter-Day Saint all along. According to the program they weren't supposed to do that to you until you were a little bit older, and by then I was beginning to realize that baptizing your long-dead ancestors and laying on hands and wearing Masonic long johns wasn't entirely normal behavior, even in El Norte. They even took me to a Catholic church once or twice, but it didn't have the right smell or the right saints in it or offering bottles all over the floor, like in Guatemala, so I said don't bother. They were cool enough about it, in their way. In fact I still call Ma and Pa Ø every once in a while, even though I can't bear them. When I ask about my stepbrothers they've always each just sired another brace of twins. What with the combination of ideology and fertility drugs down there, they multiply like brine shrimp.

As an alternative to becoming a living saint, I got steered onto the extra-curricular-activities track. I started with the Chess Team and the Monopoly Team. The folks at Nephi K-12 forced me to play the cello, the orchestra's most humiliating instrument. I wasn't good. I thought music was math dumbed down. I hid in the library a lot, taking mental pictures of dictionary pages for later retrieval. I learned to read English by memorizing H. P. Lovecraft, and now people say I talk that way. I politely refused to bob for apples at the school Halloween party—well, actually I dashed crying out of the multipurpose room—because I thought I was about to get waterboarded. I got involved with the Programming Team, the Computer Games Team, and the Strategy Games Team. You'd think that someone on that many teams would have had to talk with the other students, but I didn't. Most of the time I got to stay out of real PE because of the hemo thing. Instead they made me and the other cripples sit on mats and pretend to stretch and lift weights. The only sport I was ever really good at was target shooting. The family were all gun nuts and I went along with it. I joined the Math Team, even though I thought it was silly to think of math as a team sport. It's like having a masturbation team. One time my math coach gave me a stack of topology quizzes and was surprised that I aced them. He and another teacher tested me a bit and said

I was a calendrical savant and that I calculated each date at the time, unlike some who memorized them, although I could have just told them that myself. It's not really a marketable skill, though. It's something about one in ten thousand people can do, like being able to lick your own genitals. Around that same time I got involved with the Tropical Fish Team. I built my first few tank systems out of garden hoses and old Tupperware. I decided that when I grew up I'd be a professional chess player. I wore my skateboard helmet on the bus. I decided that when I grew up I'd be a professional Sonic the Hedgehog player. I appeared, as "J," in a study in *Medical Hypotheses* called "Hyper-numeric Savant Skills in Juvenile PTS Patients." I decided that instead of learning to play the cello, I'd learn to *build* cellos. I listened to the Cocteau Twins instead of Mötley Crüe. I made my first thousand buying and selling magic cards. I acquired a hillbilly nickname. I did Ecstasy alone.

New treatments got my hæmophilia under control, but in the meantime I'd been diagnosed as having "posttraumatic-stress-disorder-related emotional-development issues," along with "sporadic eidetic memory." Supposedly PTSD can present like Asperger's. But I wasn't autistic in all the usual ways, like for instance, I liked learning new languages and I didn't mind "exploratory placement in novel pedagogic situations." One doctor in Salt Lake told me that PTSD was a blanket term that didn't really cover whatever I had, or didn't have. I figured that meant I wouldn't get any scholarship money out of it.

In September of 1988 an anthropology grad student from BYU, Brigham Young University, came to speak at our junior high school and redirected my life. She showed videos of old kivas and Zuni corn dances, and just as I was falling asleep she started showing Maya pyramids, and I sat up. I got my nerve up and asked some questions. She asked me to tell where I was from. I told the class. A few days later they let me and the other redskins out of school to go to a Native American Placement Program scholarship conference that she was chairing in Salt Lake. It was in a gym at the high school and included things like flint knapping and freestyle face painting with Liquitex acrylics. A student teacher introduced me to another professor named June Sexton and when I told her where I came from she started talking to me in pretty good Yukateko, which really blew me away. At some point she asked whether I'd ever played *el juego del mundo*, and when I didn't know what she meant she said it was also called "*alka' kalab'eeraj*," the "Sacrifice Game," which was close to a word my mother had used. I said yes and she brought out an Altoids box full of curiously red tz'ite-tree seeds. I couldn't play at first because I was hav-

ing something that I might identify as nostalgia, or the poor second cousin of nostalgia, but when I got it back together we played through a few dry rounds. She said a mathematician colleague of hers was working on a study of Maya divination and would love it if I could teach him my version. Sure, I said, thinking quickly, but I couldn't do it after school hours. Anything to get out of PE.

Incredibly, a week later a green van from a place called FARMS—the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies—actually did pick me up right before lunch period and drove me north into the mountains, to BYU in Provo. June babe led me into a forgettable building and introduced me to Professor Taro Mora. He seemed to me like a wise old sage, like Pat Morita in the *Karate Kid* saga, even though he was only forty. His office was totally plain, with a wall of books and journals on Go—which is that Asian board game played with the black and white pebbles—and another wall of stuff on probability and game theory. He worked in catastrophe modeling. He said he'd collected versions of the Sacrifice Game from all over Central America, but that the variant I'd learned was one that only a couple of his informants had even heard of and that differed from the usual game in a few important ways. First of all, in most places the client just comes in and says, "Please ask the skull/seeds this for me," and the sun adder does everything else. But the way my mother did it, the client played *against* the adder. Second, she'd made a board in the shape of a cross, while almost all other adders just sorted the seeds into a single row of piles on a flat cloth. The third and most tantalizing thing was simply that I'd learned the game from a woman.

This was almost unheard of. Throughout 98 percent of the Maya region, adders were invariably men. Taro said he wasn't an anthropologist but that he guessed my mother might have represented a survival of some Ch'olan tradition of female secret societies that had otherwise disappeared soon after the Conquest.

Taro met with me twice a week until the end of the semester, when he went back to New Haven. By that time I'd found out that he was the head researcher of something called the "Parcheesi Project" and that he and the graduate students in his lab had a theory that all or almost all modern games are descended from a single ancestor, an ur-game. They'd started out trying to reconstruct it by collecting tribal games in Central Asia, but pretty soon the research had led them to the Americas.

A lot of anthropologists at the time tore down the idea. And it did sound a bit like another Thor Von Danekovsky cult-archaeology crock-pot contact

theory. But Taro was really a mathematician and didn't care. He was a pure researcher and one of only a few people working on the overlap between catastrophe theory, the physics of complex systems, and recombinant game theory, or RGT. RGT is basically the theory of games like chess and Go, where the pieces form different units of force in space. Economists and generals and whoever have been using classical game theory—which is mainly about gambling—since World War Two, but applied RGT only really got going in the 1990s. Taro's idea was that using a reconstructed version of the Sacrifice Game as a human interface could significantly improve performance in strategic modeling, like simulations of economics, of battles, or maybe even of weather. He'd had some experimental success with it before he even met me, but he said he wanted even more spectacular results before he published anything. His lab had worked up dozens of different reconstructions of what the original game board might have looked like. We all put in hundreds of hours, both before and after I went to college, trying to dope it out. But the thing that kept stopping us was that even if we'd been sure about the design of the board, there was no way to know what the exact counting protocol had been in the old days or how many seeds or pebbles or whatever they'd used. So Taro decided to try another approach. He brought in brain scanners.

I still had my five quartz pebbles from Guatemala. In fact, they were the only things from there I still had, since the tz'ite seeds had eroded to pink powder and had been replaced with Skittles. I'd only scattered—that is, played the Sacrifice Game—a few times since I'd been in the States. But when I started again, sitting all wired up in a Ganzfeld chamber in the basement in Provo, it seemed like I'd been a beneficiary of the particular sort of improvement that comes from not practicing. At first they had people in a room on the other side of the building acting out different scenarios, and I'd try to predict those. I did pretty well. Then we found it worked better when the experimenters were actually losing money, or getting hurt, or something real. After a few months we started working on events in the real world, the spread of the AIDS virus or the first oil war or whatever, which was a lot harder to set up controls for. We kept beating the odds and getting better and better but still on an agonizingly gentle curve. He said my calendrical savant thing was helping me play faster but that so far I wasn't really playing deeper. That is, I wasn't focusing enough. I was like, well, I'm a teenager, how should I be able to focus at all? Anyway, five years later, when I started working with

acquired something like real emotions. I started learning new things about humans. Like for the first time I got clued into the whole secret about facial expressions and what they meant, and how people try to hide their emotions or fake ones they don't have. Weird stuff. A whole shadow-world of interpersonal politics lurked out there, affectations and masks and subtexts and just plain lies. I became sensitive to my personal appearance, or, rather, learned I *had* an appearance. I lost thirty pounds and kept it off. I read a book called *How to Pick Up Chicks for Dummies*. I did 182,520 abs crunches. I moved to Grand Avenue in Los Angeles. I picked up some chicks for dummies. I decided to be an ornithologist. I started using the Game to research investments. I made some money right away, maybe just by luck. I had some motivation, because in those days prophylactic treatment for hæmophilia B cost about \$300K per year, but without it you spent all your time worrying about getting bruised or cut and then plugging leaks like Super Mario. I gave up ornithology because I found out that really, people already know about everything there is to know about birds. I decided to go professional with the chess thing. I worked my FIDE rating up to 2,380. On May 11, 1997, when Deep Blue beat Kasparov, I gave up the idea of being a chess player. What was the point? It was like being a Dial-A-Matic adding machine. I decided I was going to move to Seoul and study to be a professional Go player. I learned some Korean. Then it turned out you had to learn some Chinese to learn Korean, so I learned some Chinese. I gave up the idea of being a professional Go player because it turned out they don't have *empanadas de achioté* in Asia. I decided to be a marine biologist. I left L.A. and moved to Miami. I gave up the idea of being a marine biologist because it was too depressing to go through water samples, logging all the different vintages of toxic waste. I decided I'd study biology and specialize in chemosensation. I gave up building cellos because of all the lacquer and varnish and glue. I decided I'd study olfactology. Then I gave up being a chemist at all because the field had become so industrialized that at the rate things were going I'd have been lucky to come up with even one decent molecule. I decided to get out of the sciences and write a novel. I moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. I wrote a few articles on computer games and whatever for magazines like *Wired* and *Artforum* and even *Harper's Bazaar*. The editor there told me a jaunty, irreverent tone was mandatory. I went around drinking single malts and picking up chicks for dummies. The phase didn't last long. I started trading commodities online. I gave up the idea of being a novelist because, as I learned more about the field, it turned out that even in this day and age novelists are expected to

cover a pretty narrow range of subjects. You're supposed to be interested in certain things, things like, say, emotion, motivation, self-expression, relationships, families, love, loss, love and loss, gender, race, redemption, women, men, women and men, identity, politics, identity politics, writers, Brooklyn, writers who live in Brooklyn, readers who wish they were writers who live in Brooklyn, the Self, the Other, the Self versus the Other, academia, postcolonialism, growing up, the suburbs, the 1970s, the 1980s, the 1990s, growing up in the suburbs in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s, personhood, places, people, people who need people, character, characters, the inner lives of the characters, life, death, society, the human condition, and probably Ireland. And of course, I have exactly zero interest in any of these things. Who wants to hear about the characters' inner lives? I'm not even interested in my own inner life. I decided I'd become a professional Hold 'Em player. I moved to Reno, Nevada. In those days there were so many fish at the tables that almost anyone who could count could make money. I made some money. I did some math for Indian-reservation casinos in Utah, Arizona, and Florida, coming up with new ways to fleece the white man. I made some more money. I gave up the idea of staying on the pro poker circuit because I was already making more money in commodities than I could at online or even real-world tables, and with a lot less interaction. I kept up my column at *Strategy* magazine just out of sentiment. I made some more money.

Money. Right. I suppose I should mention that.

By '01 I had enough cash to do what I wanted if I didn't mind wearing off-the-rack jackets. I looked up No Way, my *cuate viejo* from T'ozal—who was still with the Enero 31 resistance group, which had gone underground after the cease-fire of '96—and I spent four years in Guatemala. I worked for his friends in the CPRs, that is, the Communities of Population in Resistance, and I quietly tried to find out what (*todo por mi culpa*) had happened to my parents. And I went around and asked a lot of old sun adders about the game. I decided Taró's team had been right, that there had been a complete and complex version of the Sacrifice Game, but that now it was just a dim collective memory. Most of the old *h'menob'* used the same much-abridged version and even then worked mainly by instinct, like Alzheimer's patients who can't play duplicate bridge anymore but who still enjoy a few hands of Go Fish.

I never did track down any more complete versions of the Sacrifice Game. But my secret objective got me into enough trouble that as of 2011 the National Police still had an arrest warrant out for me. García-Torres was, in typical Guate fashion, still in the army and now a general. No Way and I

worked up a profile of him—what his habits were, how his different houses were laid out, which cockfighting pits he went to and when, where his personal bodyguards lived, the whole thing, but I must not have done a very good job because one night No Way—who had a coyote uay and could get around silently in the dark—snuck in the back way and said he'd heard the G2 was onto me. My choice, he said, was either to clear out before morning or, probably, vanish. I cleared out. I moved to Indiantown, which is a Maya émigré settlement on Lake Okeechobee about twenty miles inland from Florida's Atlantic Coast.

In Florida word had gotten around about some good results I'd had with the Sacrifice Game, and I couldn't get out of taking on a few clients. I could never really be a really great community sun adder, though. One problem is that, in a traditional village at least, an adder has to do a lot of drinking, and alcohol's never really plugged my wound. As far as I'm concerned, C₂H₆O's a poor man's drug no matter how much you tart it up. Another problem is that a lot of the craft is just being a good listener, a relentlessly traditionalist pillar of the community, and a repository of local lore. And what fun is that? You also ought to be an intuitive psychiatrist, a Person Who Deals with People. And most adders, frankly, also do a lot of plain fakery—cold reading, behind-the-scenes research, stooge planting, and even sleight of hand.

And I can't do the religious stuff with conviction, and I hate leading people on like some TV medium. It's just too depressing to see how desperate and gullible they are. I've been told more than once that I'm kind of touchy about the adder thing because it sounds like it could be a scam. When they do surveys of most- and least-admired professions, "fortune teller" is usually second from the bottom, right above "telemarketer."

Which brings up the personal question: "If he can do what he says he can, why is Jed not rich?"

Well, the simple answer to that is that, as a matter of fact, I am.



(3)

I hate my autobiography. One hates all autobiography. Autobiography is the world's second-most-loathsome literary genre, just above haikus in English. The last time I went into a real bookstore—it was just to get a cannabispreso, by the way—I picked up an autobio by Ava Gardner while I was waiting, and the first sentence was “In Johnston County, North Carolina, you couldn't be any kind of farmer at all without a mule.” It's like, uh-huh, that's sweet, Ava, but frankly, if you're not in bed with Howard Hughes, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Stompanato Artie Shaw, Mickey Rooney, or some combination of the above by the bottom of this very page—or unless you're leading up to a comparison of the mule's genitalia to Frank's—your book is taking a header back into the remainders bin. Autobiographies are all alike, it's always “Okay, just because I've attracted a certain amount of attention I'm going to drag you through everything that ever happened to me even though 99 and ⁴⁴/₁₀₀ percent of it is the exact same *basura* that happened to everyone else.” So if you get anything out of this it shouldn't be about me, even if I do figure in it a bit. It's not about me. It's just about the Game.

Oh, right. We were going to treat, briefly, the Game as Gold Mine issue. Well, let's skip ahead a bit.

In the fourth watchfire of 4 Owl, 4 Yellowness, 12.19.18.17.16—or, in the newfangled reckoning, at 4:30 AM on Friday, December 23, 2011—the Nikkei closed up 1.2 percent and sent my estimated combined portfolios just north of the five-million-dollars U.S. mark. I was splayed out on the floor—I like hanging out on stone or cement floors—blinking up at a big screen on the low ceiling of my so-called house, which was a bit west of Indiantown and only one vacant block from Lake Okeechobee, Home of the Estrogenically Hermaphrodized Bullfrog. The house wasn't really a house but rather a

bankrupt tropical-fish store, Lenny's Reefin' Stall, that I'd picked up for debt plus fixtures and was now converting into a 450,000-cubic-foot experiment in one-room mixed-phylum living. The only light in the room was an actinic blue glow from a 440-gallon cylindrical tank of Baja nudibranchs, which are basically sort of gaudy sea snails with the shell on the inside.

Damn, I thought, blinking up at the screen. After years of *vagar*, screwing around, I had finally worked out a way to use the Sacrifice Game to make real money. The Game won't work in casinos, of course, because it takes too long. It didn't help much with lotteries, because they're too close to truly random. The Game needs to work on something you already know about. Basically, it helps you notice things. Which isn't the same as predicting the future, but it beats just flailing around in the dark like most people. Anyway, the Sacrifice Game did work, slightly, with horses and sports books, especially with basketball, but I'd have to learn everything I could about the posted horses and the track, and by the time I'd played it all out a few times I could barely get the bet in before the bell. So I needed something that came at me a little slower. I started getting serious about stocks. But they were randomer than I'd thought, and I'd almost given up when I tried my hand at corn futures.

The advantage with commodities was that the harvest cycle was slow. Also, there weren't many players in the field. So I worked up histories of most of the big individual investors and started treating them as absent players in a giant Sacrifice Game. Usually I ran about twenty long-range climate simulations and then bought straddles on stuff that looked unclear. Pretty soon I had a slight but definite edge. Six months ago I'd banked my first half-million, and now I was heading into private-plane territory. Speaking of which, I thought, I'll lock up a little cash right now. Good idea. SELL 3350 DECEMBER CONTRACTS at 223.00 at MARKET to OPEN, I clicked. Hah. I hit COMPLETE TRANSACTION, counted the zeroes twice, and lay back on the floor.

Hot spit, I thought. Yes! I am KING of the FUCKIVERSE! ;*DOMINO EL MUNDO!* I RULE THE WASTELAND!!! Finally. I'm an eater, not an eaten. It was like the eyes that had been on either side of my head had migrated to the front and given me binocular vision. Predator, not prey. Dang. Next thing you know old Jed's a thrillionaire.

Hmm, what to do next? Well, I thought, with great power comes great responsibility. I must use my abilities for the cause of good.

I called Todd Rosenthal at Naples Motorsports. He was an early owl and he picked up his business line.

“Okay, I’ll take the ‘Cuda,” I said. It was a Metalflake Aztec Red 1970 hemi collapsible hardtop, 383 block, all-original metal, new electronics, numbers-matching monster that I’d had my eye on for a while, and I’d dickered it down to only \$290K. He said he’d have it and the papers trucked over by 9:00 A.M. so that I wouldn’t have time for second thoughts. Click.

Ahhhhh. That’s the ticket. Doing my bit to make the world a better place. Wouldn’t want to let some cracker show monkey get his hooks on a work of art like that. I already had a ’73 Road Runner parked outside, and another Barracuda in the Villanuevas’ garage, but I hadn’t quite reached Plymouth saturation. I have kind of bad taste. It’s more fun than the other kind. Okay, now what? Maybe a little oceanfront property. Just a medium-size island, a loaf of bread, a jug of Squirt, a twenty-thousand-gallon reef tank, a five-thousand-gallon Jacuzzi, a couple of J-porn starlets, and a Vatnajökull Glacier of pure Colombian rock. Simple pleasures. Oriental vixens desire liquidity. *No problema.*

Naturally, the rush didn’t last. Two hours later I was still in my special spot on the floor, blinking up at the overhead screens, doing a reading for a client—one of the few I’d never had the heart to blow off—named Mother Flor de Mayo, from the Grace Rural School. She was wondering whether to finally retire this year.

“¿Podré caminar después de la operación?” her old voice asked over the speakerphone.

“*Déme un momento,*” I said. I was having some trouble because her surgery was scheduled for the morning, and for some reason the Game had always seemed to work better on things that happened later in the day. “*Estoy dispersando estas semillas amarillas y las semillas negras—*”

Codex. The word had popped up in the high-priority Google Search window on my trading screen. I clicked it up. Usually if anything comes in it’s from a pretty obscure post, like the Foundation for Ancient Mesoamerican Research or the Cyberslugs Webring, but this was an article in *Time*:

An Ancient Book . . .

Whoa. Tzam lic.

That is, that sheet lightning under the skin.

An Ancient Book with Modern Relevance Comes to Light in Germany

The “Codex Nurnberg”—an eighty-page Mayan book that has been gathering dust and speculation in that city’s Germanisches Nationalmuseum since the 1850s—has, finally, been read.

The lead photo showed the top half of a page from a Maya codex, a delicate drawing of what they call Waterlily Jaguar sitting in a field of Classical-period-style glyphs. That is, the forms were pre-900 AD.

Ni modos. No way, I thought.

“¿Joaquinito? ¿Está allí?” Mother Flor’s voice asked.

“¿Madre? Perdóneme,” I said. “No estoy teniendo mucha suerte con las calaveras esta noche. ¿Usted piensa que podría venir mañana y la intentaremos otra vez?”

She said of course, dear. I said thanks and clicked off.

En todos modos.

I blew up the picture of the Codex—which, since the release of that pinnacle of human achievement called the Logitech laser mouse, I could do just by waving a finger—and zoomed in on the number glyphs. Hmm. The calligraphy looked a little post-Classic to me. It didn’t look like a forgery, though. Forgeries are usually either way bad or way too good. And from what I’d heard the Nurnberg book had a pretty clear provenance. People had been coming up with schemes for reading it for at least fifty years. Maybe it was a post-Classic copy of a Classic text—

Huh.

One of the date groups looked a little unsettling. I blew it up and enhanced it. It was fuzzy, but it seemed to be 7 Quetzal, 7 Snatch-bat, 12.19.17.7.7, that is, June 2, 2010 AD, which was the date of the particle accelerator implosion at the Universidad Tecnológica de la Mixteca in Oaxaca. Two members of a Tzotzil Zapatista group had gone to prison for sabotage, for supposedly somehow causing the thing, although I and every other right-thinking person thought they weren’t guilty. Aerial views of the blast site showed a shallowly scooped-out area over a half-mile across, lined with sand that had been fused into dark-green obsidian.

Hmm . . .

After it arrived in Europe from the New World, the fig-tree-bark pages of the book—possibly written more than a thousand years ago—fused together over the

centuries into what amounts to one solid brick. Researchers were unable, until now, to separate the accordion-folded pages due to the Mayan technique of priming the pages with gluelike compounds made from animal hides. The solution: the Scanning Tunneling Acoustic Microscope, or STAM, which “sees” ink through stuck pages.

“This is the biggest thing in our field since the discovery of the palaces at Cancuen in 2000,” gushed Professor Michael Weiner, a researcher in Mesoamerican Studies at the University of Central Florida and director of the decipherment project. “Only a few scraps of Mayan literature survived the Conquest,” he said, referring to the Spanish invasion of America that started around AD 1500.

Oh, *that* conquest of America.

The Codex (much of the contents of which will be published next year in the prestigious *Journal of Ethnographic Science*) is one of only four other Mayan “books” known to have survived the hands of Catholic religious authorities.

Weiner and his research team so far remain silent as to the exact content of the book’s glyphic text. However, rumors have spread through the tight-knit community of Mayan scholars that the book contains a drawing of a cross-shaped “divination layout,” a sort of game used to predict the future, and a string of eerily accurate predictions of actual catastrophic events, many of which occurred centuries after the book was written.

The Mayans, who flourished in Central America between AD 200 and their mysterious downfall around AD 900, were a highly advanced civilization with a complex writing system and a mastery of mathematics, astronomy, architecture, and engineering, as evidenced by the massive pyramids they built from

Honduras to Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula, now a chic vacation destination. More mysterious and unsettling was their unique spiritual life, which involved bloodletting rituals and human sacrifice, as well as an intricate system of interlocking calendars, which tracked stary events and predicted earthly ones far into the future. At least one of these dates has long been familiar to Mayan scholars and, in the last few years, has become known to many nonspecialists as well: December 21, 2012, or, as it is more popularly known, Four *Ahau*.

They meant *Kan Ahau, Ox K'ank'in*, or 4 Overlord, 3 Yellowness, 13.0.0.0.0. The old End of the World *bolazo* again. Dolts.

Maybe I should mention that I'd had a pretty big attitude problem about that date since about the seventh grade. People always asked me about it and I had to keep explaining that saying it's a doomsday thing was a huge, huge overinterpretation. The twenty-first was an important day, no question, but not necessarily the end of anything, let alone everything. It's only a big deal because there are a lot of deeply spiritual cretins out there, and they're disappointed by the lack of disasters at the turn of the Christian millennium and the fact that 9/11 took their gurus completely by surprise. So they're looking for another convenient deadline. Any time the world's going to end, church pledges go up. Because, you know, why save? It's an old scam ever young.

If you happen to be even one-eighth Native American, you already know how these airheads keep coming up to you and acting like you've got some kind of spiritual aura. If there's an Indian character in a movie, chances are twenty to one that he's got ESP at least, and probably telekinesis, hands of healing, and, somewhere, a third eye. And the 2012 thing is the worst. Everybody's got a different interpretation, and the only common denominator between them is that they're all wrong. The Maya tracked an asteroid that's going to crash into the earth on that date. The Maya left their cities and flew to Venus and that's the ETA of their return flight. The Maya knew that on that date there'd be a major earthquake, a volcanic eruption, a plague, a flash ice age, a drop in the sea level, or all five. They knew that on that date the earth's poles would reverse. On that date our yellow sun's going to go out and a blue sun will take its place. Quetzalcoatl is going to reemerge out of the transdi-

mensional vortex in a jade-green flying saucer. The all-flowering oneness of the universal sea-sky-earth-goddess-truth is going to autopropagate through the cosmic oom. Time will get back in its bottle. Aurochs and mastodons will stampede down I-95. The Lost Continent of Mu will rise up out of the Galápagos Fracture Zone. The true Madhi, Joseph Smith Jr., will appear on the Golan Heights wearing a U2 T-shirt. Shirley MacLaine will shed her human form and reveal herself as Minona/Minerva/Mama Cocha/Yoko/Mori/Mariammar/Mbabamuwana/Minihaha. Scarlett Johansson will give birth to a snow-white bison. The NASDAQ will hit 3,000. Pigs will fly, beggars will ride, boys will be boys . . .

Although, on the other hand, you had to admit that the exactness of the date, 12/21/12, does have a sinister specificity about it that gives you a queasy feeling. I mean, it's not like Nostradamus, where it's so vague you can make up anything and it seems to fit. Of course, we, I mean, we Maya, had always been pretty sure of ourselves.

This is the long-awaited last date of the Long Count, the Mayans' astonishingly accurate ritual calendar, which can be precisely correlated to days in the Christian one. A year from now, on this date, the current cycle of Mayan time comes to an end.

Weiner is dismissive of doomsday scenarios. "We weren't planning to release this until a year or so from now, after the twenty-first," he says. "People can get ridiculous, and besides, we wanted to finish the research." However, he says, "With all the speculation about the comet, we thought we'd release some of the interesting Ixchel-related findings."

Could the Mayans have timed their calendar to the appearances of Comet Ixchel? Its discoverers at Swinburne University, in New South Wales, who named their find after a Mayan goddess, clearly think so. Soon to be visible to the naked eye, Ixchel has a 5,125-year periodicity—or orbit—around the sun, meaning it was last seen in 3011 BC—Year One of the Mayan long-count calendar. If any ancient people

could have honed in on its return, that people were the Mayans. Determined doomsayers will need to find some other threat: The ball of rock and frozen gases will miss the earth by at least fifty thousand miles.

For the 2.3 million Mayans still living in Central America, the date betokens something nearer home: The twenty-first has also been set as a limit for talks in the renewed treaty effort between the small Central American state of Belize, a British protectorate, and the Republic of Guatemala, which in 2010, for the fourth time in a hundred years of disagreement, again claimed Belize as its twenty-third state, or *departamento*.

If the opportunity passes, the day might bring another era of disaster to the Mayans—but a resolution could begin a new era of peace in the troubled region.

U.S. efforts to aid the peace process have been complicated by the fact that the Mexican government has blamed a 2010 accelerator explosion in the Oaxacan city of Huajapan de León—in which over 30,000 people were killed—on Zapatist indigenous-rights groups, Indian revolutionaries operating out of Guatemala and Belize. But if the region is not stabilized, there's also media trouble ahead: Many observers fear that the International Olympic Committee might favor other sites than Belize for the 2020 Summer Games.

What clues are there in the Codex Nurnberg? Along with the astronomical data usual to Mayan texts, the book is said to mention both the date of the accelerator blast and a celestial event that could well be Comet Ixchel. Predicting the future based on images of “year-bearers” in the images of rabbits, centipedes . . .

Whoa.

The old squirt of tzam lic under my left thigh. Something wasn't right about that last word. *Centipedes*.

I couldn't get a grip on what it was, though, and of course the harder I tried the more it slipped away. Come back to that one later.

. . . centipedes, blue deer, and green jaguars may seem a bit far-fetched. Interpretation will be, to say the least, a long and difficult process.

Aside from the Codex, does the divination game itself have anything to teach us? Professor Taro Mora, a physicist and specialist in prediction models, who has been studying Mayan games with Weiner's help, clearly thinks so. Mora, a spry sixty-eight-year-old, who spends most of his eighteen-hour days "teaching computers to teach themselves," waxes enthusiastic over its potential.

"There is much to learn from ancient approaches to science," Mora says. "Just as we are using Go [an ancient Japanese strategy game] to help computers develop basic consciousness, we may use other games to teach them other things."

Way to go, Tar babe. That's the way to wax, if you want to wax at all.

Asked whether the game held any insights about the world's eventual end, Mora joked, "No, but if the universe does disappear, at least we will know the Maya were onto something."

Could the End Date foretell an unhappy event for the Mayan region, or even for the entire world? And if so, what should we do about it?

Many people's answer seems to be, "When on Mayan time, do as the Mayans do." Thousands of visitors from all over the world, and from all walks of life, are already planning trips to Chichén Itzá and other popular Mayan sites, waiting to salute the comet, greet the dawn, and ask the old gods for another five

thousand-plus years for humanity. And while most of us wouldn't go that far, we should be willing to entertain the possibility that the mysterious Mayans had far-reaching spiritual insights into their future—and, possibly, our own.

Pendejos, I thought. Morons.

No, wait. *I'm* the moron.

The minute—well, the decade—that I leave Taro alone, he comes up with the goods. I felt like I'd held a stock for thirty years and sold it just before it took off.

Well, I thought, I certainly can't just wait until you decide to publish. I need to see that game board this minute. This second. This picosecond.

I searched up Taro's page. It said he was at the University of Central Florida, and that the lab was now being sponsored by grants from the UCF Corporate Exchange Program. And funding for the UCFCEP—as I found with only minimal snooping—had come from the catastrophe modeling team of the Simulated Trades Division of the Warren Investment Group. I remembered the company because it was a big employer in Salt Lake, and I'd seen in *Barron's* that it had had some ethics problems with an alternate-energy thing a few years ago. Well, whatever.

I tried Taro's old filter password. It still worked and got me into his personal box. I couldn't come up with some other excuse for writing, so I just wrote that I'd seen the article and wondered if I could come by soon, like, say, later today. "Send," I said. It sent.

Estas bien. I switched the screens to tank monitor mode. It said the Gulf tank was low on calcium, but I didn't have the energy to deal with it. Maybe he won't write back, I thought. No, he would. One of the good things about now is how you can lose track of someone for years and then get back in touch in a trice. Or even a half a trice. Except you also need to come up with more excuses.

Hmm. 4 Ahau. 12/21/12. So it's a big deal again.

Well, just wait until the twenty-second. Nothing gets old faster than an apocalypse that didn't happen.

Right?