

XI

HIDDEN IN EDEN

*"And the man and his wife were both naked,
and were not ashamed." Genesis 2: 25*

The wind is now favourable. I set up the jib. We are going upstream and the current is strong but the wind makes child's play of it all and we are moving energetically despite the load.

Amateur sailors who are used to ascending rivers will know this phenomenon well. No matter what the strength of the current is, if the wind blows strongly enough in the right direction, the boat will move ahead. The thrust exerted by the wind on the sails is directly proportional to the speed of the current. The stronger the current, the stronger the resulting propulsive thrust; -this is one of the main advantages of sailing.

We sail along the left bank. The river is nine to ten metres deep here, but the depth goes to twelve metres in the middle of the Rio Siapa.

The wind strengthens and the boat accelerates. I roll up the sails a bit. The mass of clouds has almost reached us. A light rain the smooth surface. From the opposite bank, we can hear the characteristic roar of a heavy downpour approaching from the forest. We see a solid wall of water coming from the south, sweeping everything in its way. Already the bank is no longer visible. The sailboat is soaked at once. Claudette seeks shelter inside while I stay at the helm, protected in my oilskin.

The place has turned into a watery hell. We can barely distinguish the silhouette of the trees shaking on the bank and

countless large drops splatter on the deck in a deafening roar. It feels like a titanic fight between nature and the elements, a fantastic assault, insane and surreal, where everything clashes, mixing and mingling together until it becomes a confusing whole. The terrible fight opposing the intangible and the indestructible.

This spell of bad weather seems to last an eternity. The Casiquiare must be far behind by now. Eventually the sun makes a timid break through the clouds, just above the treetops, like a magistrate deciding to put an end to the gigantic contest. A magnificent rainbow materializes nearby, and the rain ceases completely. Night is about to fall.

The sky is clearing up gradually. The few blue patches grow bigger and bigger. The air is limpid, as always after a downpour. The river is splendid, the tree-covered cliffs softly illuminated by the light of the setting sun.

"Ten metres," announces Claudette.

This seems like a good place to spend the night. I roll up the jib, declutch the motor and go up to the bow to drop anchor. The sailboat stabilises itself.

What a change of rhythm! The banks are no longer flashing by, the wind has fallen, the trees are immobile. Only the river is pursuing its endless course, murmuring against the hull. The sky is immaculate now; not the slightest white wisp of a cloud troubles the celestial plenitude. Claudette, standing in front of the little stove, is preparing our evening meal.

A star appears in the west. I recognise the beautiful companion of our nights, Jupiter. She is alone, as though she wanted to pay us a visit before all the others showed up. So here you are again, my beauty, still as graceful, as seductive as always. As you can see, we have abandoned the overpopulated blue immensities for these fantastic green expanses, which no one had deemed worthy of sailing up until now.

For a long moment, I remain thoughtful, watching this luminous jewel, with its fragrance of sea-sprays, monsoons, and flying fishes. Here is the faithful friend I had almost forgotten, my mysterious

friend, the only witness to some of the most marvellous moments of my life.

"Hey, what are you doing up there? The food is ready..."

That's my other star, my kitchen star. The aroma of tomato sauce invades my nostrils. If romanticism has taken a backseat, my stomach, on the other hand, rumbles with satisfaction. I join Claudette and we sit down to eat.

The next morning, we weigh anchor at seven o'clock. The wind is practically dead and our progress is slow, but this is truly a magnificent waterway, as wide as the Casiquiare, as deep, and as rich in birds of all colours. As for villages... We have not seen even one carbet.

The following day is spent identically, watching the same scenery, the same fauna, and not seeing the slightest sign of human activity.

The third day is superb, and we leave very early. The summer sun is shining in all its glory. The birds even seem to be singing louder and more often than usual. This is the kind of day that wraps you up in joy from the moment you wake up. I don't know where we are on the map, but we have probably covered thirty miles since leaving the Casiquiare. The wind is fair, and we should be able to cover the same distance before nightfall.

The wind fills out the sail, which takes on a powerful majesty between the two pale green walls of the banks, shivering in the trade wind. The trees are flashing by much faster than during the two previous days. A few river dolphins follow in our wake. A couple of macaws, red, green, yellow, and blue, pass right over the boat.

The Rio Siapa meanders somewhat before turning into a long straight line. Suddenly I spot something floating on the water.

"Claudette! The binoculars, quickly!"

My wife goes down to get the binoculars, then comes back up and scans the river at length.

"It's a pirogue," she says. "A small pirogue carrying three people. They are going upstream as well, but they are too far away to be able to see them well."

This is wonderful, finally the proof that there are people living on this waterway! We will not have come all this way for nothing. The wind is strong, so we are moving quickly, but the pirogue has already disappeared in a distant bend of the river. Still, unless they disappear into a small side channel, we should be reaching them soon.

We pass the same bend, and see them about a hundred metres ahead of us. They have not noticed us yet. The sailboat is gliding smoothly towards them. Two men and a woman are paddling without a care in the world.

The wind, funnelled along the channel's route, is momentarily blowing on the beam. The sail snaps a bit, then regains its grandiose fullness. The three paddlers turn around, taken aback by the strange sound. And seeing this enormous red and white sail inflated by the powerful trade winds, this unimaginable vision, they are completely panic-stricken. That they could fear us had not even crossed our minds, but here they are, paddling like madmen, escaping as fast as they can. I call to them:

"Amigos, amigos..."

Either they cannot hear me, or they cannot understand. We are going much faster than them, however, and quickly catch up. As we get to the same level, we can read total alarm on their faces. We pass them. I roll up the jib and wave my arms in a friendly way. They slow down. Claudette continues to call out to them, while I smile as much as I can, trying to reassure them, to inspire trust.

We can see their faces well now, and without a doubt, they are Indian to the core.

The first man is wearing a large khaki shirt, torn at the left elbow, its shirttails hanging over his thighs. He is not wearing trousers. A kind of painted red-orange halo surrounds his face. Though not smiling, his expression is not bellicose, but rather a mixture of curiosity and distrust.

The woman, for her part, is basically naked. A piece of red cloth, bearing no resemblance to the loincloths we had seen in Puerto Ayacucho, is used as a kind of G-string, suspended by a fine cord wrapped around her waist. A thin wooden stick, about four inches long, pierces her nostrils. Three more sticks are planted on both of her

cheeks and on her chin. Her chest is ornamented with two long multicoloured bead necklaces, each one going from one side of her neck to a little below the opposite armpit, thus crossing both in front and on the back. She seems more at ease than the first man, and is even smiling a little.

The last man is also wearing a worn-out and dirty-looking shirt. He does not wear trousers either and his face has no paint, but he seems indifferent to us, only making sure that the pirogue is going smoothly on. In fact, he is the only one still paddling, the other two being busy observing us.

They are very close to us now. We can see two bows and arrows at the bottom of their boat. The bows are identical to those of the Pieroa and Guahibo Indians, but the arrows are much longer, with wooden points instead of iron ones. I think I see more than one kind: large thick ones, and small thin ones.

There is a small pile of fish by the woman. Their flattened heads make them look like the ones we were fishing in the Maroni but without the long moustaches, which characterised them.

I hand them a cord, and sign for them to come aboard.

The first man is still wearing the same expression, but he grabs the cord, moors the pirogue, and climbs the ladder. The woman follows him, as does the second man.

All three of them are now standing in the cockpit. Their outfit, though it fails to shock us, is surprising. Under their shirts, the men are completely naked, and are not embarrassed to exhibit their organs, held in a high position by a fine cord passed around their waist. I am completely flabbergasted. Claudette instinctively looks away. Only the woman is wearing something to cover up her sex, but this still leaves her buttocks fully exposed.

They are sitting on the portside girder, unselfconsciously flaunting their genitals, held up against their groins. They are trying to look at everything all at once: the mast, the cords, the large capstans we use to haul up the jib...and then go to have a look inside, exclaiming in their strange dialect. It sounds like a series of words where most of the consonants are aspirated, interspersed with many clicks of the tongue.

The man with the painted halo looks at me.
"Ya pouhy pii, ya pouhy pii..." he says, pulling on his lower lip and sticking three fingers from his right hand between this lip and his gums. Perhaps he is trying to be amusing.

The other two repeat the same gesture.

"Pouhy pii, pouhy pii..."

And all three of them have their fingers behind their lips as they stare at us. Claudette is astounded.

"You wanted real Indians..." I tell her ironically, "Well, here they are!"

What are they trying to explain, what is the meaning of their bizarre actions? As I look at them in turn, I stick three fingers in my mouth and say:

"Pouhy pii, pouhy pii..."

They laugh.

I go down to the cabin and come back with a packet of light cigarettes left behind by a San Fernando national guard during an inspection. I open it and give them one each. The first one makes me understand that he wants three, not one. How unusual! Not two, not four, not the whole pack, but exactly three cigarettes. Perhaps they want to smoke three cigarettes at the same time. I give him three and offer the same number to the other two, who take them without the slightest hesitation.

This done, I strike a match under the interrogative eyes of the painted man. I mime the gesture of putting the cigarette in his mouth so that I can light it up. He complies. I put the match next to the tip of his cigarette, but he does not inhale, he waits, as though the mere proximity of the match were sufficient!

Again, I mime the action of inhaling with exaggerated puff, puff... He does the same but only from the corner of his mouth, while keeping the cigarette untouched between his lips. This is becoming rather comical, and Claudette bursts out laughing. Apparently, this man has never smoked in his life.

Meanwhile, the other two have undone their cigarettes and collected the tobacco, using it to form a small ball by spitting into it to make it stick together. They are kneading it in their hands, into the oblong shape of a large olive and then they put this thing between

their lower lip and their gums. It gives them a huge swollen jaw. So this is what they were asking for, tobacco!

The first man is still holding the cigarette in his hand. It did light up in the end, and is now slowly burning away. He seems amazed to see his tobacco going up into smoke.

Their village cannot be very far. I unroll the jib, which comes down gently, like an enormous red and white parachute opening up slowly. Our three guests are stunned to see this sail unfolding before their eyes. The woman lets out a loud "Wwhhhhaaaaaoooooooooooo..." while the other two click their tongues very rapidly.

The haloed man's tension is easing visibly. He is almost smiling. The boat is sliding quickly on the surface of the water. On the left bank, by a small inlet, a second pirogue is moored to a few branches. Two men are busy fishing, or at least were busy, for since the sailboat has made its appearance, it seems to have grabbed their full attention.

The Indian with the painted face stands up, cigarette in hand, in a triumphant attitude. He waves his arms about, then sits back down on the girder. The woman is pointing to a spot on the left bank, probably the location of their village. Children come running out of the forest, waving their arms and yelling excitedly, followed by the adults. There must be fifty of them, some wearing shirts, others wearing nothing at all.

I come up with the idea of showing off the nautical capacities of our boat before dropping them off. I continue beyond the village. Our three passengers protest. I cannot understand what they are saying but it must be something like: "Where are we going? We were supposed to stop there!"

We sail on for a third of a mile or so. I tack, flatten in the jib and come round to the village. The sailboat starts to list. The woman screams and grabs the mainsheet traveller track. They stare at the surface of the river. How far can the boat lean into the water like this?

I adjust the sail and the boat rights itself. Everyone calms down, though not completely: the Indian woman refuses to let go of the traveller track. As for the other two, their furtive looks are not exactly the most happy.

I roll up the sail. We are almost there.

"Twelve metres," reads Claudette.

I run to the bow to drop anchor. We have reached our Indian village, our longed for retreat from civilisation. In a sailboat, we managed to reach the heart of Amazonia. What a beautiful day!

The village cannot be very far. I unroll the jib, which comes down gently, like an enormous red and white parachute opening up slowly. Our three guests are stunned to see this sail unfolding before their eyes. The woman lets out a loud "Whooooooooooooo..." while the other two click their tongues voraciously.

The blond man's tension is easing visibly. He is almost smiling. The boat is sliding quickly on the surface of the water. On the left, a small inlet, a second passage is marked by a few patches. Two men are busy fishing, or at least were busy, for since the sailboat has made its appearance, it seems to have grabbed their full attention.

The Indian with the painted face stands up, cigarette in hand, in a triumphant attitude. He waves his arms above, then sits back down on the ground. The woman is pointing to a spot on the left bank, probably the location of their village. Children come running out of the forest, waving their arms and yelling excitedly, followed by the adults. There must be fifty of them, some wearing shirts, others wearing nothing at all.

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I roll up the sail. We are almost there.

XII

YANOMAMI MY FRIEND

Our three guests get down into their pirogue and go back to the shore. The others are crowding around them. The man with the painted face embarks in a long explanation, his words loud and clear and his gestures eloquent. The others listen without trying to interrupt. Occasionally, we hear exclamations of surprise, and they glance at us before refocusing their attention on the man.

We soon go ashore as well. All are observing us with curiosity. I call out to them with a loud "Buenas..." Nobody answers. I can hear them muttering in their dialect. Is it good? Is it bad? We can't tell.

I cannot see any dwellings, only a small damp path sinking into the forest. Three men presently appear in the track. The first is wearing a very dirty shirt and a worn pair of trousers, the second a tee shirt full of holes, going down almost to his knees. The third is completely naked, wearing only the small cord they use to maintain their sex in a high position.

The one wearing trousers greets us in Spanish, then asks us where we are coming from. His Castilian is very succinct, but sufficient to be understood. I explain that we come from France, that we have been travelling for over four years, and that we would now like to take a break in a quiet place.

"Here, here, here..." he replies eagerly, "it is very, very, very quiet." He is insisting on the "very", to be absolutely precise about how quiet the place is. Then he adds in the same tone:

"You have tobacco?"

"No," I say. "We don't smoke."

I think I see a glimmer of disappointment in his eyes and wish we had stocked up on it in Puerto Ayacucho. Still, there must be a few cartons left from what we had originally brought from France. Humidity had quickly yellowed their paper, so few had been distributed so far.

"Listen," I add, "I must have a few packets left, but not much. I have to look for them and I will tell you later."

His village is set back from the river, he says. He makes a sign for us to follow him. We go up the narrow trail and get to a smoky clearing where many large huts are gathered. They are entirely built out of woven palms, in the shape of an inverted V. There seem to be no openings to these dwellings, despite the white smoke coming out on top.

He approaches one and pushes aside a few spiky branches held together by lianas, thus uncovering a very narrow opening through which he disappears.

"Come, come..." he says.

We follow him inside the curious construction. A child closes the door behind us, unexpectedly plunging us into darkness. The pungent smell of smoke burns our nostrils. The trembling voice of an old woman can be heard. She must be just next to me. Little by little, our eyes get used to the darkness, and shapes become clearer, more distinct.

The interior is strange, absolutely unlike that of the Galibi carbets in French Guiana. Embers are slowly going up into smoke in the four corners of this very large room. Around each fireplace, a few hammocks have been suspended from the large posts driven into the ground that support the whole structure.

The hammocks, placed in a V shape or a triangle, are very rudimentary. They are made from dried vegetable fibres attached together at the ends by a simple cord. We wonder how someone can lie inside them without falling through. Apparently, these hammocks constitute their only furniture.

Near the entrance, large baskets with a frontal carrying strap are sitting on the ground. They are woven pretty much like the koulou-

koulous used by the Terre-Rouge Indians. A few bows and arrows are resting on the transversal beams of the structure, and up against the walls. Enormous bunches of both cooking and sweet bananas are piled up here and there. In the pallid light of these weak fires, the small yellow pyramids add to the strangeness of the atmosphere.

Another woman, nude and ancient, is lying in a hammock, a few metres from the entrance. The woman we had heard as we came in, most likely. She smiles and beckons us closer. We comply. Like our passengers earlier, she puts three fingers in her mouth and says:

"Pii, pii..."

Of course, she is asking for tobacco!

I tap the pockets of my shorts and of my shirt, to show her that we have none with us. She understands and stops immediately. Our companion grabs a banana bunch and brings it to us.

"For you," he says.

He then sits down in a hammock, next to a nearly extinct fire. We squat in front of him, on the beaten-earth floor.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Juan-Francisco, and my wife is Claudette. And you?"

He seems bothered by this question. He hesitates, not knowing what to say. But he must have a name! Maybe he does not want to tell us; maybe he is ashamed of it.

"Call me Juan," he finally replies, "that's the name the missionaries gave me. Yes, that's it, call me Juan!"

We start chatting. He seems proud to speak Spanish, and so speaks it a bit loudly at times. We learn that these Indians are Yanomamis, and that they have not always lived here on the Rio Siapa. Previously, the community was living very far from here, near the Sierra Parima, even further than Mavaca. Juan spent his childhood there. He comes from a large family. His father, the captain of the village, had three wives.

He was barely eight years old when missionaries came for him and brought him back with them. They kept him for almost a whole year, with other children, and this is how he came to speak Castilian. When he went back to his family, he became an interpreter between the people of his tribe and the doctors and the scholars who occasionally came to visit them. Then a war erupted between the Yanomamis and the Maquiritaires. It started from a simple story of

one woman being kidnapped by one side or the other; he cannot really remember which. His father had not wanted to get involved: he had known other wars and considered he had seen enough. He only wanted to lead a quiet life. But one night, the Maquiritaires attacked the village by surprise, and set fire to it. Five people were wounded, one killed, and all the cleared parcels were destroyed.

This is the reason they emigrated here, the Siapa region being a much quieter one: the Maquiritaires are far away. And the bad Yanomamis as well, he adds, for these exist too. Where we are now, there are only good Yanomamis, and this is why we should stay here.

A young boy appears in the carbet's opening. He must be seven to ten years old. He is naked too. It seems that this ancient fashion of covering one's body with fabric, launched by Adam and Eve on a fateful day, very long ago, has not really caught on in the area. Juan addresses him dryly, almost curtly. The young boy rapidly disappears from whence he came, only to come back a few minutes later with a cord around his waist, holding his penis up to just below his navel, like a man. We can't help smiling. Juan notices this, and says:

"One should not show his "tip", especially not to strangers!"

His "tip"? Despite my curiosity, I dare not question him any further.

The boy is gathering a few embers from the fire, and as we are watching him, we understand what he meant. The extremity of his organ is held by a kind of slipknot that ties up the foreskin above the glans, thus hiding what they call the "tip", which is the glans itself. These people may seem to show no restraint, and have no hang-ups, but we realize they nevertheless have a kind of modesty that is no less respectable than ours, even though it takes a very different form.

A woman appears through a second opening, situated opposite the first one. She looks young. Her face is completely covered with black and red patterns, and is pierced by the same kind of little sticks as our earlier female passenger, through the nose and cheeks. Tiny bouquets of flowers have been slipped through her ears. A large red cloth is wrapped around her hips, hanging about mid-thigh.

She gets closer and shows us a small bracelet of blue and white beads adorning her wrist.

"Ya pouhy," she says.

"She is asking whether you have any beads to give her," translates Juan.

Unfortunately, while we may have a few packs of cigarettes, we have no beads like these. We do have those necklaces given to us by the people of Terre-Rouge, but would not want to part with their gift. I shake my head negatively. She does not insist, and sits down by the old woman.

I get up and walk up to a bow and three arrows resting against the wall. As I had already noticed, the bows are exactly like those used by the other ethnic groups we have met. It is the same kind of wood, a hard wood, flexible yet very resistant. The rope is made from braided lianas, secured to the bow by simple knots. But it is the arrows that fascinate me. They have nothing in common with those used by the Guaribo or Pieroa Indians. They are at least twelve inches longer, the reed is thicker, and they seem much more finely worked.

First, the points are made out of wood, not iron. All three arrow points are different. The first one is big, wide and thick, almost like the tip of those picks used by soldiers in the Middle Ages. It is inserted in the reed's extremity and secured by a very thin thread wrapped around it several times.

"This is a war arrow," explains Juan, "but is reserved for hunting now. It is very good for large game, and it can be used without curare. The one next to it is only used to shoot monkeys," he continues, pointing to a second one, long, slender, and highly sharpened.

It reminds me of the large knitting needles my grandmother used. It is apparently secured to the reed in the same way as the first one, but the reed has been split open to hug the point more tightly, which gives an almond shape to its cross-section. The point is coated with a blackish substance, identical to the one used on the tip of my Panare blowpipe darts: curare. The third arrow point is made from a small bone carved into a highly sharpened arc, and attached to a small piece of wood tied to the arrow's body, thus creating a kind of harpoon.

"This one is only used to shoot birds," he declares.

I now look at the feather fletching of the arrows' lower extremities. They have been joined together with a high level of

originality and aesthetic concern. They are not simply cut and squarely attached, as was done in the northern tribes. No, here we have two big black feathers, cleaned of their barbs on one side, and bound to the reed in parallel, giving the impression that there is just one feather, the shaft of which constitutes the arrow's body.

Juan explains that this arrangement causes the arrow to spin upon itself as it is shot, thus going further faster. Then, in the same tone of voice, he says:

"Give me your shirt."

I look at him. Two years ago, such a request would have surprised me, nay, offended me. But our previous experiences have given us the opportunity to learn about this surprising culture, this Amerindian spirit, and now I know that I can say no, as dryly as he has just spoken to me, and that no grudge will be held, that everything here is done without ulterior motives. On the other hand, there is something that I would not mind having...

"Give me your bow and arrows," I reply.

His face shows no surprise, no dissatisfaction, but no acquiescence either. He is silently thinking about the exchange, staring in front of him. Then he looks at me and sighs.

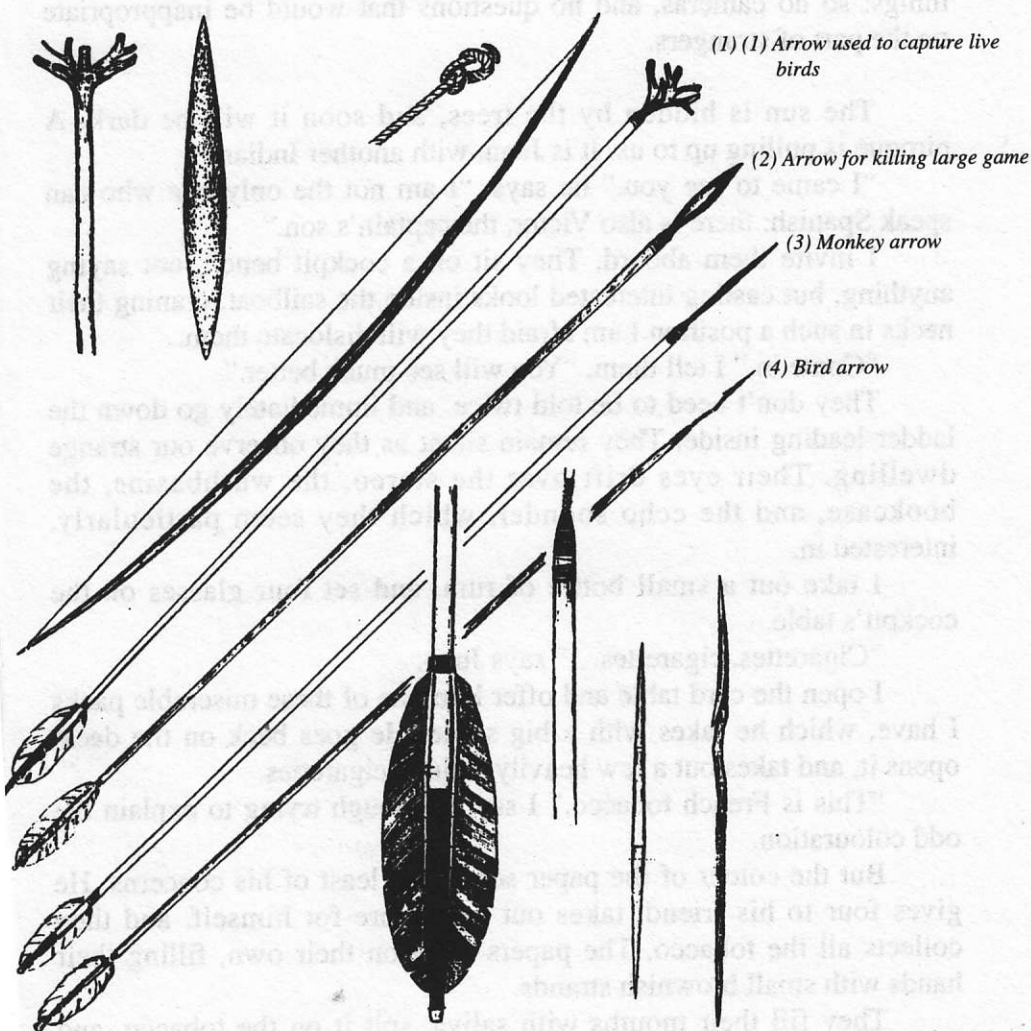
"Take it," he says.

I take off my shirt, give it to him, and take possession of the handmade weapon, after which we go back to the boat.

We now have to look for cigarettes. It seems a much-appreciated commodity. I search the chests under the berth and in the front cabin, and end up finding about twenty cartons of cigarettes. They had not moved since our departure from France. Unfortunately, despite the many layers of plastic used to protect them, humidity has taken its toll, and these four years of navigation have been fatal. The paper has gone from white to a yellowish maroon, some cigarette have burst open, and when we try to pull out the others, the tobacco falls apart to the bottom of the pack. What a mess!

Still, I keep the stash at hand. It would be a shame to throw it all away.

Looking though the porthole, I realise they are all on the bank, men, women, children, and the elderly, mostly naked, and switching



each other with strips of red cloth to keep the mosquitoes away while they are observing us.

I would like to go back to the village, but it is probably better not to appear too curious for now. Anyway, we have plenty of time. We have to let them get used to our presence, slowly, without rushing things: so no cameras, and no questions that would be inappropriate on the part of strangers.

The sun is hidden by the trees, and soon it will be dark. A pirogue is pulling up to us. It is Juan, with another Indian.

"I came to see you," he says. "I am not the only one who can speak Spanish: there is also Victor, the captain's son."

I invite them aboard. They sit on a cockpit bench, not saying anything, but casting interested looks inside the sailboat, craning their necks in such a position I am afraid they will dislocate them.

"Come in," I tell them, "You will see much better."

They don't need to be told twice, and immediately go down the ladder leading inside. They remain silent as they observe our strange dwelling. Their eyes drift over the stereo, the washbasins, the bookcase, and the echo sounder, which they seem particularly, interested in.

I take out a small bottle of rum, and set four glasses on the cockpit's table.

"Cigarettes, cigarettes..." says Juan.

I open the card table and offer him one of these miserable packs I have, which he takes with a big smile. He goes back on the deck, opens it, and takes out a few heavily stained cigarettes.

"This is French tobacco," I say, as though trying to explain the odd colouration.

But the colour of the paper seems the least of his concerns. He gives four to his friend, takes out four more for himself, and then collects all the tobacco. The papers open on their own, filling their hands with small brownish strands.

They fill their mouths with saliva, spit it on the tobacco, and then knead the resulting blackish paste. They mix it thoroughly, conscientiously, until it forms a kind of large smooth olive, the same way our passengers had done in the morning.

While he is doing this, Juan explains to me that tobacco is very important to them. They don't smoke it, but keep it in their mouth to flavour their saliva, thus providing a kind of constant stimulant. They feel powerful with this unusual ball stuck between their gums and their lip.

In their former village, there was a tobacco plantation next to their parcels, but the seedlings they had brought did not take root, and their former plantation is too far away for them to go back and get new ones. Every now and then, they manage to get a few packs of tobacco from the gold diggers coming back from the mountains, but these occasions are quite rare.

To make this tobacco olive, they need three to four cigarettes, or half a tobacco leaf. It will last them three days. They only take it out to eat or to drink.

I serve the rum. They put their tobacco balls on the table, take their glasses, and take a small sip. A horrible expression distorts their so far smiling faces. Victor seems overtaken by a kind of muscular spasm that completely disfigures him.

"Leave it if you don't like it," I say.

"No, no, it's very good," he replies.

Immediately, he downs the rest of his drink. The shock is harsh; he half opens his mouth, shakes his head, shivers, then lets out a curious bbbaaarrhhhaaakkk, followed by the violent trembling of his whole body. His glass is empty, and he puts it down with a satisfied air.

Juan is taking it more slowly, and has no problems. But from now on, I will only offer them water and cordial when they will come for a visit.

I take advantage of their presence to ask them to teach us some of this Yanomami dialect. Getting to know a people starts by learning their language, which usually exhibits all their particularities. They seem flattered by this unexpected request, and propose to come back every now and then, at about this time of day, to teach us Yanomami.

The first lesson is extremely interesting. I ask them about certain key words commonly used in Western languages. Things like "hello" or "good evening" are not part of their vocabulary, and neither are words like "thank you", "please", and other such expressions of what

we call politeness, but might as well call hypocrisy. None of this burdens their language. To say, "goodbye", they say, "I'm leaving", "please" can only be translated as "I want", and as for "hello", why say it? It should be obvious that someone is there or coming!

They only count up to two. Beyond two, they show their fingers, and if there is more than ten of something, they say "a lot". As for all these more modern words like "read", "write", "trousers", they don't exist in Yanomami. If the need arises, such words are borrowed from Spanish.

Conjugation is very straightforward. The verb never changes, only the subject. To express a past or present tense, "yesterday", "tomorrow", "before", or "after" can be added before the verb. As for the time of day, it is indicated by pointing to the relevant position of the sun.

It is a very expressive dialect, accompanied by a variety of facial expressions and tonal variations. Sounds are more or less accentuated, depending on how much emphasis one wants to draw to a word. These accents intensify meaning. For example, "a lot" is "pluka", but if there is really a lot of something, it is not "pluka" but "pluuuuka". And if the quantity is even greater, it turns into "pluuuuuuukaaaaaaaa", said with a wide embracing gesture to further add to the impression of there being a really enormous amount.

But it is getting late, and I already have a whole page filled with new words and phrases. I stop the lesson, and ask Victor:

"What's your name?"

"Victor," he answers.

"Yes, but what is your Yanomami name, the name that was given to you by your father, not by the missionaries: the name your own people call you. You do have a Yanomami name, don't you? What is it?"

He seems as embarrassed as Juan when I had asked him the same question earlier. He looks at his friend, looks at me, hesitates, smiles a forced smile that hides something much deeper. At this point, I realise that this question is extremely disturbing for them, but it is too late already.

"Ichiminawe," he says very softly, staring at the floor.

"Ichiminawe? But that's a very beautiful name," I tell him.

I take my pen and start to write "Ichiminawe" on the page.

"No, don't do this!" he yells violently, "The spirits of the dead are against it, and I will die if you write it down!"

Victor is shattered. I cross out the few letters already on the sheet, and apologise for having broken this unknown rule. Juan explains to me that each Yanomami is given a name in the year of his birth, but that none of them may tell it to a stranger. It is forbidden, and the spirits keep watch. None may break this rule without risking the thread of his life to be cut short.

"I will not repeat it," I reassure him. "In fact, I have already forgotten it."¹

The night has fallen, the moon is long in coming up, and the darkness thickens. Juan and Victor climb down to their pirogue and go back to the village.

The next day, we meet Tikixowe, the captain of the tribe. He is a tall and strong fellow, with a frank and intelligent expression that takes his interlocutor by surprise. With shorter hair and western clothing, he could pass as an engineer or a senior executive. But he can neither read nor write, and does not speak a word of Spanish. His life is the same as that of the other Indians. He sleeps in a hammock, not far from his two wives and his many children. He cultivates his parcel himself, and regularly goes hunting with his bow and arrows. Besides, he is not asking for anything else; this life perfectly satisfies him. We offer him a beautiful blue pair of shorts, two packets of cigarettes, and two jars of marmalade. This is pretty standard procedure: in the immense lands reserved for Amerindian tribes, it is a matter of principle for newcomers to give presents to the captain of the village.

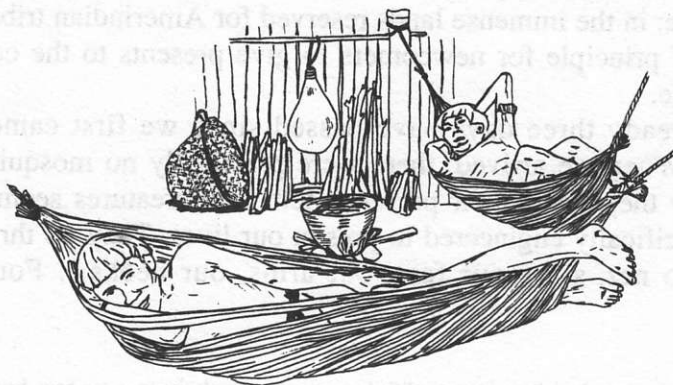
Already three days have passed since we first came to this village. When we arrived, there were practically no mosquitoes, but gradually they made their presence felt. The creatures seem to have been specifically engineered to poison our lives. They go through the mosquito net, sting our feet, our arms, our necks... Four insect

(1) The names given here have been modified so as not to break the trust we have been so lucky to receive from these people.

repellent coils are permanently lit in the cockpit, diffusing their toxic fumes fairly efficiently. Still, we have to stay cooped up inside the boat, a second net barring the door. This way, the place is endurable. Fifteen days, said the man on the Casiquiare...we are still lucky to have been held up in Puerto Ayacucho.

The first week passes by like this. We hardly go ashore. It becomes too annoying to dress up like Tuaregs, and still to come back neurotically scratching ourselves. According to the Indians, there are no mosquitoes in the village. They stay close to the water. Yet these people frequently come to get water, wash up, look at the boat, and call out for us to give them cigarettes. How did they get used to this calamity?

Step by step we build up a kind of dialogue, and a friendly climate is slowly established. At dusk, when the mosquitoes disappear and the light turns almost mystical, when the eyes can rest and the body relax, some of them come to pay us a visit. Sometimes they bring a bow, sometimes arrows, sometimes the little sheath they use to put away the curare-coated points. We give them tobacco, the little blue packets having turned out to be very useful indeed. Juan says he much prefers it to the light tobacco he gets from gold diggers in exchange for a few banana clusters. Ours is stronger and lasts longer: they can keep it up to four days in their mouths.



XIII

LAST DWELLING PLACE

The sky is overcast today, and the rain relentless. Our jerry cans are full; we have no need for more drinking water. A new leak has appeared right above the berth; yet another infiltration in the covering of the deck, at the height of the centreboard. We are out of mastic, so our only solution is to keep a saucepan underneath it, which is not very pleasant.

We can hear some screams coming from the village. A man's voice is repeating the same thing over and over.

"Ya pouhy, ya pouhy, ya pouhy, ya pouhy,..." he screams, meaning "I want, I want, I want, I want..."

What exactly does he want? He doesn't say what he wants, but he wants something. He keeps wanting and wanting; it has lasted for over two hours now. Maybe they are sniffing yopo, this hallucinogenic powder Juan has told me about. It would not be very wise to bother them at this time.

Despite the thunderous rattle of the rain in the trees, we can hear them screaming from here. And there goes a second one, who suddenly "wants" as well:

"Ya pouhy, ya pouhy, ya pouhy..."

Now and then we can also hear a woman moaning and crying, her wailing interspersed by the other two's "ya pouhy".

Eleven pm. The rain has not stopped, except for a very short respite just before dusk. The forest seems covered by a deep and dark

mask. Even the trees' silhouettes are invisible through these black torrents of water falling from the sky.

Spells of bad weather follow each other relentlessly. Heavy lightning tears up the pouring sky. The infernal avalanche is crushing us down like insects.

In the Amazonian forest, storms are really spectacular. They really cannot be compared to what is seen in the European countryside. You can hear them coming from afar, they seem to be everywhere at once: on the Casiquiare to the north, on the Orinoco to the east, on the Rio Negro to the west.

Thunder is not the ordinary sharp snap we know but a deafening boom resonating on each channel and each river of the area, rolling back towards you for at least thirty seconds. In Amazonia, a storm is like a dress rehearsal for the Apocalypse to come.

That night, we experience our journey's most violent storm of all. For over two hours we are assaulted by a multitude of electrical discharges, coming from every direction at once. Huge luminous arcs streak the thick layer of opaque clouds. A violent wind heaves the boat across the current, makes it list almost to the surface of the river's now permanent swell. We are shaken by the continuous stream of waves crashing against the hull. It seems to have no end.

It is nine when we wake up the next morning. The sky is absolutely clear. The storm has scrubbed clean the celestial arch, now an immaculate cerulean blue. The sailboat is wrapped in a huge glowing cloud of white, yellow and orange butterflies.

No one is on the bank, not a single woman is bathing, not a single child playing. The five pirogues are still moored in the same spot. Everything is unusually calm, and not a sound is coming from the village.

We have a quick breakfast and go ashore. The kind of lethargy that has overtaken the place is deeply intriguing. We reach the carbets. A woman, sitting on the still-wet ground, is crying softly, contemplating the little red shorts she is gripping in her hands. I take out my Yanomami glossary and walk up to the unhappy creature. Her face is bathed in tears. She looks up to us, handing us the small shorts with a deep sob, then points to a nearby dwelling.

At this precise moment, Juan appears from the trail leading to the parcels. Three Indian men are following him, each carrying a heavy load of wood on their backs. It is actually the first time we see men carrying wood: this activity usually being executed by women.

I take the small red shorts from the poor girl's hands, but she holds firmly onto them. Perhaps we are just supposed to touch them. She points a second time to the same carbet. This is all very strange, and we wonder what she is trying to tell us. The village's carbets are disposed in a circle, thus creating a kind of plaza, in the middle of which the earth has been packed down over two or three metres.

Suddenly, a terrible scream comes out of the aforementioned carbet, the howl of a possessed woman. Dread fills the first woman's face; she falls down on her knees, moaning and pulling out her hair. Juan is there. I turn to him questioningly.

"Her brother is dead," he explains, pointing to the woman, now curled on the ground. "He died last night. The brujos could not chase away the evil spirit inside him. We will incinerate him a little later."

He drops his load of wood at the future cremation site, and tells us to follow him. The howls have stopped; or rather have turned into a long and plaintive moan. He raises the dried palms used as a door, and goes inside the carbet of the deceased. We crouch down and follow him: the door is very low, which makes it hard to get in.

The thick darkness inside adds a certain something to this funereal atmosphere that sends cold shivers down your spine. We can see absolutely nothing. There is not a single opening to let in some light. The pungent smell of smoke, mingled with that of cooked vegetables, irritates our eyes and nostrils. The thin voice of a very old woman is humming an almost wordless funeral chant.

We can now distinguish a few silhouettes. Juan is squatting a few metres from us. On the left, near the entrance, the livid face of a young woman appears in the flickering light of a weak fire.

The howling resumes. I stare at the darkness from which emerges this painful and desperate cry, and glimpse a kneeling shape, slowly rocking a hammock.

The howl turns into a deep sob. The chanting is still as sad, as mournful, as poignant, and it would be hard to imagine any other kind

of accompaniment for the moaning and weeping of the poor prostrated woman.

Juan stands up, walks over to the fire on the left, and collects a few embers. He comes back, and we can hear him moving a few pieces of wood about, then blowing hard on the embers. Flames shoot up, violently illuminating the whole carbet. Not that the light is harsh, but our eyes have got used to the suffocating darkness.

The pitiful scene we could barely make out now appears in all its tragedy. The weeping woman is very young. Her naked body is entirely covered by a thin layer of dust. Untidy hair frames a face convulsed with pain and wet with tears. She is kneeling with a distracted look on her face..

Next to her, in a simple liana hammock, is the body of a child. He looks merely asleep. The boy is between eight and twelve years old. Round cheeks, smooth skin: his face has the freshness of youth, and shows none of what betrays the weight of their years on the faces of men. Death took him thus: no one knows when his time will come.

We stay immobile like this for a very long time, waiting for God-knows-what, contemplating this heart-wrenching scene, this afflicted soul pouring out her grief before the child's inert body. Juan is squatting nearby, frozen as well. The child's death seems to have left everyone paralysed.

We can hear screams outside, fierce, bitter, violent screams. The palm door is raised open, and three men come in, gesticulating as though they were fighting an invisible enemy. The first two are waving large and heavy machetes above their heads, yelling like possessed souls. The third one is holding a huge lance, three or four metres long, with a highly sharpened iron point. He seems to be looking for someone, or something. His eyes scan to the right, to the left, then appear to have found what they were looking for in the back, in a spot where I see absolutely nothing. He runs over there, running his lance through the air, letting out a roar closer to that of a beast than that of a man.

The other two walk up to the body and execute a kind of danse macabre, sweeping the air with their machetes. The woman is desperate; she hits the ground with her fists, yelling out her pain with ever-renewed force. The woman we had noticed earlier, by the first

flickering fire, spills out in tears, moaning loudly, almost hysterically. This scene, the most poignant I have ever witnessed, lasts only a few minutes. The two men stop dancing, grab the child's hammock by its extremities, and cut the cords that held it to the pillars. They carry the body outside, and we follow them.

The light outside is blinding. The sun is already high up in the sky. The funeral pyre has been lit, and the people of the village have gathered around it, waiting. The women are all weeping. Their lamentations, mingling with the men's yelling and chanting, make for a chilling concerto.

The body, still in its hammock, is delicately laid on the pyre. The boy's locks catch fire immediately, giving off the strong smell of singed hair. I now see that the two pallbearers have painted their faces black, into a horrible mask that would easily frighten any child back home. They cover the body with more wood, as a light gust of wind revives the flames. The flames get higher and higher, the heat increases rapidly. The skin blackens and cracks. I think I see the right hand's fingers move, curling up into a fist; but this is probably just an optical illusion.

The smoke gets thicker and thicker. The men are brandishing their machetes again, slicing through the dark column of smoke rising up above the flames, as though trying to chase away any remaining evil spirits. Another man, much older, jerks his arms about rapidly, as though he were trying to catch this smoke, or perhaps channel it elsewhere. The women's lamentations seem to have no end: as soon as they weaken somewhat, they pick up again with more intensity, more of their virulent energy.

The smell of burnt flesh is now everywhere. Slowly, the blackened shapeless mass of the dead boy reappears under the flame, in a final goodbye to the audience gathered around him. The two Indian men stop their strange combat and add more sticks of wood on top of the body. The smell becomes acrid, almost sickly sweet. We back off a few metres.

The deceased has been feeding the flames for over half an hour already. The smoke has gone from black to grey, then from grey to white. People are leaving in small groups, going back to their own homes. We sit down on a tree trunk, about fifty metres from the

funeral pyre, and motionlessly observe the scene. Only the closest family members remain.

The fire has gone out. It would be very difficult to recognize a human body in this pile of ashes, which are still warm. Two little girls and one little boy walk over to us. They do not seem overly affected by the recent events. The boy whispers in Claudette's ear:

"Toffees..."

My wife looks in her pockets and hands them out a few of the chewy sweets she always brings ashore.

An hour passes. Each gust of wind sends ashes flying over the village. The mother and sister of the boy walk over to the pyre. They are both carrying a small and skilfully woven red basket called "boitura". They will certainly collect the child's ashes to bury them in some sacred place in the forest.

Slowly sinking their hands in the black mass, they seem to be looking for something, fiddling in the ashes conscientiously. The girl takes out a hard and rather long bone, either the tibia or the femur since she is standing by what used to be the legs of the body. She delicately removes the mortuary dust stuck on its surface, and then puts it in her little red basket. She sinks her hands again in her brother's remains, and takes out a second, then a third bone.

The mother seems to be meeting with more difficulties. She is searching where the head was, but the skull is crumbling between her fingers. Nevertheless, she manages to recover the jaw, almost intact, with all its teeth, and then the cervical vertebrae. In less than half an hour, the two baskets are full of charred bones.

Claudette is completely horrified. The actions she is witnessing seem too horrible to be real. Her subconscious refuses to accept it. Such is the nature of our Western culture that she finds it hard to accept that anyone could manipulate someone's remains in this way, with their bare hands, much less the deceased's mother and sister. The very principles of her peasant education have just been whipped to the bone. But perhaps this will be a step forward towards this tiny light shining brightly in the darkness, this distant star we call Truth. In the long run, what are we but a mere pile of dust and ashes?

All the bones have been collected by now. Nothing distinguishes the mortuary ashes from those of the pyre. It is all nothing but a blackened mass, occasionally stirred by a gust of wind that sends specks of the boy's remains flying over the village.

The two women go back to their carbet, carrying the calabashes full of bones. No one is crying anymore, no more lamentations can be heard. Perhaps the fire, by destroying the body, also destroyed the heavy clouds of mourning. But everything can be an illusion, and if their sweet faces are no longer ravaged with tears and convulsions, the tragic sadness of their features indicates without a doubt that their inner pain is still intense, and is a lot more moving and poignant than the pain that generates endless scream and tears. Their sadness is that of the soul.

The women have disappeared into their carbet. There is nobody left in the small plaza, except for a few carefree frolicking children who sometimes glance furtively in our direction.

What can we do? Curiosity tells me to follow them into the carbet, but we don't know these people very well, which makes this rather delicate. If Juan was there, we could at least ask him to take us inside. Claudette is torn between the terror triggered by the last few hours and the same curiosity that fills me. I contemplate the pile of ashes. There goes the body of a child. Yanomami, my friend, so this will be the issue of your life on earth...

We wait like this for a long time, hoping for something else to happen, for Juan to walk by, or anyone really. But the village is silent, almost meditative, and even the forest seems lethargic.

The door of the carbet is lifted up once more. A man comes out. This is Matakoiima, Yaupewe's brother. His entire body is covered with red and black painted motifs, and blue macaw feathers decorate his arms. He goes into Juan's carbet. A few moments later, he comes back out with two more men, similarly adorned. All are now wearing bows and arrows. One of them carries a large white wooden pestle. The first man, seeing us, raises his bow up above his head and lets out a ferocious roar. What does all this mean? The other two imitate him, gesticulating madly and yelling like furious beasts. My blood slows in

my veins. I don't think they have anything against us, but this extraordinary event, this whole gruesome scenario, is somewhat upsetting. They walk towards the funeral carbet in this same ferocious attitude, and go inside.

The plaza is deserted again. Even the children are gone. What is the reason behind this whole masquerade? We can hear the men roaring like enraged tigers. What is going on in there? We wait like this for half an hour, maybe more. The screams and roars have stopped, but the lamentations have resumed. I am consumed by curiosity. It is unbearable to know that a mere fifty metres away, some extraordinary scene is probably taking place, certainly something that very few people have seen, and yet to be sitting on this stump, unable to see anything.

It must be pretty late, two thirty, maybe three in the afternoon: the sun is definitely on its way down. There are plenty of butterflies at this time of the day, but we really don't feel like chasing after them.

The door of the carbet is being lifted again; Juan has finally reappeared. I wave to him. With a small gesture of the hand, he invites us to join him. We approach. He holds the door open for us and we go in. The opening is even smaller than the one leading into his home. He closes the door behind us.

Again we are swallowed by a thick darkness. A cauldron is heating on the glowing embers of the fire closest to the door. It is difficult to see what is inside, but it smells like boiled bananas. A little further, a dozen people are gathered around a second fire, squatting or sitting on the ground, though a few are standing up. They are all holding bows and arrows, solemnly, their arms pointing straight ahead. One is letting out small cries that sound more like a yapping dog than like a roaring jaguar.

The two women are kneeling on the ground. The weak reflection of the flames on their skin adds to the harmonious shapes of their prostrate bodies, giving them a tragic quality that further amplifies the gruesome atmosphere that pervades the entire dwelling.

In the middle of the group, one of the ferociously painted men is sitting not far from the fire, and holds a massive solid wood container

between his two hands. Another man, the first one we had seen, is conscientiously crushing whatever is inside with the wooden pestle: crush, rotate, crush, rotate... We walk a little closer to them. A third woman has just removed the cauldron from the fire. She stirs its contents with a long wooden stick, then leaves it in a small recess of the carbet.

The man with the pestle is still crushing away. The other one regularly removes the resulting powder and, using a banana leaf as a funnel, pours it in the narrow opening of a large calabash, while letting out these odd puppy cries.

Everything is accomplished with a kind of quiet solemnity, but the pallid light of the fire adds a frighteningly surreal quality to the scene that freezes us to the core.

This sensation is heightened as our eyes get used to this cavernous darkness. Details become clearer, more distinct. We begin to make out the paintings covering the men's bodies, the macaw feathers adorning their arms, and then the half-empty basket of bones next to the grinding man. So this is what he does his utmost to reduce to dust, carefully and precisely: the charred remains of the poor child who died in the middle of the night.

This thing we are witnessing is a picture of a different world, a frightening vision in which we have been engulfed. It feels like a nightmare. Actually, not a nightmare, but rather a kind of dream that has nothing whatsoever to do with reality, as we know it.

We are waiting, frozen upright by this nightmarish situation, which we would never have been able to imagine. We barely dare to breathe during this atrocious scene. Once more Nimotawe grinds the bones into a fine greyish bone dust, emptying it with all the care in the world into the calabash, with the help of his banana leaf funnel.

During this time, holding the pestle in his left hand, Matakoiima sinks his right hand into the bone basket, then takes out a few curved pieces: the child's ribs.

He sets them carefully in the middle of the wooden mortar, raises the pestle up in the air, and lets it bear down forcefully on these human fragments. A light cracking sound can be heard. He twists the

pestle against the bones, using the weight of his body to increase the applied pressure, and then starts all over again. The resulting muffled and repetitive sound fills our ears.

A few moments later, Nimotawe spreads a new banana leaf on the ground. Matakoïma stops his tragic labour, hands the pestle to another Indian sitting nearby, and grabs the heavy container to empty it over the spread-out banana leaves. The powder settles into a small whitish cone.

Nimotawe funnels this into the calabash. The two women are still weeping, tears continuously streaming down their livid cheeks. We observe this edifying scene patiently, but it seems interminable. One by one, each bone is crushed into a fine powder: from the smallest to the biggest, the most solid to the most friable, the whitest to the most charred one.

Only a few fragments still remain in the red basket. Nimotawe grabs a handful, crushes it quickly, and empties it over the leaves spread out on the ground. At the end, he simply turns the basket over the mortar, and shakes it until it is completely empty.

During this time, the other Indians have not moved at all; they are not so much spectators as witnesses. These fragments, this whitish dust, were still a loved one only yesterday. His spirit has now followed that of his ancestors.

The calabash is almost full. The wrinkled face of an old woman appears next to us. She is holding an enormous receptacle, made from a huge calabash. She walks over to the cauldron and pours half of its contents into this improvised bowl, which she rests on the ground. The colour of his "soup" is halfway between yellow and a kind of lime green. She puts the half-empty cauldron back where it was, takes the bowl, and brings it into the middle of the group. The men move out of the way to let her pass. She sets it down next to Matakoïma.

The women's weeping doubles in intensity; it is punctuated once again by painful moans and high-pitched screams nearing hysteria. Matakoïma grabs the calabash containing the boy's ashes, and holds it between his hands with a religious solemnity bordering on exaltation.

The scene is extraordinarily poignant. It feels like something coming from the calabash is reaching us straight to the core. The other Indians have not moved from their places, but some are twisting upon

themselves, as though horrible demons were tormenting them from inside.

Matakoïma tips the calabash over this huge bowl of yellowish liquid, and slowly pours the ashes into it. The bone dust comes out from the large brown container in a thin greyish stream. He empties about half of this powder, then sets the calabash aside. He takes the wooden stick that Nimotawe gives him, and gently stirs the strange mixture.

Putting down the wooden stick, he sinks his hand in the mixture, to scoop out some of the liquid with the palm of his hand. Carefully, so as not to let a single drop escape, he begins to drink this very slowly. Once done, he repeats the same scenario again. Nimotawe comes closer, holding a small cup, also made from half a calabash. He fills it with this soup of bones and ashes, then drinks its contents avidly.

It had seemed to me, with the vision of the dead child's remains being pounded and crushed into powder, that I had reached the limit of what could go beyond the reality of things as I conceived them. I now realise it was just a threshold. But my mind is still too troubled by the successive upheavals that have shaken it in the last few hours. Storms have come to shake, one by one, the still solidly anchored lineaments of my own western culture. These stormy winds have raised waves of turmoil, and I still cannot find the strength of reflection necessary for me to calmly analyse what is happening before my eyes. I am there, standing upright, frozen, like an automaton whose mechanism has not been rewound.

One by one, they all approach the receptacle, grab the cup, fill it with this incredible mixture and bring it to their lips. One of the two women does not even bother with the little wooden cup, plunging her two hands straight into the big calabash and then drinking avidly at length, as though trying to quench some strange inexpressible thirst. Actually, it seems that this funerary absorption has done her some good, since her tears have stopped flowing.

The container is now almost empty. All have drunk once or twice. A fair share of the child's bones has been ingested in this way. Matakoïma takes the funereal calabash containing the other half of the



The bones of the dead child are turned into a fine white powder.

remains and sets it against a pillar not far from the fire. A few Indians nonchalantly come out of the carbet. We follow them. The sunlight blinds us a little. We go back to sit on the tree stump.

I feel a bit stunned by all that we have seen. The brain, the mind, is not unlike the stomach: you can only ingest so much at once, otherwise you get a kind of indigestion. My ideas are still unclear and disordered. In my mind, I see the child, as he was this very morning, then I see this thin stream of ashes flowing out of the calabash, and then this yellowish soup. It is a little like a movie, projected on an invisible screen right in front of me. I can't help it; it is a kind of hallucination, a waking dream. It doesn't matter if I close my eyes: those stupefying images keep marching in my mind.

Still, I don't feel any horror, any disgust or any revulsion facing these facts. It is more as though something has wedged itself between the very principles of my western culture and this faint glimmer we call Truth. After all, could we dream of a better burial place than the warm living bodies of our loved ones?

Juan comes out of the carbet as well and walks over to us. 'It's our culture...' he says gently, faintly embarrassed, as though apologising for some misdeed that had done us wrong.

My poor Juan, it pains me that you should feel any shame about this ceremony. Who indeed has the right to criticise your culture? Definitely not us, who have forgotten everything about our ancestral customs.

Your thoughts can be read in your eyes like words in bold type on top of a page. You think that these things are the doings of savages. But what do you think we are, we westerners caught in our materialism? Do you really think we have the monopoly of happiness on earth? Which of our two people has more to learn from the other? Which of the two is closer to the truth? Indeed, where does it hide, this truth that makes us all run in sometimes rather obscure, rather uncertain directions?

In the past, we the 'civilised' appreciated white bread. Why? Because there was also black bread! The black bread having disappeared, the white bread lost much of its apparent flavour. This is how life goes. Good taste, good things, pleasures, all need references

in order to exist. You couldn't have the positive without the negative, nor light without darkness. Would good exist if it weren't for evil? Who can really pretend to know happiness without having known misery?

It is all nothing but chimeras. The true value of things, the most precise dimension of this truth of life, it is to be found here, at the core of life, where the natural rules begotten by creation have not yet been falsified by the artificial values created by 'civilised' man.

