

**“Fear of knowledge is natural; all of us experience it,
and there is nothing we can do about it. But no matter
how frightening learning is, it is more terrible to think
of a man without knowledge.”**

—don Juan Matus

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Journey to Ixtlan

THE LESSONS
OF DON JUAN

by
CARLOS CASTANEDA



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INTRODUCTION

ON SATURDAY, MAY 22, 1971, I went to Sonora, Mexico, to see don Juan Matus, a Yaqui Indian sorcerer, with whom I had been associated since 1961. I thought that my visit on that day was going to be in no way different from the scores of times I had gone to see him in the ten years I had been his apprentice. The events that took place on that day and on the following days, however, were momentous to me. On that occasion my apprenticeship came to an end. This was not an arbitrary withdrawal on my part but a bona fide termination.

I have already presented the case of my apprenticeship in two previous works: *The Teachings of Don Juan* and *A Separate Reality*.

My basic assumption in both books has been that the articulation points in learning to be a sorcerer were the states of nonordinary reality produced by the ingestion of psychotropic plants.

In this respect don Juan was an expert in the use of three such plants: *Datura innoxia*, commonly known as jimson weed; *Lophophora williamsii*, known as peyote; and a hallucinogenic mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*.

My perception of the world through the effects of those psychotropics had been so bizarre and impressive that I was forced to assume that such states were the only avenue to communicating and learning what don Juan was attempting to teach me.

That assumption was erroneous.

For the purpose of avoiding any misunderstandings

about my work with don Juan I would like to clarify the following issues at this point.

So far I have made no attempt whatsoever to place don Juan in a cultural milieu. The fact that he considers himself to be a Yaqui Indian does not mean that his knowledge of sorcery is known to or practiced by the Yaqui Indians in general.

All the conversations that don Juan and I have had throughout the apprenticeship were conducted in Spanish, and only because of his thorough command of the language was I capable of obtaining complex explanations of his system of beliefs.

I have maintained the practice of referring to that system as sorcery and I have also maintained the practice of referring to don Juan as a sorcerer, because these were categories he himself used.

Since I was capable of writing down most of what he said in the beginning of the apprenticeship, and everything that was said in the later phases of it, I gathered voluminous field notes. In order to render those notes readable and still preserve the dramatic unity of don Juan's teachings, I have had to edit them, but what I have deleted is, I believe, immaterial to the points I want to raise.

In the case of my work with don Juan I have limited my efforts solely to viewing him as a sorcerer and to acquiring *membership* in his knowledge.

For the purpose of presenting my argument I must first explain the basic premise of sorcery as don Juan presented it to me. He said that for a sorcerer, the world of everyday life is not real, or out there, as we believe it is. For a sorcerer, reality, or the world we all know, is only a description.

For the sake of validating this premise don Juan concentrated the best of his efforts into leading me to a genuine conviction that what I held in mind as the world at hand was merely a description of the world; a description that had been pounded into me from the moment I was born.

He pointed out that everyone who comes into contact

with a child is a teacher who incessantly describes the world to him, until the moment when the child is capable of perceiving the world as it is described. According to don Juan, we have no memory of that portentous moment, simply because none of us could possibly have had any point of reference to compare it to anything else. From that moment on, however, the child is a *member*. He knows the description of the world; and his *membership* becomes full-fledged, I suppose, when he is capable of making all the proper perceptual interpretations which, by conforming to that description, validate it.

For don Juan, then, the reality of our day-to-day life consists of an endless flow of perceptual interpretations which we, the individuals who share a specific *membership*, have learned to make in common.

The idea that the perceptual interpretations that make up the world have a flow is congruous with the fact that they run uninterruptedly and are rarely, if ever, open to question. In fact, the reality of the world we know is so taken for granted that the basic premise of sorcery, that our reality is merely one of many descriptions, could hardly be taken as a serious proposition.

Fortunately, in the case of my apprenticeship, don Juan was not concerned at all with whether or not I could take his proposition seriously, and he proceeded to elucidate his points, in spite of my opposition, my disbelief, and my inability to understand what he was saying. Thus, as a teacher of sorcery, don Juan endeavored to describe the world to me from the very first time we talked. My difficulty in grasping his concepts and methods stemmed from the fact that the units of his description were alien and incompatible with those of my own.

His contention was that he was teaching me how to “see” as opposed to merely “looking,” and that “stopping the world” was the first step to “seeing.”

For years I had treated the idea of “stopping the world” as a cryptic metaphor that really did not mean

anything. It was only during an informal conversation that took place towards the end of my apprenticeship that I came to fully realize its scope and importance as one of the main propositions of don Juan's knowledge.

Don Juan and I had been talking about different things in a relaxed and unstructured manner. I told him about a friend of mine and his dilemma with his nine-year-old son. The child, who had been living with the mother for the past four years, was then living with my friend, and the problem was what to do with him? According to my friend, the child was a misfit in school; he lacked concentration and was not interested in anything. He was given to tantrums, disruptive behavior, and to running away from home.

"Your friend certainly does have a problem," don Juan said, laughing.

I wanted to keep on telling him all the "terrible" things the child had done, but he interrupted me.

"There is no need to say any more about that poor little boy," he said. "There is no need for you or for me to regard his actions in our thoughts one way or another."

His manner was abrupt and his tone was firm, but then he smiled.

"What can my friend do?" I asked.

"The worst thing he could do is to force the child to agree with him," don Juan said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that that child shouldn't be spanked or scared by his father when he doesn't behave the way he wants him to."

"How can he teach him anything if he isn't firm with him?"

"Your friend should let someone else spank the child."

"He can't let anyone else touch his little boy!" I said, surprised at his suggestion.

Don Juan seemed to enjoy my reaction and giggled.

"Your friend is not a warrior," he said. "If he were, he would know that the worst thing one can do is to confront human beings bluntly."

"What does a warrior do, don Juan?"

"A warrior proceeds strategically."

"I still don't understand what you mean."

"I mean that if your friend were a warrior he would help his child to *stop the world*."

"How can my friend do that?"

"He would need personal power. He would need to be a sorcerer."

"But he isn't."

"In that case he must use ordinary means to help his son to change his idea of the world. It is not *stopping the world*, but it will work just the same."

I asked him to explain his statements.

"If I were your friend," don Juan said, "I would start by hiring someone to spank the little guy. I would go to skid row and hire the worst-looking man I could find."

"To scare a little boy?"

"Not just to scare a little boy, you fool. That little fellow must be *stopped*, and being beaten by his father won't do it.

"If one wants to *stop* our fellow men one must always be outside the circle that presses them. That way one can always direct the pressure."

The idea was preposterous, but somehow it was appealing to me.

Don Juan was resting his chin on his left palm. His left arm was propped against his chest on a wooden box that served as a low table. His eyes were closed but his eyeballs moved. I felt he was looking at me through his eyelids. The thought scared me.

"Tell me more about what my friend should do with his little boy," I said.

"Tell him to go to skid row and very carefully select an ugly-looking derelict," he went on. "Tell him to get a young one. One who still has some strength left in him."

Don Juan then delineated a strange strategy. I was to instruct my friend to have the man follow him or wait for him at a place where he would go with his son. The man, in response to a prearranged cue to be given after any objectionable behavior on the part of the child, was

supposed to leap from a hiding place, pick the child up, and spank the living daylight out of him.

"After the man scares him, your friend must help the little boy regain his confidence, in any way he can. If he follows this procedure three or four times I assure you that that child will feel differently towards everything. He will change his idea of the world."

"What if the fright injures him?"

"Fright never injures anyone. What injures the spirit is having someone always on your back, beating you, telling you what to do and what not to do.

"When that boy is more contained you must tell your friend to do one last thing for him. He must find some way to get to a dead child, perhaps in a hospital, or at the office of a doctor. He must take his son there and show the dead child to him. He must let him touch the corpse once with his left hand, on any place except the corpse's belly. After the boy does that he will be renewed. The world will never be the same for him."

I realized then that throughout the years of our association don Juan had been employing with me, although on a different scale, the same tactics he was suggesting my friend should use with his son. I asked him about it. He said that he had been trying all along to teach me how to "stop the world."

"You haven't yet," he said, smiling. "Nothing seems to work, because you are very stubborn. If you were less stubborn, however, by now you would probably have *stopped the world* with any of the techniques I have taught you."

"What techniques, don Juan?"

"Everything I have told you to do was a technique for *stopping the world*."

A few months after that conversation don Juan accomplished what he had set out to do, to teach me to "stop the world."

That monumental event in my life compelled me to reexamine in detail my work of ten years. It became evident to me that my original assumption about the role of psychotropic plants was erroneous. They were not the

essential feature of the sorcerer's description of the world, but were only an aid to cement, so to speak, parts of the description which I had been incapable of perceiving otherwise. My insistence on holding on to my standard version of reality rendered me almost deaf and blind to don Juan's aims. Therefore, it was simply my lack of sensitivity which had fostered their use.

In reviewing the totality of my field notes I became aware that don Juan had given me the bulk of the new description at the very beginning of our association in what he called "techniques for stopping the world." I had discarded those parts of my field notes in my earlier works because they did not pertain to the use of psychotropic plants. I have now rightfully reinstated them in the total scope of don Juan's teachings and they comprise the first seventeen chapters of this work. The last three chapters are the field notes covering the events that culminated in my "stopping the world."

In summing up I can say that when I began the apprenticeship, there was another reality, that is to say, there was a sorcery description of the world, which I did not know.

Don Juan, as a sorcerer and a teacher, taught me that description. The ten-year apprenticeship I have undergone consisted, therefore, in setting up that unknown reality by unfolding its description, adding increasingly more complex parts as I went along.

The termination of the apprenticeship meant that I had learned a new description of the world in a convincing and authentic manner and thus I had become capable of eliciting a new perception of the world, which matched its new description. In other words, I had gained *membership*.

Don Juan stated that in order to arrive at "seeing" one first had to "stop the world." "Stopping the world" was indeed an appropriate rendition of certain states of awareness in which the reality of everyday life is altered because the flow of interpretation, which ordinarily runs uninterruptedly, has been stopped by a set of circumstances alien to that flow. In my case the set of circum-

stances alien to my normal flow of interpretations was the sorcery description of the world. Don Juan's precondition for "stopping the world" was that one had to be convinced; in other words, one had to learn the new description in a total sense, for the purpose of pitting it against the old one, and in that way break the dogmatic certainty, which we all share, that the validity of our perceptions, or our reality of the world, is not to be questioned.

After "stopping the world" the next step was "seeing." By that don Juan meant what I would like to categorize as "responding to the perceptual solicitations of a world outside the description we have learned to call reality."

My contention is that all these steps can only be understood in terms of the description to which they belong; and since it was a description that he endeavored to give me from the beginning, I must then let his teachings be the only source of entrance into it. Thus, I have left don Juan's words to speak for themselves.

—C.C.
1972

Journey to Ixtlan

THE LESSONS
OF DON JUAN

PART ONE

“Stopping the World”

1

REAFFIRMATIONS FROM THE WORLD AROUND US

“I understand you know a great deal about plants, sir,” I said to the old Indian in front of me.

A friend of mine had just put us in contact and left the room and we had introduced ourselves to each other. The old man had told me that his name was Juan Matus.

“Did your friend tell you that?” he asked casually.

“Yes, he did.”

“I pick plants, or rather, they let me pick them,” he said softly.

We were in the waiting room of a bus depot in Arizona. I asked him in very formal Spanish if he would allow me to question him. I said, “Would the gentleman [caballero] permit me to ask some questions?”

“Caballero,” which is derived from the word “caballo,” horse, originally meant horseman or a nobleman on horseback.

He looked at me inquisitively.

“I’m a horseman without a horse,” he said with a big smile and then he added, “I’ve told you that my name is Juan Matus.”

I liked his smile. I thought that, obviously he was a man that could appreciate directness and I decided to boldly tackle him with a request.

I told him I was interested in collecting and studying medicinal plants. I said that my special interest was the

uses of the hallucinogenic cactus, peyote, which I had studied at length at the university in Los Angeles.

I thought that my presentation was very serious. I was very contained and sounded perfectly credible to myself.

The old man shook his head slowly, and I, encouraged by his silence, added that it would no doubt be profitable for us to get together and talk about peyote.

It was at that moment that he lifted his head and looked me squarely in the eyes. It was a formidable look. Yet it was not menacing or awesome in any way. It was a look that went through me. I became tongue-tied at once and could not continue with the harangues about myself. That was the end of our meeting. Yet he left on a note of hope. He said that perhaps I could visit him at his house someday.

It would be difficult to assess the impact of don Juan's look if my inventory of experience is not somehow brought to bear on the uniqueness of that event. When I began to study anthropology and thus met don Juan, I was already an expert in "getting around." I had left my home years before and that meant in my evaluation that I was capable of taking care of myself. Whenever I was rebuffed I could usually cajole my way in or make concessions, argue, get angry, or if nothing succeeded I would whine or complain; in other words, there was always something I knew I could do under the circumstances, and never in my life had any human being stopped my momentum so swiftly and so definitely as don Juan did that afternoon. But it was not only a matter of being silenced; there had been times when I had been unable to say a word to my opponent because of some inherent respect I felt for him, still my anger or frustration was manifested in my thoughts. Don Juan's look, however, numbed me to the point that I could not think coherently.

I became thoroughly intrigued with that stupendous look and decided to search for him.

I prepared myself for six months, after that first meeting, reading up on the uses of peyote among the American Indians, especially about the peyote cult of the In-

dians of the Plains. I became acquainted with every work available, and when I felt I was ready I went back to Arizona.

Saturday, December 17, 1960

I found his house after making long and taxing inquiries among the local Indians. It was early afternoon when I arrived and parked in front of it. I saw him sitting on a wooden milk crate. He seemed to recognize me and greeted me as I got out of my car.

We exchanged social courtesies for a while and then, in plain terms, I confessed that I had been very devious with him the first time we had met. I had boasted that I knew a great deal about peyote, when in reality I knew nothing about it. He stared at me. His eyes were very kind.

I told him that for six months I had been reading to prepare myself for our meeting and that this time I really knew a great deal more.

He laughed. Obviously, there was something in my statement which was funny to him. He was laughing at me and I felt a bit confused and offended.

He apparently noticed my discomfort and assured me that although I had had good intentions there was really no way to prepare myself for our meeting.

I wondered if it would have been proper to ask whether that statement had any hidden meaning, but I did not; yet he seemed to be attuned to my feelings and proceeded to explain what he had meant. He said that my endeavors reminded him of a story about some people a certain king had persecuted and killed once upon a time. He said that in the story the persecuted people were indistinguishable from their persecutors, except that they insisted on pronouncing certain words in a peculiar manner proper only to them; that flaw, of course, was the giveaway. The king posted roadblocks at critical points where an official would ask every man passing by to pronounce a key word. Those who could pronounce it the way the king pronounced it would live, but those who could not were immediately put to death. The point

of the story was that one day a young man decided to prepare himself for passing the roadblock by learning to pronounce the test word just as the king liked it.

Don Juan said, with a broad smile, that in fact it took the young man "six months" to master such a pronunciation. And then came the day of the great test; the young man very confidently came upon the roadblock and waited for the official to ask him to pronounce the word.

At that point don Juan very dramatically stopped his recounting and looked at me. His pause was very studied and seemed a bit corny to me, but I played along. I had heard the theme of the story before. It had to do with Jews in Germany and the way one could tell who was a Jew by the way they pronounced certain words. I also knew the punch line: the young man was going to get caught because the official had forgotten the key word and asked him to pronounce another word which was very similar but which the young man had not learned to say correctly.

Don Juan seemed to be waiting for me to ask what happened, so I did.

"What happened to him?" I asked, trying to sound naïve and interested in the story.

"The young man, who was truly foxy," he said, "realized that the official had forgotten the key word, and before the man could say anything else he confessed that he had prepared himself for six months."

He made another pause and looked at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. This time he had turned the tables on me. The young man's confession was a new element and I no longer knew how the story would end.

"Well, what happened then?" I asked, truly interested.

"The young man was killed instantly, of course," he said and broke into a roaring laughter.

I liked very much the way he had entrapped my interest; above all I liked the way he had linked that story to my own case. In fact, he seemed to have constructed it to fit me. He was making fun of me in a very subtle and artistic manner. I laughed with him.

Afterwards I told him that no matter how stupid I

sounded I was really interested in learning something about plants.

"I like to walk a great deal," he said.

I thought he was deliberately changing the topic of conversation to avoid answering me. I did not want to antagonize him with my insistence.

He asked me if I wanted to go with him on a short hike in the desert. I eagerly told him that I would love to walk in the desert.

"This is no picnic," he said in a tone of warning.

I told him that I wanted very seriously to work with him. I said that I needed information, any kind of information, on the uses of medicinal herbs, and that I was willing to pay him for his time and effort.

"You'll be working for me," I said. "And I'll pay you wages."

"How much would you pay me?" he asked.

I detected a note of greed in his voice.

"Whatever you think is appropriate," I said.

"Pay me for my time . . . with your time," he said.

I thought he was a most peculiar fellow. I told him I did not understand what he meant. He replied that there was nothing to say about plants, thus to take my money would be unthinkable for him.

He looked at me piercingly.

"What are you doing in your pocket?" he asked, frowning. "Are you playing with your whanger?"

He was referring to my taking notes on a minute pad inside the enormous pockets of my windbreaker.

When I told him what I was doing he laughed heartily.

I said that I did not want to disturb him by writing in front of him.

"If you want to write, write," he said. "You don't disturb me."

We hiked in the surrounding desert until it was almost dark. He did not show me any plants nor did he talk about them at all. We stopped for a moment to rest by some large bushes.

"Plants are very peculiar things," he said without looking at me. "They are alive and they feel."

At the very moment he made that statement a strong gust of wind shook the desert chaparral around us. The bushes made a rattling noise.

"Do you hear that?" he asked me, putting his right hand to his ear as if he were aiding his hearing. "The leaves and the wind are agreeing with me."

I laughed. The friend who had put us in contact had already told me to watch out, because the old man was very eccentric. I thought the "agreement with the leaves" was one of his eccentricities.

We walked for a while longer but he still did not show me any plants, nor did he pick any of them. He simply breezed through the bushes touching them gently. Then he came to a halt and sat down on a rock and told me to rest and look around.

I insisted on talking. Once more I let him know that I wanted very much to learn about plants, especially peyote. I pleaded with him to become my informant in exchange for some sort of monetary reward.

"You don't have to pay me," he said. "You can ask me anything you want. I will tell you what I know and then I will tell you what to do with it."

He asked me if I agreed with the arrangement. I was delighted. Then he added a cryptic statement: "Perhaps there is nothing to learn about plants, because there is nothing to say about them."

I did not understand what he had said or what he had meant by it.

"What did you say?" I asked.

He repeated the statement three times and then the whole area was shaken by the roar of an Air Force jet flying low.

"There! The world has just agreed with me," he said, putting his left hand to his ear.

I found him very amusing. His laughter was contagious.

"Are you from Arizona, don Juan?" I asked, in an effort to keep the conversation centered around his being my informant.

He looked at me and nodded affirmatively. His eyes seemed to be tired. I could see the white underneath his pupils.

"Were you born in this locality?"

He nodded his head again without answering me. It seemed to be an affirmative gesture, but it also seemed to be the nervous headshake of a person who is thinking.

"And where are you from yourself?" he asked.

"I come from South America," I said.

"That's a big place. Do you come from all of it?"

His eyes were piercing again as he looked at me.

I began to explain the circumstances of my birth, but he interrupted me.

"We are alike in this respect," he said. "I live here now but I'm really a Yaqui from Sonora."

"Is that so! I myself come from—"

He did not let me finish.

"I know, I know," he said. "You are who you are, from wherever you are, as I am a Yaqui from Sonora."

His eyes were very shiny and his laughter was strangely unsettling. He made me feel as if he had caught me in a lie. I experienced a peculiar sensation of guilt. I had the feeling he knew something I did not know or did not want to tell.

My strange embarrassment grew. He must have noticed it, for he stood up and asked me if I wanted to go eat in a restaurant in town.

Walking back to his home and then driving into town made me feel better, but I was not quite relaxed. I somehow felt threatened, although I could not pinpoint the reason.

I wanted to buy him some beer in the restaurant. He said that he never drank, not even beer. I laughed to myself. I did not believe him; the friend who had put us in contact had told me that "the old man was plastered out of his mind most of the time." I really did not mind if he was lying to me about not drinking. I liked him; there was something very soothing about his person.

I must have had a look of doubt on my face, for he

then went on to explain that he used to drink in his youth, but that one day he simply dropped it.

"People hardly ever realize that we can cut anything from our lives, any time, just like that." He snapped his fingers.

"Do you think that one can stop smoking or drinking that easily?" I asked.

"Sure!" he said with great conviction. "Smoking and drinking are nothing. Nothing at all if we want to drop them."

At that very moment the water that was boiling in the coffee percolator made a loud perking sound.

"Hear that!" don Juan exclaimed with a shine in his eyes. "The boiling water agrees with me."

Then he added after a pause, "A man can get agreements from everything around him."

At that crucial instant the coffee percolator made a truly obscene gurgling sound.

He looked at the percolator and softly said, "Thank you," nodded his head, and then broke into a roaring laughter.

I was taken aback. His laughter was a bit too loud, but I was genuinely amused by it all.

My first real session with my "informant" ended then. He said goodbye at the door of the restaurant. I told him I had to visit some friends and that I would like to see him again at the end of the following week.

"When will you be home?" I asked.

He scrutinized me.

"Whenever you come," he replied.

"I don't know exactly when I can come."

"Just come then and don't worry."

"What if you're not in?"

"I'll be there," he said, smiling, and walked away.

I ran after him and asked him if he would mind my bringing a camera with me to take pictures of him and his house.

"That's out of the question," he said with a frown.

"How about a tape recorder? Would you mind that?"

"I'm afraid there's no possibility of that either."

I became annoyed and began to fret. I said I saw no logical reason for his refusal.

Don Juan shook his head negatively.

"Forget it," he said forcefully. "And if you still want to see me don't ever mention it again."

I staged a weak final complaint. I said that pictures and recordings were indispensable to my work. He said that there was only one thing which was indispensable for anything we did. He called it "the spirit."

"One can't do without the spirit," he said. "And you don't have it. Worry about that and not about pictures."

"What do you . . . ?"

He interrupted me with a movement of his hand and walked backwards a few steps.

"Be sure to come back," he said softly and waved goodbye.

2

ERASING PERSONAL HISTORY

Thursday, December 22, 1960

Don Juan was sitting on the floor, by the door of his house, with his back against the wall. He turned over a wooden milk crate and asked me to sit down and make myself at home. I offered him some cigarettes. I had brought a carton of them. He said he did not smoke but he accepted the gift. We talked about the coldness of the desert nights and other ordinary topics of conversation.

I asked him if I was interfering with his normal routine. He looked at me with a sort of frown and said he had no routines, and that I could stay with him all afternoon if I wanted to.

I had prepared some genealogy and kinship charts that I wanted to fill out with his help. I had also compiled, from the ethnographic literature, a long list of culture traits that were purported to belong to the Indians of the area. I wanted to go through the list with him and mark all the items that were familiar to him.

I began with the kinship charts.

"What did you call your father?" I asked.

"I called him Dad," he said with a very serious face.

I felt a little bit annoyed, but I proceeded on the assumption that he had not understood.

I showed him the chart and explained that one space was for the father and another space was for the mother. I gave as an example the different words used in English and in Spanish for father and mother.

I thought that perhaps I should have taken mother first.

"What did you call your mother?" I asked.

"I called her Mom," he replied in a naïve tone.

"I mean what other words did you use to call your father and mother? How did you call them?" I said, trying to be patient and polite.

He scratched his head and looked at me with a stupid expression.

"Golly!" he said. "You got me there. Let me think."

After a moment's hesitation he seemed to remember something and I got ready to write.

"Well," he said, as if he were involved in serious thought, "how else did I call them? I called them Hey, hey, Dad! Hey, hey, Mom!"

I laughed against my desire. His expression was truly comical and at that moment I did not know whether he was a preposterous old man pulling my leg or whether he was really a simpleton. Using all the patience I had, I explained to him that these were very serious questions and that it was very important for my work to fill out the forms. I tried to make him understand the idea of a genealogy and personal history.

"What were the names of your father and mother?" I asked.

He looked at me with clear kind eyes.

"Don't waste your time with that crap," he said softly but with unsuspected force.

I did not know what to say; it was as if someone else had uttered those words. A moment before, he had been a fumbling stupid Indian scratching his head, and then in an instant he had reversed the roles; I was the stupid one, and he was staring at me with an indescribable look that was not a look of arrogance, or defiance, or hatred, or contempt. His eyes were kind and clear and penetrating.

"I don't have any personal history," he said after a long pause. "One day I found out that personal history was no longer necessary for me and, like drinking, I dropped it."

I did not quite understand what he meant by that. I suddenly felt ill at ease, threatened. I reminded him that he had assured me that it was all right to ask him questions. He reiterated that he did not mind at all.

"I don't have personal history any more," he said and looked at me probingly. "I dropped it one day when I felt it was no longer necessary."

I stared at him, trying to detect the hidden meanings of his words.

"How can one drop one's personal history?" I asked in an argumentative mood.

"One must first have the desire to drop it," he said. "And then one must proceed harmoniously to chop it off, little by little."

"Why should anyone have such a desire?" I exclaimed.

I had a terribly strong attachment to my personal history. My family roots were deep. I honestly felt that without them my life had no continuity or purpose.

"Perhaps you should tell me what you mean by dropping one's personal history," I said.

"To do away with it, that's what I mean," he replied cuttingly.

I insisted that I must not have understood the proposition.

"Take you for instance," I said. "You are a Yaqui. You can't change that."

"Am I?" he asked, smiling. "How do you know that?"

"True!" I said. "I can't know that with certainty, at this point, but you know it and that is what counts. That's what makes it personal history."

I felt I had driven a hard nail in.

"The fact that I know whether I am a Yaqui or not does not make it personal history," he replied. "Only when someone else knows that does it become personal history. And I assure you that no one will ever know that for sure."

I had written down what he had said in a clumsy way. I stopped writing and looked at him. I could not figure him out. I mentally ran through my impressions of him; the mysterious and unprecedented way he had looked at me during our first meeting, the charm with which he had claimed that he received agreement from everything around him, his annoying humor and his alertness, his look of bona fide stupidity when I asked about his father and mother, and then the unsuspected force of his statements which had snapped me apart.

"You don't know what I am, do you?" he said as if he were reading my thoughts. "You will never know who or what I am, because I don't have a personal history."

He asked me if I had a father. I told him I did. He said that my father was an example of what he had in mind. He urged me to remember what my father thought of me.

"Your father knows everything about you," he said. "So he has you all figured out. He knows who you are and what you do, and there is no power on earth that can make him change his mind about you."

Don Juan said that everybody that knew me had an idea about me, and that I kept feeding the idea with everything I did. "Don't you see?" he asked dramatically. "You must renew your personal history by telling your parents, your relatives, and your friends everything you do. On the other hand, if you have no personal history, no explanations are needed; nobody is angry or disillusioned with your acts. And above all no one pins you down with their thoughts."