

Riding the Swords

It was hot, with nothing but a ceiling fan in the room, but that's why we spent our time outdoors—or why I did, body surfing, drinking orange sodas, and eating fresh papayas and an occasional egg sandwich made me by the German expatriate who kept a snack shop on the beach. My father would be back in the room smoking cigars and mulling the old Mixtec-Zapotec debate, holding up to the light his latest transparencies from the ruined cities of Mitla and Monte Alban, and scribbling indecipherable notes in the corners of their frames.

We made the mistake of breakfasting on ceviche before heading inland in our rented Jeep and were badly sickened by the stuff.

“Tainted shellfish,” he gasped. “I'm sorry.”

I would have preferred to stay on the coast, at Puerto Escondido, originally a coffee-shipping port and in 1974 truly a paradise for a thirteen-year-old. My father frequently traveled in the summer and it was always a mixed blessing to go with him.

“Montezuma's revenge,” he said, pulling up his trousers. The tortuous mountain roads did nothing to settle our stomachs. Every ten kilometers he stopped the Jeep and, bent double, hurried behind the roadside bushes. At one of the army checkpoints he was rebuffed by armed soldiers who forced him to stand vomiting in the middle of the road where they could see him.

“What do they want?” I asked.

“Rebels. You're a big boy. Can you drive?”

“I'll try.”

“A shame I haven't taught you.”

We took twelve hours getting north through the mountains of the Sierra Madre to Oaxaca, then west in the dismal rainy darkness to Tlaxiaco in the high Mixteca. We reeled into a small hotel where my father passed the night in a delirium in which the *Andrea Doria*, New York Harbor, a renowned Austrian anthropologist, and a soiree in Copenhagen were all somehow connected to a remembered night many years earlier when as a young researcher having descended from the villages after another round of field work he put up at a coffee finca run by a stocky and hospitable Spaniard with whom he sat up all night gaming and listening on shortwave radio to the noticias, especially news of a collision between the *Andrea Doria* and the passenger liner *Stockholm*. I had no idea what he was talking about, he slept white as a stick of chalk, and I was afraid he would die and leave me alone in that remote highland town which hadn't long known electricity.

In the morning an hour's drive brought us to the turn-off for the Mixtec village of San Leandro. The land was steep, rugged and red; green corn swept down to the road cuts.

Indians watched us roll by on the unpaved spur road. The world went clad in huaraches and sombrero. A boy driving an ox with a stick. An old woman weaving a basket of palm.

“Why are we here?” I asked.

“I’ll just talk to Domingo and some of the men.”

“Where’s the tape recorder? You’re always talking.”

“A few gaps in the notes. You can’t push them where they don’t want to go.”

I looked out the window, wondering how the waves were breaking at Puerto Escondido. A teenager, one of a gang filling holes in the road, sat on the embankment sharpening tools with a file. He watched us pass.

“Your friend,” I said, “the one they killed...”

“It wasn’t this village,” my father said.

“They’re Mixtecs, aren’t they?”

“It’s a question of respecting their ways. We’re their guests.”

“What did he do?”

“I suppose you’d call him a colleague. We weren’t close.”

“Did he steal something?”

“Yes, in a way.”

“What? What did he steal?”

“It was a sad business.”

It was the rainy season and the water rumbled through the culverts. We left the Jeep on the west side of the basin, before the road crosses the river, and continued on foot through the cornfields to Domingo’s house. I must have looked, to the villagers, as addled as I felt after yesterday’s illness. I was groomed like the average Californian thirteen-year-old, not very well, my hair dragging on my shoulders, my face peeling from a sunburn. And here I sat on a cool dirt floor in a thatched hut that didn’t look so different from the huts I saw on “Gilligan’s Island” every night at home.

I was brought, momentarily, a bottle of warm Coca-Cola to drink. Drinking warm Coke in the shade of a thatched roof while Domingo’s wife Margarita fetched her husband from the fields. My father smiled at my gloomy expression. Within me I carried such a racket of noise, all the savageries, howls, protests, canned laughs, and electronic drums and cymbals of the era having already gotten inside me and possessed me, that the atmosphere of the village seemed unnaturally quiet. My thoughts wandered. The men chatted with my father, in Spanish and Mixtec, and their halting conversation was meaningless to me, yet their syllables, soft and politely uttered, had a soothing rhythm and became like a background chant to my thoughts, which were more pictures than thoughts, a gallery of my preoccupations—a blue parrot, a split red papaya, the breasts of a coast woman, worshipers on their knees, dogs with their ribs showing, soldiers with guns, and most of all the sea off Puerto Escondido, which swept the other images together into a gorgeously formed blue wave that turned endlessly within me.

I could be happy anywhere if I were joined to things as the waves joined me to things, bursting about me and dashing me down even as they raised and buoyed me up. I wanted to be moved, to be intimate with the tides, or with the providence that governs the tides, I wanted to be picked up and shown my power, the power that drives our destinies.

Stars flickered in the twilight sky. Humid, resinous smells wafted from the kitchen shed. We were brought corn tortillas along with beans and chiles to eat. I scraped up the beans and hungrily pushed the tortillas into my mouth. An old Indian watched me and laughed.

With nightfall the drinking started. My father produced a box of cigars to go with the pulque being drunk and a celebration sprang up. We accompanied Domingo and his cousins and compadres to a shed that looked on a field of burnt corn stubble. Scattered maguey cactus grew; pine trees were silhouetted on the ridge behind us. The men, drinking pulque and aguardiente, talked with passion, passed the cup and tipped back their sombreros. I was offered a shot of the cane liquor to drink, and my father, a sheen on his brow, turned the cigar in his mouth and nodded his head. "It's all right," he said. "Go on." At the height of it two dozen villagers were gathered.

It was late and many had gone home. The rest sat on mats in the deep thatched shelter with side walls of ox leather, open at the front, with a fire smoldering and flaring outside. No one paid me the slightest attention. A peculiar warmth suffused my body and I was content just to be there with my father. Along in the night, when there were a dozen revelers left, and several conversations in progress, two of the men got to their feet, young men in white cotton trousers and carrying machetes, and, just outside of the shelter, without speaking to anyone or announcing their intentions, they faced each other and struck with their machetes, yes, they fought, they struck repeatedly.

They didn't stab with the points of the machetes, but confined themselves to hitting with the flats of the blades. The blows were solid and the machetes being sharp, the edges bit into the skin of their arms and drew blood. Out of a minute's noisy duel they established a rhythm and stayed with it. Their faces turned in and out of the firelight, grim, possessed and determined. Each delivered his blows to the thighs and the naked ribs and shoulders of the other, and in turn accepted the blows without flinching. They struck with their machetes, moving all the time in a cantering rhythm, now faster, now slower, each man raising and lowering his knees, and sometimes between his knees he passed the machete from one hand to the other.

Conversation had ceased in the shelter. There were initial calls of disapproval from the older men but the objections faded. The swordplay went on five or six minutes. The fighters were half naked and sweating. The firelight flashed on their bodies. The only sound was the slapping of machetes on their flesh and the hot escape of their breath. Those sounds, the rhythmic motions they accompanied, the lines of blood on their shoulders, the seep of red on their cotton trousers, the sweat standing on their faces and chests—all these impressions were concentrated in the illuminated space at the edge of the shelter, lit by the flickering fire, and none of the peace or silence surrounding us in every direction on that limitless night was sacrificed to it or diminished in any way.

It was breathtaking. Dazzling. My blood ran in sympathy with theirs. It didn't matter whether I understood it or not, I was seeing ahead into something, something of maximum consequence, something that stirred me in the pit of the belly and tugged at the roots of my tongue.

A second pair of men rose in imitation of the first. They swung their machetes but the effect was inelegant. Their dance was less mannered, the fight more bloody. They may have been drunker. The older men catcalled again. Nobody else defied them. It was over.

We were given a house with a dirt floor to ourselves.

"Weird, strange," my father said. He had kept stock-still during the display, in a way that forbade me to speak to him.

"What was it about?"

"I'm not sure."

I had rarely known him to be at a loss. Somehow it was all too raw for him.

Pressed in the morning, my father turned a bleary, intellectual eye on me. He had lost two colleagues over the years to the wrath of indignant villagers, to blunder and arrogance, the misreading of a situation—stoned to death, both, for breaking taboo, for seeing or touching what they shouldn't, and he had decided, now, to err on the side of reticence, and, downplaying the episode, called it a bit of local cultural noise, a “surd” that meant little beyond itself.

But to me it meant more, much more—it meant *everything* beyond itself. Hadn't we both seen them, in the museums, in the research rooms smelling of parchment, the ancient codices that had survived the barbarisms of centuries, those elegant, enigmatic records of love and war with their weirdly balanced human forms, their horror of stylized sacrifice, hadn't we seen the bejeweled skulls, the supercool beauty of the mosaics, and the exquisite goldwork of a triumphant people?

And here it was, present, alive in the dance in the night, embodied in these two young men, contained in the skin of their chests, their temples and their bellies as the sky contains all that is beneath it. I wouldn't accept that we had witnessed something merely freakish, something it did no good, served no purpose to acknowledge. In my mind I saw it again, the two young Mixtecos riding their swords—were they warriors or artists?—and my heart beat quick and loud.

A rooster crowing at the door woke us. We ate tortillas and drank coffee and my father talked for an hour with his hosts. Before we left, a young farmer approached and I was surprised to hear him address my father as *padrino*, or godfather. The cuts of a machete were plainly visible on his arms, or I would have had trouble recognizing him. He held in his hands an old cigar box. The lid wouldn't shut all the way on its contents, but slanted up at an angle. It was an assortment of preconquest artifacts which he wanted us to have—a stone figurine, a clay whistle, spindle whorls, an obsidian arrowhead, fossil corncobs the length of a child's thumb.

“They find them in the fields and rivers,” my father explained, in the Jeep.

The black arrowhead gleamed, the light reflecting off its facets where the glassy rock had been tooled. I drew its edge across the palm of my hand. I set the hard point on my forearm and creased my skin with it. I tried it again, harder, clenching my jaws, driving the blade, and when I had broken through the skin—it happened suddenly, in a beading of blood—I let up and glanced at my father.

He watched the road carefully. My pulse, amplified by the rock, radiated through my fingers as I loosened my grip. I put it back in the box and tried the clay whistle, and as we drove out of San Leandro I was piping on that thousand-year-old whistle.