

May 2008 | Volume 17 | Number 4

# Men's Journal

**Get Fit  
Or Die  
Trying**

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RIDING  
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A JOURNEY  
INTO PERU'S  
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# Down the Monkey

by

BUCKY MCMAHON

photographs by

JOSHUA PAUL

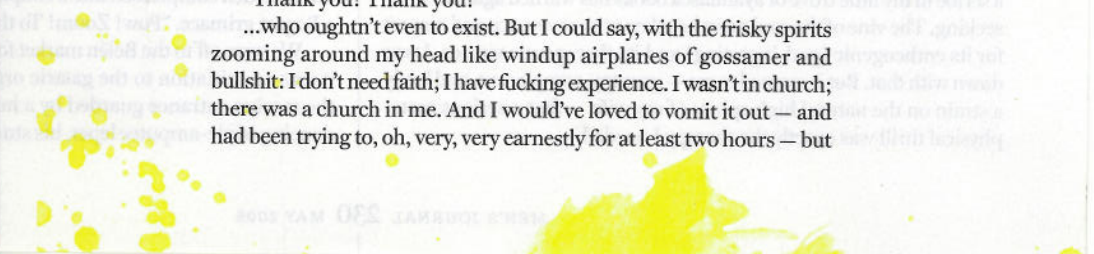
# HOLE

Deep in the Peruvian Amazon, the locals make a wicked brew they call ayahuasca. It's a hallucinogenic strong enough to knock a man to the ground — and, it's said, open a door to another realm. Our writer went in search of this ancient drug to see for himself.

I WAS ON MY KNEES IN THE DIRT, POSSESSED BY A KIND OF religious Tourette's syndrome. "I accept!" I muttered. "I accept! I accept!" What I apparently meant to accept was the ineffable and the intolerable, the heartbreaking and hilarious *responsibility* of simultaneously starring in, directing, and watching a surrealist romantic horror comedy about a poor son of a bitch who loves his life and worships his wife but is trapped in a dark crazy jungle on his knees at the mercy of an ancient Peruvian vine goddess...

"Thank you! Thank you!"

...who oughtn't even to exist. But I could say, with the frisky spirits zooming around my head like windup airplanes of gossamer and bullshit: I don't need faith; I have fucking experience. I wasn't in church; there was a church in me. And I would've loved to vomit it out — and had been trying to, oh, very, very earnestly for at least two hours — but





I just couldn't get rid of that last little bit, the aftertaste of puked ayahuasca, vine of the dead. Nausea tacked me to the ground.

"I accept! I accept!" I said.

As I acquiesced it shifted once again, something gigantic, shaggy, so earthy as to seem otherworldly. It was the medicine itself, and I could still hear the shaman, a few paces away on the ceremonial platform, singing its praises in a lilting dirge: "*Gentle ayahuasca; tranquila ayahuasca; buena medicina ayahuasca.*" When my companions and I drank the brew, maybe three hours before — our second ceremony in three days — we'd gambled on getting that "gentle ayahuasca," the "*buena medicina ayahuasca.*" For some reason this time I'd gotten *el susto* ayahuasca, throttling ayahuasca, the huge constricting snake goddess ayahuasca.

I licked my dried lips and felt my tongue prickle with sparks of electricity. That was very distressing. Was I overheating at the electrolytic level, starting to short out? All that held me together, as a coherent narrative prattler, was an exhausting tautology. I kept saying in my head, I know! I know! Which was incredibly stupid. I was what I knew. But I didn't know anything. I no longer even knew what the word meant.

It was time for the business at hand, which was Family. I was working my way backward, involuntarily. By fits and starts. In images. Snapshots. Holographs. Spooky voices. Visceral reactions. Symbols. Tokens. Venerable cars and appliances. Everything seemed to be heading back to Tallulah Falls, Georgia, and my philandering paternal grandpa who'd worked for the power company at the dam. Crazy Pat Joe. I know! I know!

But...oh God, no! The medicine was coming on strong again. I'd swallowed a buffalo! I felt a mounting excitement akin to terror, as if something were massaging my amygdala while banging a bass drum inside my chest. Another wave of nausea convulsed me. There was nothing left in me, but I strained forward, throat closed, eyeballs bulging, unable to breathe, finally sputtering, gasping, spitting. Oh God, oh fuck! I began to pant for air, breathing like a bird, shallow, rapid breaths, and never enough oxygen. On the verge of fainting, I gaped my jaws wide and drew in a long, howling inhalation like a death rattle.

"I accept!" I hissed between clenched teeth.

FOR YEARS I'D BEEN CURIOUS ABOUT AYAHUASCA, THE MOTHER of all hallucinogens. Its origins may reach back to the Stone Age, to the primitive mind already astute at whipping up a bit of entertainment from unpromising elements. Ethnobotanists consider the

## Peter had advice for dealing with imaginary monsters. "So it's 1,500 feet tall. Become 2,000 feet tall! If you don't like the looks of something, blow it away!"

ayahuasca brew a miracle of trial and error on a par with those chimpanzees typing Shakespeare. It's a combination of two basically inert plants, a giant vine and an innocuous-looking shrub, whose commingling creates a compound remarkably similar to serotonin, the wonder of indigenous pharmacology. It is said to be a doorway to another realm, of things supernal, needing only to be met halfway to wholly exist. Reality with a capital R, in a word, with the blinders ripped off.

At any rate, no one who has tried it — in the literature I've read — has been unimpressed. No one has said it was fun, either. Indeed, many a scribe in my little trove of ayahuasca books has warned against thrill-seeking. The vine of the soul must be taken with reverence and respect for its entheogenic (god-ingesting) and its therapeutic virtues. I was down with that. But it seemed to me — grumpy, complacent, and lately a strain on the natural high spirits of my wife — that a serious metaphysical thrill was exactly the therapy I needed.

It wasn't hard to find a source. Ayahuasca has spread through the Web like kudzu. And so, late one night — like everyone else in the group, it turned out — I started double-clicking and signed up for a three-ceremony tour in Peru. Soon there we all were, a pack of psychotropic tourists converging at a cafe in the heart of Iquitos. It was early Saturday morning, and the town center was filling up with characters, not the least colorful of whom was our tour leader Peter Gorman, recovering from a rough Friday night that had ended in barroom fisticuffs. Peter assured us, in his Queens-accented smoker's growl, that we were already absorbing information pertinent to our quest. As if on cue, wild-looking hombres stepped forward out of the passing crowd offering jaguar-teeth necklaces and snakeskin fetishes, while old Indian



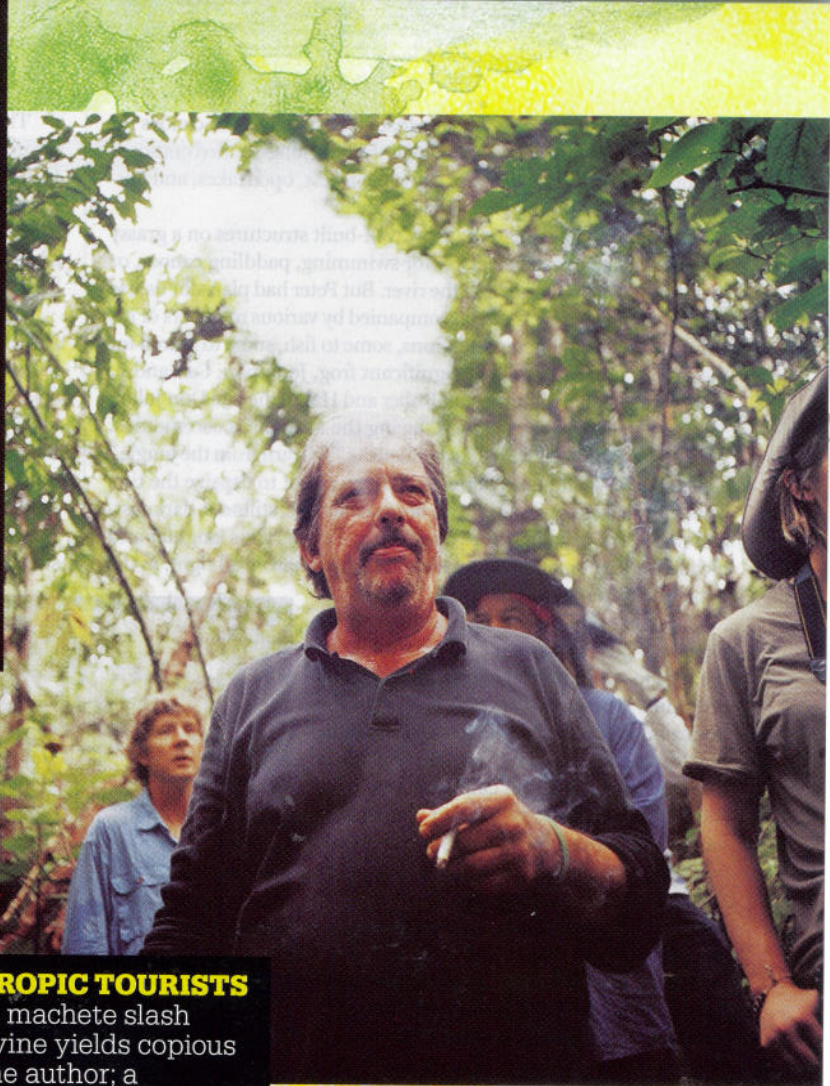
women with impenetrable eyes held up brilliantly colored cloths hand-embroidered with phantasmal patterns. "Ayahuasca," they murmured.

In a cloud of cigarette smoke the epically garrulous Gorman, a former editor in chief of *High Times* and artifact hunter for the American Museum of Natural History, told stories from three

decades of knocking around Iquitos, striking out deeper and deeper into the jungle and into the weird inner worlds of ayahuasca. About 20 years ago he'd met his mentor, Don Julio, one of Peru's more prominent shamans, or *curanderos*. Before his death at 96, Julio saved many lives as a healer; whether by medicine or magic, it didn't matter. And as an Ayahuasquero, Julio was an artist; he played the ceremony as if it were a vast church organ, bringing this participant to the heights, bringing that one back down to earth. For the gringos Peter takes into the jungle (he's led about 20 shamanic tours since 1998), "*el remedio*" offers a kind of quick, intensive form of psychotherapy. "Like 10 years on the couch compressed into a couple of hours," Peter told us, smiling a Bogart grimace. "Pow! Zoom! To the moon!"

We were off to the Belén market for further information. Certainly it was an initiation to the gastric organ of the Iquitos body politic, the market entrance guarded by a human Cerberus — a spry break-dancing triple-amputee leper, his stumps wrapped in dirty bandages.





On we filed past caiman tails glistening on the slab, snake heads impaled on stakes, and prehistoric sucker fish semi-alive in woven laundry baskets. On past cauldrons of steaming grubs, which most of us sampled; the texture was like chicken skin with a creamy filling. On past dozens of booths of homeopathic cures, like the herbal Levante Lazaro (Lazarus raiser), the original Viagra. Always with something underfoot not to step in, the frenetic press of humanity all around, and in the air above a thousand vultures in silent peristalsis. Climbing to the roof of a derelict-but-occupied two-story dwelling for an overview of the market, we learned from the señora that the buzzards roosting there were useful birds. *Sí, sí, los zopilotes*. You could cut their throats and drink their blood as a treatment for epilepsy. Rough medicine for a tough place.

In all we had three days to become acclimated, and we were getting to know one another, bonding as a team. There was little Cassandra, a shade over five feet tall and just 19, taking a semester off from her New York City college, expanding her horizons radically. Ashley, 25, superfit and flat-out gorgeous, had suffered a concussion playing college basketball that still gave her migraines and was hoping for a cure. Mike from Ohio had a real job writing computer programs. Ras, 59, the irascible Rastafarian, dreads dangling to his waist, voiced alternative theories of everything — the Egyptians were the original inhabitants of Ireland, and so forth — which made conversation challenging. Christine (not her real name), 35, smart, sweet, and quiet, was a yoga instructor who thought the medicine might help her overcome a lifetime of shyness. Little John — “Joven” — had the angelic demeanor of a devout Presbyterian minister, though in fact he’d been a commercial real estate attorney in South Florida. Divorced and semiretired from a straitlaced workaholic lifestyle, he was on a quest to reconnect with himself. Jonathan, 44, handsome and outgoing, an actor/writer/producer who was traveling on an open ticket and believed the “medicine” would help him prepare for his next project. Jerry, also mid-40s, seemed to know everything, revealed nothing (his name wasn’t really Jerry), and found it all hilarious. I thought of him as Genius Jerry.

By the time we arrived at the rough-and-tumble Iquitos docks to catch the 5 PM riverboat that would take us up the Amazon, we were all pretty comfortable with one another. Joining the jostling throng crossing the gangplank, we boarded the teeming triple-decker Don Jose lugging supplies for a week. From the deck the waterfront looked like the set of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, all the buildings tilted crazily,

### PSYCHOTROPIC TOURISTS

From left: A machete slash to a jungle vine yields copious water for the author; a guide paddles a dugout near camp; Peter Gorman leads the hunt for ayahuasca plants.

losing the battle against gravity. The whistle blew, the engines rumbled to life, and the crowd ashore opened fire with a barrage of water balloons, a Peruvian passion. We were under way.

“I can’t think of a better adventure than this,” Genius Jerry said, and I had to agree. Where we were going might not be unexplored territory anymore, the threat of jaguars and poisoned darts a thing of the past, but we were headed to a Heart of Darkness of another sort. **HERE BE DRAGONS**, as the ancient maps used to say. I was counting on seeing a few.

SOMETIME AFTER SUNSET, AS WE SAT ON THE DECK, SOMEBODY passed around a bag of magic mushrooms, and because sleep seemed unlikely anyway, and because, well, hell, this was Drug Camp, most of us munched a few. For a while everybody got very witty, every story was hilarious. Trickster George, one of Peter’s Peruvian crew, bopped by doing a Monty Python funny walk, giving us gringos the thumbs-up. Jonathan told me about taking San Pedro cactus in Cuzco with an incompetent shaman who got them lost in a freezing high-altitude rainstorm. They ended up huddled in a cave for hours and hours.

At some point Ohio Mike started feeling “really strange” and crashed on a foam pad on the forward end of the deck, wrestling with his demons. Peter was sacked out next to him. Hours melted by. We shifted from chair to chair, chatting and laughing, less and less, and then everyone just settled down to watch the intricacies of the trees on the bank, the fractal patterns in the roiling chocolate wake of the boat.

We reached Genaro Herrera, 130 miles upriver from Iquitos, an hour before dawn. We hustled ashore to wait six hours in the sleepy market square for the police to wake up, collect our passports, mull the possibilities of minor extortion, and finally release us to the bush.



At last we set out in two badly overloaded 20-foot dugout canoes for the river Aucayacu, *peque-peque*-ing (as the local long-shafted outboard motors are called) up a maze of drowned forest, open lakes, and narrow passages overhung with foliage.

Our camping destination, a few well-built structures on a grassy hillside, turned out to be perfect for swimming, paddling canoes, or just chilling out and watching the river. But Peter had plans for us. He sent everyone out that night, accompanied by various members of his Peruvian crew, on different missions, some to fish, some to search for the sapo, a pharmaceutically significant frog. Jonathan, Cassandra, and I went caiman hunting with Ruber and Hairo, the late Don Julio's son who was to be our shaman during the ayahuasca ceremonies. Throughout the hunt we had to be silent — "To learn from the jungle," as Peter said — and hold perfectly still, so as not to capsize the tiny canoe. We lasted for just over two hours of silence, stillness, darkness, and no sign of caiman before convulsing with nervous laughter and pleading with our guides to turn back. It was a lesson, all right, in the native attention span.

The next day we fasted, and though we were kept pleasantly occupied with a hike in the jungle, a trip to a lake to swim with pink dolphins, "the medicine" was always in the forefront of our minds. We had observed the ingredients harvested by machete. We'd seen them boiling in an iron cauldron on a back section of the property, the pot watched by various children and elders, the mood pot-side oddly like at a tailgate party. We were as ready for game time as we'd ever be.

WE ALL GATHERED IN THE COCINA JUST after dark for a final briefing. Peter was in a festive mood. He could already feel the spirits gathering. "It's gonna be a party!" he roared. "Chullachaqui's coming." (He meant something like an Amazonian imp.) He told us that sometimes the spirits acted up like poltergeists and made cigarette lighters explode. We listened, rapt, glancing at one another in the candlelight.

"We're going to tear down the curtain to another world," Peter said. "We're like thieves, peeking into windows. Things are gonna be looking back." He had plenty of advice for dealing with imaginary monsters: "So it's 1,500 feet tall. Become 2,000 feet tall! If you don't like the looks of something, just blow it away — poof! But don't be too quick to judge. You might ask, 'Are you my teacher?' Maybe it is. Above all, don't be afraid to let it get weird. It's what you came here for. Trust that the medicine was well made in a good place with women and laughing children."

I thought Peter might end his lecture on that happy thought, but he had one more thing to add: "Sometimes, though, like Julio used to say, you just gotta grab your balls, 'cause you're going down the monkey hole!"

We trooped to the ceremonial *palapa*, a big thatched-roof hut, open on the sides, with plank floors. Hairo the shaman, illuminated by copal torch light, was already seated in his wooden chair, his magical implements at hand — a bundle of mapacho cigarettes, his shacapa leaf rattle, and the ayahuasca itself, a turbid brown sludge in a plastic Inca Kola bottle. While we settled into place on cushions, Peter, George, and Ruber carried out some further hocus-pocus, marching around the hut, Peter muttering incantations, spraying mouthfuls of *agua florida*, puffing a mapacho, closing the *arkana*, the sacred circle, against unwanted *demonios*.

Then, like a young surgeon choosing a scalpel, Hairo scrutinized his mapachos, lit one up, puffed, and began praying. In his late 20s, Hairo was just starting out in the magic business. He was no Julio yet. Peter compared him to a young black belt. He still had a lot to learn, but he had "great powers of concentration, a good heart, and a beautiful singing voice." I know I was rooting for his powers as he lifted the bottle of medicine and blew smoke into it.

Peter stood at his elbow and named the first communicant: "Jerry." Hairo mulled over the name and poured out a portion into a tin coffee cup. Ruber brought the draft to Jerry, along with a bottle of *agua florida*, for anointing one's body, and another bottle of mixed essences to be sniffed, and a flask of Tabu perfume — the goddess's favorite — to be dabbed on the wrists. Jerry held his nose. Bottoms up! So it went, solemnly, laboriously, all around the circle. I didn't hold my nose. I thought I ought to taste it, the first time at least. It was like a lukewarm smoothie made from the scrapings of the underside of an old, old lawn mower. Like a cow's cud, maybe, like the whole jungle, chewed and regurgitated. Vile enough. When we'd all drunk, the torches were doused, and we sat in darkness, waiting for the shit to kick in.

Hairo began to sing his *icaró*, the sacred song the plants had taught him. "*Ayahuasca, ayahuasca, cuida monge, ayahuasca.*" The words were either Spanish, Quechua, or of Hairo's own invention, but the melody was universal. It was the saddest song I'd ever heard, a song of bittersweet reconciliation with pitiless nature. There was no mercy here. None needed. Laugh or weep, it didn't matter. And all the while he shook the shacapa, a sound like a rattlesnake — the *shhh-shhh-shhh* sound of a slasher-film soundtrack. At first, for a long while, the sound was localized around Hairo. Then it seemed to jump all around the hut. When it moved inside your head, you knew the trip was starting.

One by one those who had drunk first staggered to their feet and were escorted from the platform. Those who remained, seated or sprawled on the cushions, could hear the violent retching. I couldn't help chortling — not as funny as farting, but funny still. But it was like a contagion and I was swept up, onto my feet, which felt far away, my legs like rubber. "Sometimes if she wants to teach you a lot she'll take your whole body away," Peter had said. I put my arm around George's shoulders and staggered off to the vomitorium, a gentle slope of sparse grass and dirt. "Here?" I asked. "*Sí. Aquí.*" I knelt down before an ornate little altar of sepia-colored ceramic tiles, a personal apparition that was wherever I wanted it to be.

I couldn't believe the heroic retching going on all around me. Whoever was nearby sounded like a sick bullfrog the size of a gorilla. *Brrrargh! Mrrrargh!* She was Queen of the Frogs, Ayahuasca, and I was on my knees, croaking with the best of them. When the first wave of nausea passed and I opened my eyes again, I saw a two-foot dwarf and his even shorter sister standing by my elbow regarding me dispassionately. "I don't know if you guys are real or not, but do you have any toilet paper?" I said, cracking myself up. They apparently didn't. I closed my eyes again. Against a vivid egg yolk-yellow background, images began to pop like firecrackers, coming into view to the beat of the shacapas. Struttingimps. Clowns. Banal logos for nonexistent products. The head of an Indian with the body of a grub in the form of a bus, trucking down a highway. Beautiful mouths. Mouths with too many



#### IMAGES FROM A TRIP

The author sketched what he saw during the first ceremony: Peter grafted onto a tree (top), and an Indian grub/bus.



**THE SHAMAN** Hairo, shortly before the second ceremony. Near him are the "medicine," sniffing essences, leafy rattles, and, naturally, Tabu perfume – a goddess favorite.





teeth. A giraffe with bandaged shins — from banging into coffee tables! The Belén market. Those grubs again. Insects. An infestation. No, no. Poof! Beat it! I wanted beautiful things.

The question was: Were the images coming from me or from Ayahuasca? Damn but I was too excited to tell. I was being turned inside out as fast as the outside was rushing in. There was no person except the one in solution, as it were, with the air and the earth. Though I might be nothing much, a bit of rag buffeted by the cosmos and pierced at every threadbare point, experience accrued, like bugs on a grill. I had history. I had problems. God help me!

I could hear Hairo singing a particularly lilting melody that sounded soft and wet and all about sex. The pussy passage, I called it, and it held somehow my personal history of love — a tone poem of ecstatic triumphs and cruel abandonments, the wake of hurt feelings and tears an ordinary man leaves in his career as a prick. And it was within that field of eroticism and responsibility that Ayahuasca began to instruct me. Bummer. But that's where my head was. I'd had a fight with my wife the morning I'd left for Peru and I had it coming.

I saw them then, the lovely lovelies, as I called them, redundantly. Girls and youths on sunny hills of daffodils, flirting. They were the jewels of the earth. As for me, I would never be young again. Ah, no, never. But I saw my wife, radiantly beautiful, opening her arms to me. We had chosen each other as lovely lovelies, she, me, despite the disastrous distance — from everything! — that was the curse and the gift I was born with. We'd hit a rough patch, as they say, over the holidays. I'd let the breach get too wide, my chilly distance, and she'd hardened against that absence in defense, causing me to retreat farther. I understood, under the duress of the medicine, that it was all my fault. It was my *responsibility*. Reverse the cycle. Okay. I would. Yes! A quadrillion times yes! Just let me live, Ayahuasca, and I'll do whatever you say.

So there and then, in the darkness of the vomitorium, I married my wife all over again.

Corny. I know! I know! But that wasn't all. There was still something hard in me that had to be broken down. I had to be completely humbled. I also really, really had to take a crap. I opened my eyes and good old Trickster George was standing by, an amused look on his face. "No puedo caminar," I said — I can't walk — and cracked up again. "Baño?" he said, chuckling in turn. "Sí, baño."

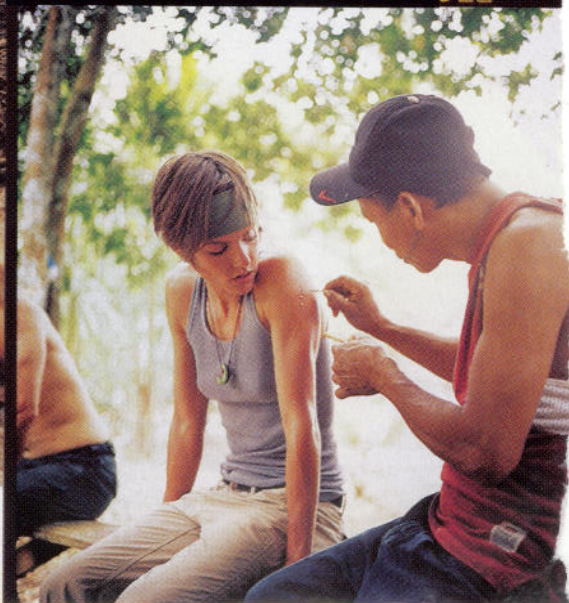
Eventually I made it to the safety of the ceremonial platform and my long-abandoned cushion. Hairo was still singing, still shaking his shacapa. I sang along quietly for awhile, watching the last images fade, feeling the medicine leaving me. The singing stopped at last. Ruber approached Hairo and asked, "Cómo están la gente?" How are the people? "La gente son tranquila," Hairo answered. The people are calm.

IN THE MORNING WE BATHED IN THE RIVER — "GOOD! CLOSES the corona," Peter said. "Keeps the spirits from getting back in your head" — and then gathered in the *cocina* to compare war stories. Young Cassandra had thrown up and bled from one nostril but hadn't felt much otherwise. Ashley had asked for a second cup. The young women were made of stern stuff. Most of us had been under the spell for about three hours, though Peter had seen it last all night and into the next day. I told Genius Jerry about the clowns and comic images I'd seen. He pushed his glasses into place and smiled knowingly. "Yeah, for some reason She seems to like that sinister clown stuff." As for himself, he'd had a delightful time, playing with spirits, swinging from vines. He'd even handled the goddess herself, in the form of a flirtatious snake. He'd suffered no distress at all.

Jerry was *evolved*. Christine hadn't had any big breakthrough. Ohio Mike had suffered mighty dyspepsia. Ras was ashen, uncommunicative. I felt, well, quietly improved. I'm not touchy-feely, but I made a point of touching everybody — the cook, the washerwoman — whether they liked it or not. Whether they liked me or not. Nobody had seen Jonathan yet, but some of us had heard him thrashing about on the grounds, still suffering, until just before dawn.

I thought we'd have a quiet day, but then Pepe, a Matsés Indian, arrived, leading a flotilla of dugout canoes full of his wife, her sisters, and their children, and carrying a little pouch of jungle amuse-

**DRUG CAMP** From left: The author strikes a familiar pose, post-sapo; Ashley gets saped by Pepe, a Matsés Indian leader; Peter gets jungle snuff blown up his nose.





ment. He brought sapo: frog slime. The day before, someone had brought a live sapo into camp. It was a formidable frog, brilliant green and the size of a man's hand. The Indians catch them, string them up on a wooden frame, and then tickle them so that they excrete a copious slick of defensive slime. This is collected on a stick, where it congeals like wax while retaining its intoxicating power. It is administered subcutaneously to the capillaries, once they are exposed by a quick jab from a burning pointed ember. Indians use it before a hunt, claiming it sharpens their senses. Peter claims to have been the first known white man to try sapo, a complex chemical compound currently of interest to modern medicine. And would we like to try it?

Well, it seemed unlikely we'd ever have another chance. A crowd of locals gathered around a shaded bench to see how the gringos fared. Trickster George volunteered to demonstrate that it wasn't fatal. Pepe poked him twice with a smoldering stick, then rubbed open the little burns. To these spots he applied a tiny dab of sapo. As we watched, George flushed red, his chest heaved, a look of worry crossed his face. "And he's a warrior," Christine said, expressing all our concern. The spell lasted less than 15 minutes, and then the grinning George was back.

Jerry went next. He got whacked. Turned sheet-white, blubber-lipped. Ras fainted outright and tumbled from the bench. Then came my turn. It felt like being microwaved, roasted from the inside. You go far away, like you do with a high fever, and then you come back. Poor Jerry, who looked as if he were turning into a sapo, was a huge hit with the kids, who were doubled over with giggles. He kept saying, "What? What?" until we were all howling.

And they say there's nothing to do in the bush.

DURING THE FIRST AYAHUASCA CEREMONY, WHILE I WAS PUKING, I'd told myself: Okay, now you've tried it. Never again. But I'd recognized even then that it was just a survival mechanism. When you're nauseated you'll tell yourself that you'll never again imbibe whatever made you sick. It is the whole point of nausea. It didn't mean you couldn't change your mind. And I had. By the time we'd gathered again in the *cocina*, with the second ceremony only moments away, I was just as excited as I'd been the first time, only



maybe more nervous. A little more respectful and reverent, even. Peter told us that each time could be different, that if you'd had a lot of purging and suffering the first time, the next time could be all light and beautiful visions. I was really hoping for that.

We took our places again on the cushions, veterans now of Hairo's brew. Christine, who was on my left, gave me a hug, and we wished each other luck. Jonathan was on my right. We clapped each other on the back: "Good luck, man."

We drank, and Hairo sang, shook the shacapas. The eerie *shhh-*

## Accepting didn't do any good. I was going down the monkey hole anyway. My pulse rate soared, and the panting became life-and-death desperate.

*shhh-shhh* sound jumped into my head. It was like the first trip on fast-forward. Everything rushing, twitching. The air was thick with spirits — or something — buzzing, muttering. I staggered out and fell to my knees in the vomitorium and panted.

"I accept!" I said.

Like I had any choice. Accepting didn't do any good. I was going down the monkey hole anyway. My pulse rate soared, and the panting became life-and-death desperate, as if I were sprinting just steps ahead of a locomotive. Yet even then there was a part of my mind that was coldly alert, watching. That rational voice said, *Okay, dude, maybe it's time to go ahead and panic. I think you're about to have a heart attack.* I was going to die, and in the morning they'd find me, cold and stiff and ridiculous.

No, don't panic! I told myself.

*Idiot! You are panicking. This is what panic feels like.*

That seemed somehow to calm me a little. I seemed to catch my breath for a moment. It was possible I might hold on a little longer. Second by second.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I looked up out of my delirium. Trickster George. "*Malo*," he said.

What? Evil? "*Malo*," he said again, squatting beside me. He brushed his hand across the dirt. "*Hormigas*," he said. Ants.

Oh fucking great. But all right. Hanging onto George, I clumped back to my cushion. Jonathan, I saw, hadn't moved all night. Christine was already sitting up, coming out of it. I flopped over onto my side and assumed the fetal position. I seemed to be wrestling with the spirit of my long-dead grandfather and his multigenerational legacy of woe. Compassion! That was the only help. Meanwhile, my bowels were bubbling and squeaking. I was in imminent danger of shitting myself and latched onto the goal of not doing so.

"*Cómo están la gente*," I heard Ruber say to Hairo some minutes later. "*La gente son tranquila.*"

Not really. The medicine held me for another couple of hours of rushes and panting spells, and then at last seemed to come to some conclusion, a final vision of a desolate windswept crag. A Golgotha. Place of the skull. The world without me. Dear me. When I could finally sit up, everyone was long gone. Even Hairo was asleep on his mat nearby under mosquito netting. My efforts to stand up roused him and he was quickly at my side. "*Baño?*" he asked.

THE BIRDS WERE ALREADY TWITTERING IN THE GRAY LIGHT BY the time I made it to my bed. I lay awake waiting for everyone to get up. For some reason, I was eager to tell my tale. Dude, I've been down the monkey hole! I'd been down it and was never going back. I was like a new convert to AA or NA or any A you wanted. I told Jerry the whole story in as much detail as I could muster. He listened patiently, pushed his glasses up, and smiled. "It sounds like you experienced the 'little death.' It's a commonly reported phenomenon with ayahuasca."

The little death, eh. Commonly reported. That was somehow oddly deflating. It was also the first chink (continued on page 267)



in my resolve to never touch the medicine again. After all, we still had one more ceremony on our schedule, back in Iquitos.

That night, our last at the camp, Peter threw a party for the whole bush neighborhood, anybody who could paddle round the bend or *peque-peque* from miles away. He gave away all the food we hadn't eaten and poured the *aguardiente* with a liberal hand. There was even a band that knew maybe three songs for pennywhistle and drums — catchy tunes all, and perfect for the local style of dancing, which was almost like marching. We were a long way from home, and many of the locals were soon quite intoxicated. Whenever the music stopped you could hear a strange wind blowing through the trees, but the leaves weren't moving and in fact there was no breeze. Peter said it must be spirits.

After a night on the riverboat we were back in Iquitos in a fleabag hotel. I ran into Hairo in the lobby that afternoon, and with help from Ohio Mike, who was pretty fluent, I asked the shaman if he'd *seen* anything, you know, *maló* hovering around me at the last ceremony. He said, Mike said, that he hadn't seen anything, but had been aware of my struggle — *mi lucha*. *Lucha* was right. I arranged for a quickie "cleansing," a sort of exorcism — one *icaro's* worth, for 20 soles, about seven bucks. Hairo sat me down and broke out his *mapachos*, his *shacapas*, and he sang that sad song that I loved. He blew smoke at me and made a sound like *buhbuhbuh* as he sucked at the top of my head. Get 'em all, man, I thought.

The next day we traveled out of town by van for the final ceremony, hiking in about a mile from the highway to the botanical reserve and shamanic retreat called Sachamama ("the mother spirit"). It was a pretty place in a patch of upland jungle, quite rustic, with lots of very skinny cats and even skinnier Europeans dressed as if they were in Rishikesh. There was nothing to eat, since everyone was fasting for the ceremony, and nothing to drink but a flavorless tea. I couldn't help wondering if there was some sort of bulimia cult thing going on here.

The Sachamama brew was supposed to be dynamite, Peter said. Less vine and more shrub. (Hairo tended to go heavy on vine, he told us now.) So if we hadn't gotten it yet, we were sure to "get it" tonight. It seemed we were all more than a little afraid of that, everybody tiptoeing around and whispering, except Ras. Like me, Ras had gone monkey hole last time, but unlike me, he'd prudently stayed behind in Iquitos.

At last it was full dark and time to head to the ceremony. Our group filed in with half a dozen other pilgrims, those staying in the isolated jungle bungalows and doing the *Dieta*, the monthlong fasting retreat, and we all took seats on long high-backed benches. These were a great innovation. Instead of staggering to the vomitorium, all you had to do was twist around and puke. The shaman Francisco Montes and his assistant Rachel approached the communicants, blessing each, anointing each, and checking their pulses for, I think, potential cardiac cases. Smart. Then we were called in turn to the altar to drink from a gourd cup. I tried to quaff my portion in a gulp, but had to gulp again, and barely kept it down.

The two shamans sang beautifully. They shook their *shacapas* and the darkness began to bustle and shimmer. I heard Ohio Mike, who was sitting next to me, whimper, then groan. Peter was right there, asking, "You okay, Mike? You okay?" But no, Mike was not okay. He was just getting started. Across the room Christine squeaked, "I don't want to do this." And Peter rushed to comfort her, his murmured voice, the ur-parental voice every child hears in his bedroom late at night: It'll all be all right. Then Mike was heaving over the back of the bench, crying, "Oh God! Help me!"

I was just eyes and ears. I wouldn't go anywhere in my head that I'd been before. I couldn't prevent the Tourette's when a wave broke through me, but it was more a cringing politeness, like "Thank you! No more for me. That'll be fine." I tried to watch the stirring darkness, the twittering microbial lights. It really was alive, a fairyland, but I couldn't bear those fairies. The seductive suction of them. I was *way* too high. All my fingers were palsied, twitching. My right arm felt hot and stiff, as if encased in horn. Beside me, Mike was now thrashing, sounding as if he were dying.

Then Christine piped up, in a high beautiful voice like birdsong. "I get it!" she said. "It's so beautiful! I love my life! I love it! Thank you! Thank you!"

Everybody came out of wherever they were and clapped. We loved Christine. I loved Christine. I loved her. I loved poor Mike. And beautiful Ashley. And Peter and Jerry and Jonathan and Joven and Cassandra and Ras. I loved the whole group like family. But —

— I was over the back of the bench, roaring to the jungle. This was the big one, the real thing, the Purge. There was something in me that had no name, that was beyond good and evil, nature and the supernatural. To know it was to puke it, and to puke it was to puke again.

Out!

Out!

Out!

I was done.

Thank you! ☺

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