The Case of the Missing Chacmools

Soon after New Age icon and bestselling author Carlos Castaneda died in 1998, a group of his most loyal followers vanished, and many believed they'd made a suicide pact. Geoffrey Gray investigates the writer's bizarre cult and finds himself entangled in a web of murky financial dealings, sex, possible foul play—and one death-defying supernatural being.

Geoffrey Gray

Jun 20, 2024

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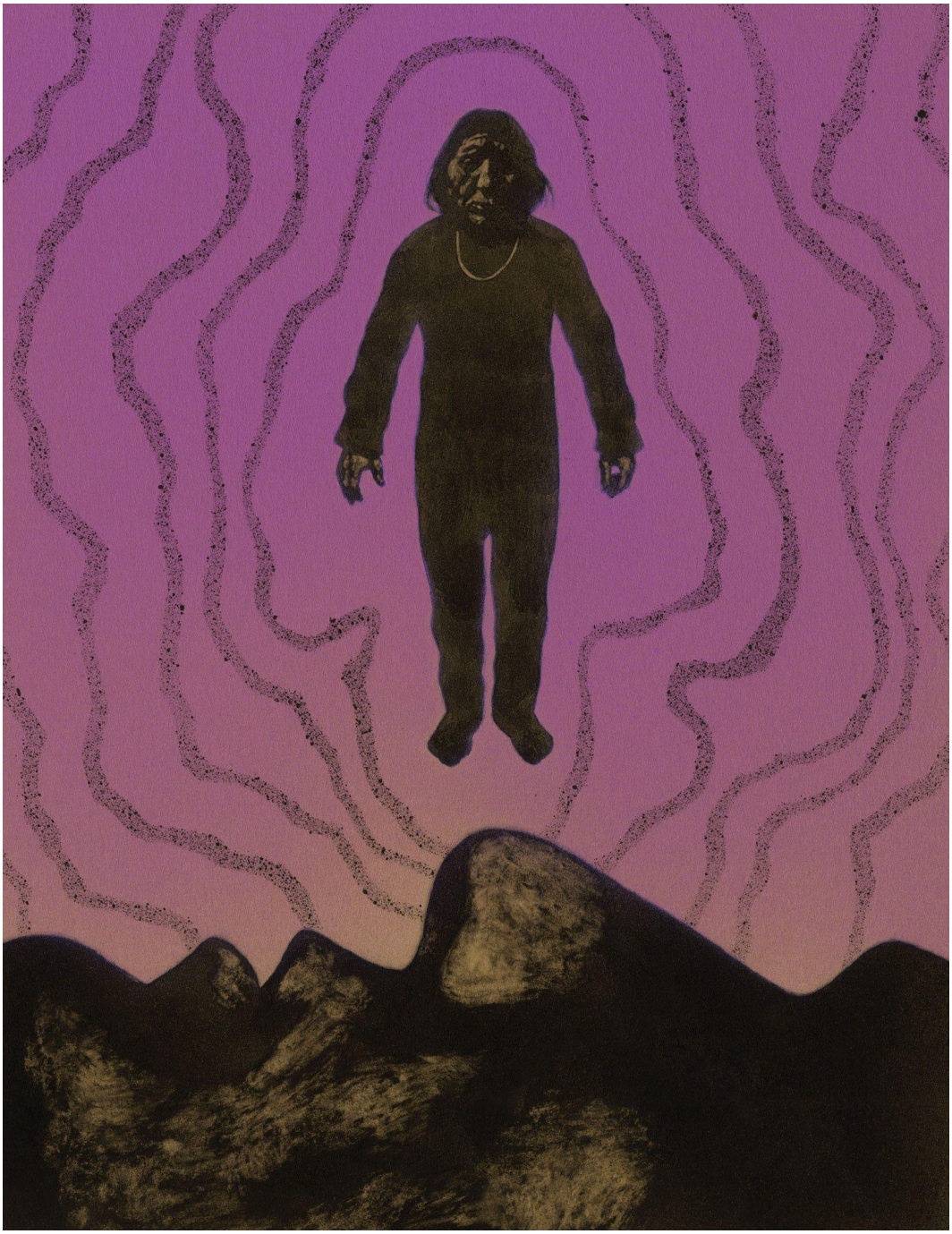


EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 1: The Missing Sister

Our talk goes late into the night. My office is dark, the only light spilling out from an old desk lamp onto a cache of documents from the cult: tax records, bank records, ancient spells, the death certificate.

Chris Ahlvers is on the line from a place she keeps outside Tucson; I'm on the outskirts of Mexico City where I live and work. She's telling me about her younger sister and wondering where she is. She and Dee Ann were very close. That's what happens between sisters when their mother dies and they are so young.

"There's no one that cares like a mother does," she says. "That connection is gone. You're abandoned."

After their mother passed, Chris assumed the role as best she could. She and Dee Ann grew up in the central Iowa community of Webster City, with its traditional downtown, old mills, and fairs. Chris watched as her younger sister—striking, with Scandinavian features, blond hair, high cheekbones, green eyes—became a star cheerleader in high school. Dee Ann was Miss Popular, everybody's crush.

But without a true maternal force, a proper anchor, Dee Ann sought acceptance in the wrong places. An unexpected pregnancy forced her to drop out of high school. Then she struggled to find work, forging checks to pay the rent and buy groceries. Another child came. At home, she felt trapped. To support her kids, she turned to sex work. She was homeless for a period, sleeping on park benches and at least once in the local jail. Dee Ann's world was a cold one. She was after something more.

"She wanted freedom," Chris says. "Freedom from this world, freedom from having to work and toil."

Spirituality was Dee Ann's escape hatch. She started reading New Age books, hanging out in sweat lodges, spending time with the local hippie set. It was the late 1970s, and, eventually, the inevitable next step was to head west, to move to California and find her guru.

"That was her mission," Chris says. "To find a man who would take her to the next spiritual level."

Chris remembers the scene in 1985 or 1986 when Dee Ann moved away. She packed a bag and jumped into a convertible with some new friends. Dee Ann left her two young children with Chris, and the kids screamed and cried and hollered as their mom sped off and abandoned them.

"She was laughing her ass off," Chris says. "She was free. She was free from the chains."

Dee Ann had wanted her sister to come with her. Together, they could escape, she promised. But Chris didn't go along, and that was one of the last times she ever saw her sister. After moving to Los Angeles, Dee Ann found her guru: the famous writer Carlos Castaneda.

She joined his cult and became a witch—as his female followers called themselves—or a chacmool, a word from ancient Mexico for revered statues depicting guardians of the gods. As part of her initiation, she changed her name. She became Kylie Lundahl.

Then she disappeared. Days after Castaneda died, in the spring of 1998, Dee Ann and five other chacmools mysteriously vanished. More than 25 years later, they are still missing.

EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 2: Find the Path

Chris Ahlvers had read Carlos Castaneda's books. So had Dee Ann. The titles were New Age staples, and Castaneda was a household name. He was among the top-selling authors of the '70s. *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* had started as a thesis project in the early '60s, only to find its way into the hands of Michael Korda, then a hungry young editor at Simon & Schuster, which snatched up the rights and distributed copies of it across the world. Korda went on to commission more Castaneda titles, turning the unknown grad student, who was then in his 40s, into a New Age franchise.

The Don Juan series—12 titles in all—is estimated to have sold more than 28 million copies globally, according to the website of Castaneda's former company, and most of the books are still in print. By 1973, people were buying 16,000 copies a week of *The Teachings*, and well-loved secondhand editions are often found in indie bookstores, hostels, and other places where young, curious minds gather.

Castaneda's books follow similar lines, each one documenting his relationship with Don Juan Matus, a *nagual*—a sorcerer and spiritual leader who possesses magical powers—whom he claimed to have met at an Arizona bus station in 1960. Back then, Castaneda was a struggling anthropology student at UCLA, seeking to learn the wise ways of the ancients, write up his fieldwork, and earn a master's degree.

As portrayed in Castaneda's series, Don Juan was a formidable mentor. He introduced the author to the wonders of peyote—or so the story goes—including a trip during which Castaneda allegedly turned into a crow and obtained animalistic and supernatural powers.

"For a sorcerer, reality, or the world we all know, is only a description," Don Juan tells Castaneda in *The Teachings*.

Supposedly holding the keys to another dimension, Don Juan reveals to Castaneda that our universe is only a front and that the unknown reality behind it is a complex system that knows no beginning or end, a multiverse of energy streams. Within these streams, there is "a crack between the worlds," he tells Castaneda, a chance to encounter and live in an infinite state. To do so, one has to become an impeccable warrior, radically in tune with oneself and the cosmos.

"A warrior is aware that the world will change as soon as he stops talking to himself," Don Juan says, "and he must be prepared for that monumental jolt."

Playing the naïve student, Castaneda asks Don Juan how to get started, where to turn onto the warrior's path.

The answer is easy.

"All paths are the same: they lead nowhere," Don Juan says. "Follow the path with heart!"

The wisdom of Don Juan made for a natural addition to the consciousness-expanding bookshelf of the late '60s, alongside Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* and Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Castaneda's accounts of his apprenticeship and far-out journeys with Don Juan were so popular that his Yaqui wise man became a cultural touchstone, inspiring musicians like Jim Morrison, Joni Mitchell, and John Lennon. George Lucas allegedly modeled Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars* after the shaman.

If only Don Juan were real. Even before *The Teachings* was published, while the manuscript was still a graduate student's thesis, questions were raised about its authenticity. After it was released as a book and soared in popularity, more questions arose. It was strange, anthropologists noted, that the Yaqui Don Juan would be into peyote when Yaqui cultural practices in Sonora did not incorporate the psychedelic. And it was odd, literary critics observed, that a shaman from a rural part of Mexico spoke like an Ivy League academic. Soon, journalists uncovered evidence of true deception. Not only were the Don Juan books a fraud, scholars concluded, but so was much of their author's life story. Castaneda was one of the greatest literary hoaxers of all time.

But as the controversy swirled, another mystery began to unfold. In the early 1970s, Castaneda virtually disappeared, shunning all but a few interviews and public appearances, but still writing books. Now earning a fortune each year in royalties, Castaneda purchased a compound on the fringes of the UCLA campus, where he formed a cult with dozens of followers, mostly young women who identified as his witches.

As a cult leader, Castaneda was a fetishist. He insisted on cutting the hair of his witches, giving them the same short, boyish look. He wanted them to bathe in water infused with rosemary, which he felt was a purifier. Intercourse with him was usually part of their indoctrination, and according to insiders, he would initiate sex with several witches at once.

The cult was a business, too. The chacmools ran their own company, earning payment for teaching Castaneda's methods and ideas in workshops and selling his books and T-shirts. While Castaneda and the witches were busy generating revenues, he claimed to be gathering enough energy to cheat death and live forever.

"We have to balance the lineality of the known universe with the nonlineality of the unknown universe," he said.

Castaneda's ambition to enter infinity, as he called the other dimension of life, became urgent after he was diagnosed with liver cancer in 1997. He died a year later, and six of his beloved witches disappeared. The only clues to their whereabouts were found on the desert floor in Death Valley. Among them: a red Ford Escort belonging to one disciple, discovered less than a week after the chacmools' disappearance, and then, some five years later, scraps of the disciple's pink jogging suit, a rusted pocketknife, and her partial skeleton nearby.

The discovery was perplexing. If these were the remains of one witch, where were the others? According to the L.A. County Registrar-Recorder's Office, the agency that tracks births and deaths, none of them have been declared dead. Yet as far as I can tell, none of their families have a clue what happened to their loved ones.

"It's a mystery," Dee Ann's sister, Chris, tells me. "They could have all blown their heads away in the desert.... Or they could have taken the money and gone to South America."

Chapter 3: Serve and Return

I first learned about the missing chacmools on the tennis court. During one of our matches—this was about a year ago—I noticed that my friend, the sculptor and multimedia artist François Bucher, had been playing suspiciously well. Every ball that came off his racket seemed to possess its own magical powers—dropping into out-of-reach spots for winners, gracing the line just so. One serve came at me so fast, the ball ricocheted against my racket frame, sailed high over the fence, and landed in the bushes. This was not the same Bucher I had trounced in our previous matches. During a changeover, I sat next to him, chugging my water and wondering what he had changed about his game.

"New coach?" I asked.

"The medicines," he said, running his fingers through his long hair.

He confessed that he'd taken mushrooms the previous night. He was tripping still.

"The medicines," he said again and removed a bamboo pipe from his tennis bag. He packed it with rapé, a mix of tobacco and Amazonian herbs. He lodged one end of the pipe in his nostril and the other end in his mouth and gave a massive puff. The snuff-like mix exploded in a cloud, and his words took off like a motorboat.

Bucher described some of his psychedelic adventures, including the time he'd spent with a shaman in the Amazon rainforest, and spoke of his fascination with Carlos Castaneda, an early influence.

Bucher had been a believer in Castaneda. He'd read a few of the books before discovering the theory that Castaneda had been a con man and had led a cult. "But did it matter to me that Don Juan might have been a concoction?" Bucher said. "Probably not. The bigger question is, What happened to the chacmools?"

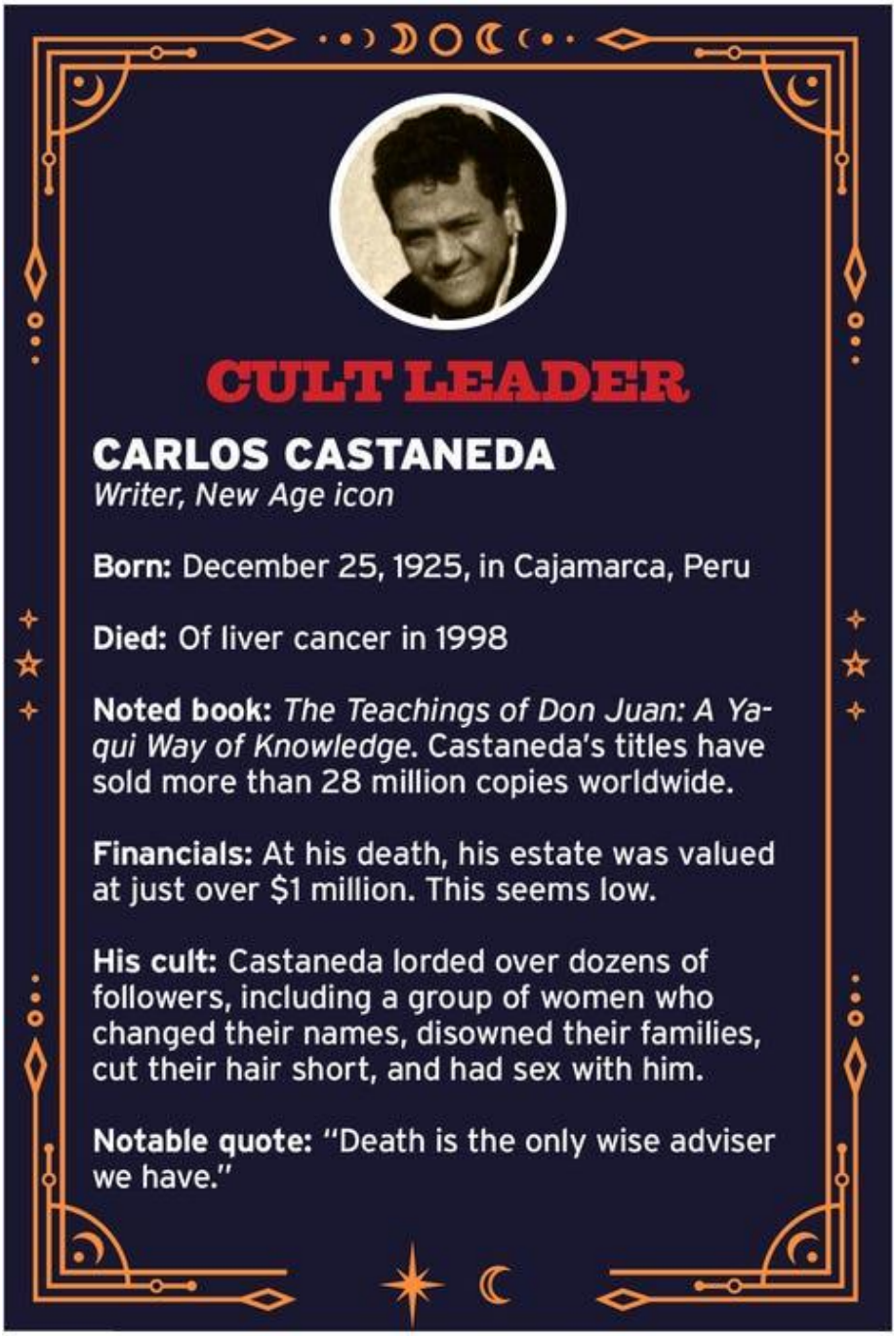
He took another bump from the bamboo pipe, the green powder covering his fingers and smudging his tennis whites.

"It would be interesting to follow the money," he said. With many of Castaneda's titles still in print, the income from his royalty checks must be significant. "Where is all that book money going?"

Bucher had thought about launching his own investigation. But with his art studio, his traveling, it all felt like too much.

"Maybe you could do it," he said.

Later that day, back in my office, I struggled to make sense of Bucher's tale. Coincidentally, I had just picked up a copy of *The Teachings of Don Juan* in a Mexico City bookstore, looking to dig in after all these years. I'd moved to Mexico several years ago, and reading it felt essential to learning the traditions of my adopted home.


CULT LEADER
CARLOS CASTANEDA
Writer, New Age icon
Born: December 25, 1925, in Cajamarca, Peru
Died: Of liver cancer in 1998
Noted book: The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge. Castaneda's titles have sold more than 28 million copies worldwide.
Financials: At his death, his estate was valued at just over $1 million. This seems low.
His cult: Castaneda lorded over dozens of followers, including a group of women who changed their names, disowned their families, cut their hair short, and had sex with him.
Notable quote: "Death is the only wise adviser we have."

Alta

As a teenager at boarding school, I had seen dog-eared copies of the book in the rooms of upperclassmen whom I admired and strived to be like. *The Teachings* was a bible to them, a totem, and, I later learned, a fake. Had we all been duped? How could Castaneda have made the entire Don Juan story up?

Beyond the hoax, a deeper mystery was at work with the chacmools. How did one of the top women in Castaneda's cult wind up dead in the desert and five of her counterparts go missing, at the same time, never to be seen again?

I looked up the word *chacmool* and saw pictures of statues from Mexico during the Toltec Empire. The large, carved figures represented slain warriors, each reclining and holding a bowl that contained offerings for the gods, often human hearts from sacrifices. The Chacmools could be male or female and were viewed as intermediaries between the ordinary and ethereal worlds, the gatekeepers between the mundane and the sublime.

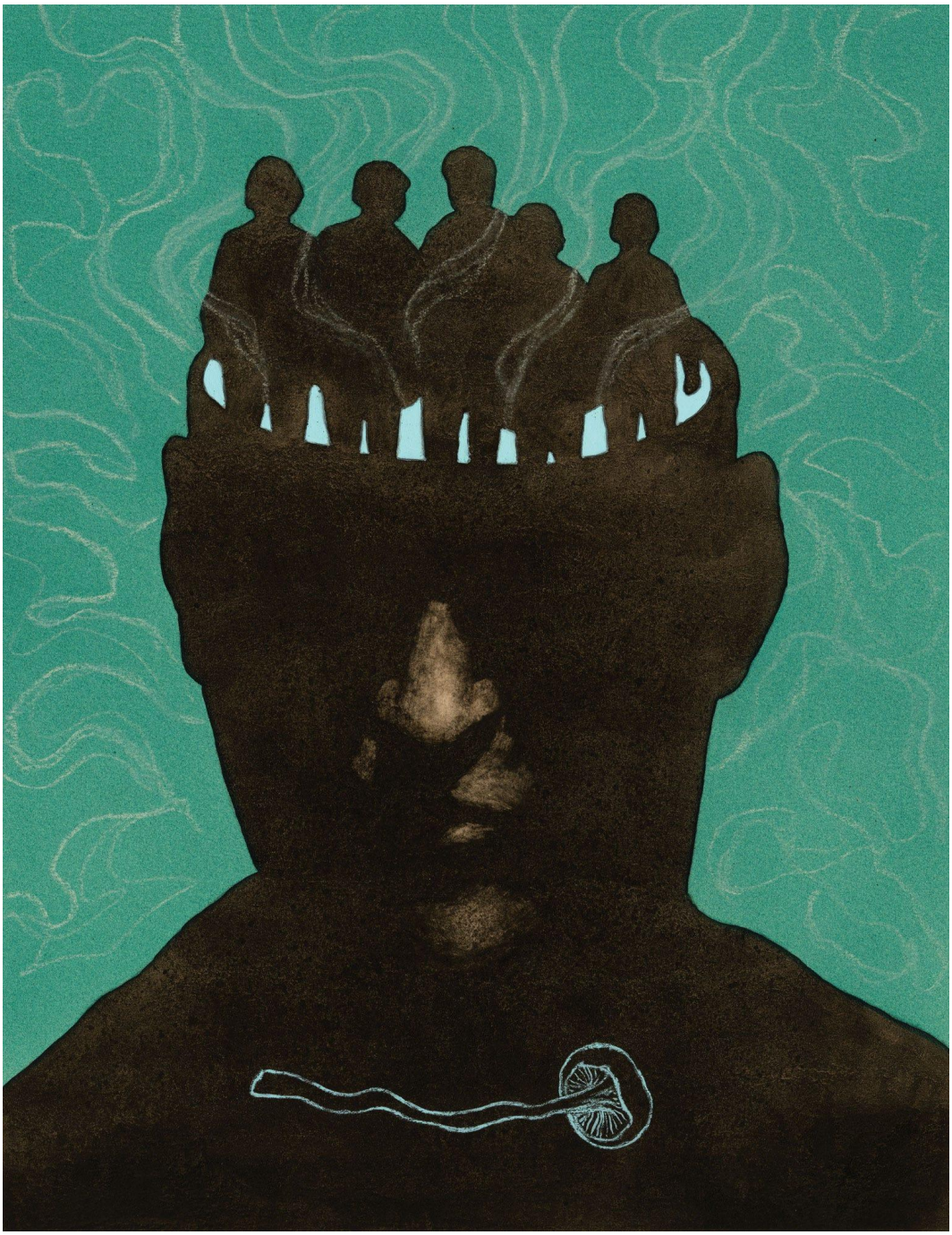
Castaneda's faithful witches must have seen themselves as their own sacrificial warriors. To enter his inner circle, I read, they were asked to abandon their families, destroy photos, legally change their names, and become his sexual subordinates.

At my desk, I began to delve into the Castaneda mystery. Given the headlines about efforts to legalize mushrooms and psychedelics, why not trace the history of Castaneda and his witches, early advocates for their use? But the more I read of their activities, the more I found myself trying to decipher accounts laced with supernatural spirits, other dimensions, and New Age babble. I needed a guide to enter this world.

Jennifer Stalvey seemed perfect. She was a forensic accountant and a private investigator. She also had expertise in cults. She had done work on the Castaneda case and was once tapped to participate in a hunt for the missing chacmools.

I sent her an email, requesting an interview. She agreed to speak with me but had a condition.

"Due to the nature of your request, I'd rather meet in person," she wrote back. And so I booked a flight from Mexico City to Los Angeles, where Stalvey worked, and where Castaneda had formed his cult, and the place where Dee Ann and the other witches were last seen alive.



EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 4: Meet the Private Eye

The storm is descending on Los Angeles when I land. The rain is cold and hard—a winter rain, relentless, a torrent that comes down in sheets through the night. "Biggest rainstorm in years," the locals murmur, an ominous start to my hunt.

On the freeway, the puddles have grown into lagoons. Through the taxi's rain-lashed windows, the night is a blur of distorted lights as I skid and hydroplane down to Long Beach to meet Stalvey for dinner, hoping for an insight or a clue to help me locate the missing witches.

She is waiting at Alibaba, her go-to Mediterranean joint. The place is packed, no tables anywhere. We sit outside under the heat lamps. The rain is hammering against the roof, the water cascading off the awning.

She does not look like a typical gumshoe. Instead of a Sam Spade overcoat, she wears red lipstick and owlish glasses and has long, curly brown hair. She sips house red and talks about her time going undercover inside cults across the country.

I find it odd that the chacmools were accomplished students, academics, and writers. How could such an intelligent group of women be seduced by a fraudster like Castaneda?

"You have to be intelligent to be brainwashed," Stalvey says, explaining that the rational mind is often overcome by emotional needs: To feel accepted, to feel significant and empowered. To have something to fight for, to be inspired.

"It's in our nature," she says. "We all have a desire to believe."

Like Amalia Marquez. She had read Castaneda's books in Puerto Rico and then moved to Los Angeles to follow him. She was looking for a new path, a chance to start fresh. She met the witches and joined his inner circle.

Marquez was given the name Talia Bey, and after a few years, her family never heard from her again. When her brother, Luis Marquez, learned that she was among the missing chacmools, he contacted the police.

Luis wanted detectives to undertake a search, but they didn't seem particularly interested. So he and his family turned to Stalvey for help.

Back at Alibaba, I ask Stalvey about the leading theory in the case. Castaneda claimed he could defeat death. He lectured and wrote that the permanence of death could be overcome and that, through certain shamanic practices (taught by him, of course), one could bottle up enough spiritual power to transform into a burning ball of energetic fire and pass through to another dimension. Many of Castaneda's followers believed that the band of chacmools killed themselves after he died in order to go with

him into the afterlife. Does Stalvey see an act of unity in death as having been their ultimate badge of loyalty?

Nope. Stalvey doesn't buy it.

"In my experience, once the cult leader is gone, then everyone kind of snaps out of it," she says.

As persuasive as Castaneda's promise to enter that crack between worlds might have been, the entire belief structure he had created, she says, would have collapsed the moment he croaked. After a cult leader dies, a fight for power normally ensues. The leadership crumbles; new tensions arise. The cult's core ideas are disproved. Key allies disappear. Soon there's nothing left to fight for. So why stick around?

Group suicides in cults are also very rare, she says (Jonestown and Heaven's Gate notwithstanding). Actual death is a big commitment. It's easy to talk about killing yourself until the pills are doled out or guns are passed around. "There's always one who hesitates in the end," Stalvey says.

Besides, she adds, the chacmools had plenty of good reasons to stay alive. "Why would you kill yourself when you have just learned that you have hit the lotto and are about to become rich?" she says, referring to Castaneda's will, yet another mystery surrounding the chacmools.

Allegedly signing it only four days before his death, Castaneda left all his worldly possessions to his witches and his other core disciples. There was a pecking order, thoughtfully considered. The chacmools closest to him were to receive the largest shares of his estate, which included real estate, valuable intellectual property, and a steady stream of book royalties.

Dee Ann Ahlvers was on Castaneda's list of beneficiaries. According to the will, she was scheduled to receive $100,000 from his estate plus a share of any future revenues. The other five witches who went missing were awarded equivalent cuts.

The bill comes, and Stalvey says goodbye. I settle up with the waiter and linger in the rain for the taxi. I recall something Chris Ahlvers said about her sister, who had turned to prostitution, forged checks, slept on park benches, and struggled financially to support herself and her little kids.

"I can't see my sister walking away from that money and going, Oh, I'd rather shoot myself," Chris said.

Chapter 5: Invention of the Shaman

I find a parking spot on the UCLA campus and make my way through the quad, walking under holly trees and between the patches of sunlight and shadow that line the path. I head in the direction of Haines Hall, the headquarters of the Anthropology Department. It's here, among these hallowed buildings, that, in the mid-1960s, a fortysomething student born Carlos Cesar Arana Castaneda made a name for himself as Carlos Castaneda.

Navigating the bustling campus, I pass students cocooned in their own worlds, earbuds in, eyes glued to screens. The enormity of UCLA strikes me—a city unto itself, a place where one could easily blend in or fade away.

I pause for a moment, trying to transport myself back to school life in Castaneda's era. The Beatles were ascendant, and the countercultural revolution was raging. But flipping through UCLA's yearbooks from then, I'd seen holdouts of the conservative 1950s: a mix of poodle skirts, skinny ties, and fraternity pins. As a recent immigrant from Peru, Castaneda must have felt like an outsider here.

The closest person to him during this time was Margaret Runyan. He had met her when they were undergrads at Los Angeles City College. Runyan had grown up on a farm in West Virginia. At the time, Castaneda was desperate to earn a living and make a name for himself. He drove taxis and worked in a women's shoe shop. He typically wore black sports shirts.

He was hardly her type. He was not conventionally handsome. He was not successful. She had recently dated Louis L'Amour, the western writer, and was courted by actors and directors. But Castaneda was different. He was mesmerizing.

He was a gifted storyteller, regaling Runyan with tales of his privileged childhood in South America, of growing up in the political courts of Brazil—not Peru—and being nurtured by global socialites and diplomats. His uncle, he boasted, was none other than Oswaldo Aranha, the renowned diplomat, presidential adviser, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Castaneda also waxed poetic about his father, César Arana Burungary, describing him as an academic who shunned the trappings of power for a quieter life in the classroom, teaching great works of literature.

Castaneda was an artsy and rebellious kid, and his family whisked him away to Nicolás Avellaneda, a prestigious boarding school in Buenos Aires, where he straightened out and polished his Spanish, adding the language to the Portuguese and Italian he spoke at home. More than anything, he told Runyan, he'd wanted to become an artist, a sculptor specifically, and so he'd set off for northern Italy, enrolling in an art


CHACMOOL
DEE ANN AHLVERS
Cult name: Kylie Lundahl
Born: April 6, 1956, in Webster City, Iowa
Last seen: Shortly before Carlos Castaneda's death in 1998, Ahlvers was spotted near the cult compound driving a blue Ford. Shreds of her credit cards were found in the garbage, cut with scissors.
Role: Skilled in martial arts, she was a movement instructor in the Tensegrity workshops, guiding fellow witches and other disciples in the so-called magical passes.
From a fellow chacmool: "[She] had the splendid physique of a classical Amazon, and as little body fat as an Olympian."

Alta

school in Milan. He crafted his first busts and other pieces among the castles, studios, and treasures of Europe.

Sculpting, however, was harder than he'd imagined. He simply lacked the talent, he told Runyan. And so he'd moved to Los Angeles to reinvent himself, far from the eyes and pressures of his noble family back in South America. He was curious about cultures and traditions and liked to write. After completing community college, he was admitted to the graduate anthropology program at UCLA.

He was an ambitious suitor, showing up at Runyan's place to cook her his famous pasta dish, often served with a bottle of Mateus, a bubbly rosé from Portugal and his favorite wine.

"He jokingly referred to [Mateus] as his most valuable teacher," Runyan writes in her 1997 memoir, *A Magical Journey with Carlos Castaneda*.

As they drank and laughed together, he told her other stories, each one more fantastic than the last, and very few of them turned out to be true.

As a kid, the real Carlos Castaneda never came close to diplomats or politicians. His father was not a dreamy academic but a struggling goldsmith and watch repairman. The family was so poor that Carlos was sent away as a child—not to an elite boarding school in Buenos Aires but to his extended family's chicken farm in rural Brazil. He grew up dressing in hand-me-downs and cleaning out coops, not wearing crisp uniforms and reciting Latin.

He really did go to art school, but not in Milan. After moving to Lima, he attended a fine arts school for a time, yet according to later accounts, he spent his days at the racetrack, earning a meager living wagering on horses. During this period, his girlfriend became pregnant, and instead of sticking around to support her and his daughter, he fled to the United States. He never looked back.

After questions were raised about the authenticity of *The Teachings*, a *Time* reporter tracked down Jose Bracamonte, one of Castaneda's friends from his gambling days at the Lima racetrack. "He was witty, imaginative," Bracamonte recalled. "A big liar and a real friend."

When they met, Runyan looked past Castaneda's fabrications. She thought it was all part of his growth process, of shedding his immigrant background. "[He] was like an insecure young man searching for a respectable identity," Runyan writes. But even the identities he chose to adopt were twisted up. She describes him as "an author, conceiving of the elements of a fictional character, who was himself in disguise."

At UCLA, Castaneda struggled. He couldn't find a topic for his thesis. He wanted to investigate the cultural histories of plants in Indigenous communities in the Sonoran Desert along the California border. But his advisers rejected the idea, claiming that a treatise on plants was for a botanist. Anthropologists, they reminded him, studied the traditions and behaviors of peoples.

Looking back, Runyan believes that Castaneda stumbled on the idea for Don Juan at a Thanksgiving dinner party. They and their friends were talking casually about the power of wise man archetypes in literature.

The most influential leaders were not writers, Runyan said at the party. They were subjects. Buddha. Jesus Christ. They were characters of myth—timeless allegories crafted by disciples. The setup was nearly the same in all the texts. The bumbling student learning from the archetypal wise man.

"If I came to you, and I told you that I'd found the ultimate way of life...it would be very hard for you to accept," she remembers saying to the group. "But if I said to you that I've got a mysterious teacher who has let me in on some great mysteries, then it's more interesting."

"Like *The Razor's Edge*," said one guest, referring to W. Somerset Maugham's novel.

"Like *Siddhartha*," another said, citing Hermann Hesse's book.

Castaneda nodded along, as if thinking carefully, filing the conversation away. Years later, when he and Runyan were living together, he started going to the desert to pursue an idea for his thesis. He had met a shaman, he said, though he could not say much more. He would go for days, sometimes weeks. He was working on his paper, totally dedicated.

When she finally read his report—outlining his encounter with Don Juan in the parking lot of a Nogales Greyhound station, then his peyote trips and transformation into a crow—Runyan doubted it was true.

The shaman's last name (Matus) sounded too much like the Portuguese wine (Mateus) that Castaneda had introduced to her. Moreover, the Socratic dialogue he used, the surreal exchange between Castaneda and his so-called mentor, read too much as if he was following cues from Hesse in *Siddhartha* and the other writers they had discussed at Thanksgiving. He was using the wise man archetype. As Runyan turned each page, a stark truth emerged. She knew who Don Juan really was.

It was Castaneda. And those deep conversations and dialogues he was having with his shaman were actually conversations and dialogues with himself.

At Haines Hall, I gaze up at the old bricks and peer through the windows, imagining the faculty's arguments over Castaneda's thesis paper. It was such a personal and refreshing take, such a departure from the stuffy and formal presentations his professors were so used to, that many in the Anthropology Department advocated releasing it under the school's imprint as a hardcover book. Members of the University of California Press's editorial board were bullish. College campuses across the country were full of marijuana smoke and talk of psychedelics. The hippie movement was full-on, so why not sell into that trend?

Other professors were hesitant. Castaneda had offered no photographs, no field notes, no evidence that his Don Juan even existed. How could the professors be sure that the research underpinning the thesis was accurate?

After nearly a year of dithering over the merits of Castaneda's work, the Anthropology Department voted to approve his thesis, and, in 1968, copies of *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* started coming off the press.

Sales surged, and Simon & Schuster purchased the rights to the book from the university press. Castaneda was soon earning a fortune in royalties. He would buy an apartment in Westwood, a beach house, and later the compound near UCLA.

Chapter 6: Under the Lemon Tree

The address is 1672 Pandora Avenue. I tap it into my phone, calling a Lyft to take me there. The aptness of the street's name doesn't escape me. Here, just steps from UCLA's vibrant campus life, Castaneda conjured a hidden sanctuary for his witches and other disciples.

As we drive along shaded streets, I'm struck by the neighborhood's ordinariness—it's tranquil, as if part of a model suburb. The car stops in front of the compound. High hedges guard the perimeter, making it difficult to see into the property.

With a mix of trepidation and curiosity, I start to snoop around. I move down Eastborne Avenue, which runs along the side of the property, glancing through the foliage at the buildings that once housed Castaneda's followers. The windows, now just reflecting the sun's glare, reveal nothing of the residence's past. I circle back to the main entrance on Pandora and press the bell. I call out from behind the gate, then holler.

"Hello! Hello!"

The place feels abandoned. I take a peek inside the mailbox. It's empty. I drop in a note just in case and walk around to the backyard. I hoist myself onto the fence, and that's when I spot it: a tall, flourishing lemon tree. Castaneda fancied himself a gardener, and this tree must have been his pride, a meeting place where he could play the role of wise old man, pruning shears in hand, dispensing his so-called wisdom to his followers and new recruits.

"The best way to change the world out there is to start by changing yourself," he told one young follower, using a line that could apply to anything.

"Use your shortcomings as routes to power" was another.

Dozens of young women, I estimate, must have passed under the branches of this lemon tree. But one of them stands out for me: Amy Wallace, daughter of the novelist Irving Wallace. As a teenager, she first encountered Castaneda at her father's L.A. literary gatherings. Later, she became an established author too. Then, in her 30s, reeling from a divorce and depression, she found herself a target of Castaneda's machinations.

Wallace's indoctrination began under the guidance of Regine Thal, known in the cult as Florinda Donner-Grau, or Flodo. In Wallace's memoir, *Sorcerer's Apprentice*, published 10 years before her death in 2013, she describes Thal as an intellectual and rebellious figure in Castaneda's inner circle.

They met in Berkeley when Thal and another witch gave a reading and talk at Gaia Books, an independent bookshop near Wallace's house. At the time, Wallace was

despondent over the loss of her father, and she was impressed by the energy of the witches, their vibrancy. She recalled in her memoir that her father had been friends with Castaneda (both were published by Simon & Schuster) and that she had met him years earlier.

At Castaneda's L.A. compound, Wallace encountered his ardent disciples devoting themselves to the purported teachings of Don Juan Matus, on a quest to discard their egos, to live a life of discipline and supposed impeccability. Life inside the compound was an odd blend of strict rules and surreal expectations. Wallace, who was still living in her own place, observed how the followers were asked to abstain from drugs and even caffeine, adhere to a rigid diet, and renounce their past identities. This was a path to absolute freedom, Castaneda preached, and a chance for disciples to experience their own raw perceptions.

"It is best to erase all personal history," Castaneda writes, "because that makes us free from the encumbering thoughts of other people."

In the compound, this process of erasing one's previous relationships—recapitulation, Castaneda called it—was accepted by many witches, who had struggled with things like alcoholism, drug addiction, low self-esteem, or the trauma of losing a parent. Cutting ties, for some of them, was a relief.

"Isn't it wonderful not to be yourself?" a witch remarked to Wallace.

In forgoing contact with family and friends, the disciples also gave up the support networks that might have protected them from Castaneda's demands that they surrender to him sexually. Wallace's account of her first "encounter" with Castaneda is chillingly clinical. His explanation of the act as a spiritual necessity to her is as bizarre as it is unsettling.

"You have to give your *poto* to the *nagual*," Castaneda tells Wallace. Sex with him is not for pleasure, he claims. Sex is for sorcery reasons.

"For magical purposes we must have a '*close encounter*,'" he says. "It's the only way left to us.... The hole between a woman's legs is magic and when the *nagual* leaves his juice inside it goes directly to her brain.... It's the fastest way."

She is playful in response, not believing him. He is in his late 60s. He was friends with her father. She is 30 years younger. "Oh, are you a dirty old man guru, then?" she says.

"This is a serious proposition, *chola*!"

She isn't interested. But Castaneda is relentless in calling her. Three times a day. Six times a day. Eventually, she relents. For their first time, they drive to a motel on Wilshire Boulevard. He doesn't use a condom, claiming he has supernatural powers.

"Hey, you better not have gotten me pregnant," she says.

"Me make you pregnant? Impossible! The *nagual's* sperm isn't *human*. It doesn't match your juices. You're human!"

The experience is cold, odd. She doesn't want to repeat it, and she tells him so.

"That's fine, *chica*, that's fine," she recalls him saying. "But let me tell you, being around the *nagual* is like being on a drug.... You'll have to rest after seeing me. But you'll want more of this drug."

Despite her refusals, his calls kept coming, morning and night, as if he were always there. He oscillated between being sweet and romantic and erupting in rage. "You whore!" he said on more than one occasion. "You're spoiled rotten—born with a silver spoon—up your *culo*!"

He'd push her to tears. It was a vicious dance—praise followed by abuse, a cycle that kept her ensnared. "What am I, in business? To be *your guru*?" he'd say. "No! I only want your freedom! *You* must choose."

Over the years, Wallace became a trusted follower, adopting the alias Ellis Finnegan. She bought a house near the compound, a hangout spot for herself and the other witches, all of whom she came to know intimately.

I imagine that when Dee Ann Ahlvers entered this world, Thal became a guiding force for her, much as she had for Wallace. Thal had been with Castaneda for a long time, knew his quirks and how best to manage his moods. She had been raised in Caracas, Venezuela, in a German family and spoke English, Spanish, and German. She had met Castaneda in Haines Hall, working on her doctorate in anthropology. Like him, she was interested in shamans and methods of persuasion. In Wallace's book, Thal recounts a childhood dream that neatly sums up her role inside the compound.

"I had a toy farm, Ellis, and I made all the dolls mate and breed," she tells Wallace. "I controlled them all, and *I loved it*! *That* was my dream, my delight! I *always* knew I wanted to grow up and run my own human farm, with *living* people, who I could pair and mate, and whose lives I could play with just like my toy farm dolls!"

Thal was also a writer. She authored a series of books published by mainstream houses. *Being-in-Dreaming: An Initiation into the Sorcerers' World* was printed by HarperCollins and blurbed by the movie director Oliver Stone. "A woman's gripping tale of self-discovery in present-day Mexico," he called it. She also published *Shabono: A Visit to a Remote and Magical World in the South American Rainforest*, with HarperCollins, and *The Witch's Dream: A Healer's Way of Knowledge*, with Simon & Schuster. The books follow Castaneda's themes, and he wrote the introduction to *The Witch's Dream*. And like his writings, Thal's works were met with skepticism about their authenticity.

Thal was close in spirit to Maryann Simko, who as a chacmool changed her name to Taisha Abelar. Simko was also a writer and proficient in karate. She had met Castaneda while she was an undergraduate at UCLA. After moving into the compound, Simko claimed a background that also carried a whiff of fabrication. Traveling around Mexico for her own book, *The Sorcerer's Crossing: A Woman's Journey*, published by Penguin, Simko had, she claimed, gone undercover as a guy. She adopted the persona of "Ricky" and stuffed a fake penis in her pants so that the bulge would help her seduce women. Simko later claimed to have lived as an "Ape Girl" in a Mexican tree house and to have been taught by none other than Don Juan Matus.


CHACMOOL
AMALIA MARQUEZ
Cult name: Talia Bey
Born: April 4, 1955, in Puerto Rico
Last seen: At the cult compound, around the time of Castaneda's death, in a new Ford Crown Victoria.
Role: President of Cleargreen, the cult's business arm, dedicated to teaching the works of Castaneda, hosting workshops, and selling merch.
From a family member: "She was a force of nature. A carefree, curious sort of free spirit. She was always exploring things, always with a smile on her face. She was trying to make his message around the world."

Alta

But among all his disciples, the witch Castaneda cherished and looked after the most was Patricia Partin, who went by Nuri Alexander.

Partin had met Castaneda while waiting tables and attending classes at UCLA. And much like Dee Ann Ahlvers, she had experienced tragedy as a young girl. Partin's dad was almost killed in an accident that left him with permanent damage.

Despite her graying hair, Partin acted like a child, claiming to be stuck in another dimension, at the age of seven, and trapped in time. For nearly 20 years with the cult, she played with dolls and spoke like a little girl.

Living in the compound, Partin became Castaneda's daughter-concubine, a peculiar combo even for the witches. "She was seven years old when she first climbed into my bed!" Castaneda told Wallace of Partin. "She climbed on top of me and—Boom! Boom! Boom! She wanted to *do it* at *seven years old*—and we did! What could I do? I couldn't resist—she attacked me in my sleep!"

Partin's "mother" in the house was Kathleen Pohlman; with Castaneda, they formed a kind of First Family inside 1672 Pandora. Like most of the other witches, Pohlman had an academic and artsy background. She was in graduate school at UCLA when she met Castaneda. She had been grieving, too. Her father had died in a car crash, and she had an interest in the arts of healing and in obtaining her acupuncture license. She drifted apart from Castaneda and the witches for a few years, only to return under a variety of names—Carol Tiggs, Elizabeth Austin, Muni Aranha, Muni Alexander.

According to Castaneda, Pohlman was possessed. During a trip to Tula, the Toltec capital of ancient Mexico, she was overcome by a shape-shifting supernatural force—Xoxopanxoco—that Castaneda and Don Juan called the Death Defier. The force was immortal and all-powerful, and shamanistic lore claimed that those who were possessed by it could live forever.

The wild claims that a spirit emerged from the ether, took human form, and offered mystical bargains like the Devil only elevated Pohlman's status within the cult. Castaneda deemed her the nagual woman, his esoteric counterpart. She helped Castaneda develop Tensegrity, the theory that they taught at spirituality workshops organized by Cleargreen Inc., the business arm of the cult, which also produced motivational videos, sold T-shirts, and recruited new witches. Pohlman worked for Cleargreen, and its funds were overseen by the core witches together. The company continues to operate, offering both in-person and virtual workshops.

It was into this closed society that Dee Ann Ahlvers had gone, becoming Kylie Lundahl. Her sister remembers the package of family photos and mementos she received along with a letter. "She told me she was going to Sweden," Chris says, describing how her sister referred to her old self—Dee Ann—in the third person. "She said, 'I'm sending you some pictures of her and her family that she didn't want anymore.' She sent birthday cards for my children for their next birthdays so they would have a card. And she said, 'I'm totally severing my relationship with everyone that I know from before so that I can gather the energy that I need to meet the challenges ahead.'"

Ahlvers became the loyal one, the protector. She was a reliable and selfless force in the compound. As Castaneda aged and began losing his vision, she became his aide, bodyguard, driver, and confidant.

She was also vital to Cleargreen. When the company started to promote a series of tai chi–style movements called the "magical passes," Ahlvers assumed the role of lead instructor. Videos reveal her to be a potent force. Spiky, platinum blond hair. Lean, chiseled arms. She goes through the movements—Opening Up Yourself to Intent, Preparing to Cross Over, the Butterfly—blowing out air, a true chacmool.

Privately, inside the compound, Ahlvers was distraught. She was a natural beauty ("a classical Amazon," per Wallace) and was always in top physical condition ("as little body fat as an Olympian"). But because she was tall and big-boned, Castaneda complained to her and others that her legs were "huge." To stay in his good favor, Ahlvers, like many others, went on diets. She considered surgeries like liposuction and starved herself to lose weight, her face turning gaunt, sickly, and drawn.

But in the spring of 1998, as Castaneda's sickness turned grave, Ahlvers appeared to take an active role in helping some of her fellow chacmools plot their exit from this world. With his death imminent, she and other chacmools considered purchasing a massive boat. According to one correspondence from the group, they were looking to spend around $400,000 for a "cargo/crew vessel" that was "100 to 200 feet long," with a "range of 10,000 miles" and "unlimited navigational capability."

To prepare for the voyage, Ahlvers purchased a handful of books, receipts from Barnes & Noble later showed, studying up on how to survive—at least temporarily—the high seas. Among the titles she picked out: *Sea Vegetables: Harvesting Guide & Cookbook*; *Fishing for Sharks*; *Shark Liver Oil*; *Good Food Afloat*; *The Care and Feeding of the Offshore Crew.*

Meantime, the idea of guns—or at least talk of using them—arose. According to Wallace, the compound buzzed with Pohlman's confession that the chacmools had acquired firearms to carry out a suicide pact after Castaneda died.

"WHAT? GUNS?!" one follower said, according to Wallace. "Suicide? I refuse to believe that...just can't imagine it. If they go poof! in front of me, and burn like they've always said, that's one thing–but *guns*."

Wallace grew especially close to Ahlvers. A passage from Wallace's book recounts their last encounter. As Castaneda lies sick and incapacitated, Ahlvers shows up at Wallace's home with a box of papers and personal belongings. She wants to use Wallace's fireplace to burn them.

"It takes so long with the shredder," Ahlvers says. Together, they feed pages of poetry, diary entries, and drawings into the flames, erasing evidence of her time at the cult. They speak about her plans for after Castaneda's death.

"I know exactly what to do," Ahlvers tells Wallace, though she doesn't reveal any specifics.

In her memoir, Wallace describes how the police called soon after Castaneda's death to ask whether she knew anything. Park rangers in Death Valley had found a car that belonged to Partin, who was 41 at the time of her disappearance.

Castaneda had given specific instructions to Partin, whom he had legally adopted as his daughter. Wallace describes them in her memoir. Castaneda told Partin that in the event of his death, she should "get in her little red car and drive very, very fast into the desert." By doing so, Castaneda claimed, "the car, with her in it, would ascend to a higher plane."

Later, hikers discovered some of her bones. Partin's identity was eventually confirmed by fragments of a pink jogging suit, DNA from her bones, and a small folding knife found in one of her pockets. The rest of her skeleton was missing, no doubt the work of vultures, coyotes, and other scavengers scraping the desert floor.

EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 7: Into the Desert

I set off for the Mojave and on toward the Panamint Dunes, in Death Valley, where Partin's vehicle and remains were found. Soon enough, the morning rush hour traffic and the snarl of Los Angeles disappear from my rearview mirror, and the open road stretches before me. Overhead, the sky is blue and blinding. A new world unfolds with every mile marker, a barren landscape stripped to its spiky core, a living canvas painted with cactus, scrub brush, and sunbaked earth.

I feel the heat rise from the asphalt and penetrate the windshield. I flip on the air-conditioning in a futile attempt to fight off the inferno outside. I search for the perfect song to pair with the long drive ahead, though all I can hear is my stomach rumbling from hunger. Time to stop for breakfast.

I pull into the drive-through of a burrito joint, and as I wait for my ranchero special with extra jalapeños, I absentmindedly gaze out the rolled-up window. That's when I see them: a pair of hawks circling above—dancing through the air, searching for prey, perhaps.

The image is a Castaneda image, like the ones on his book covers, and one he must have witnessed too, many decades before, as he left Los Angeles to hunt for Don Juan. Or to conjure him.

Fabrication, to Castaneda, was not a crime. He had learned to see plagiarism as an opportunity, a chance to outwit and hustle those around you. Growing up poor in Peru and Brazil, hustling was a way of life. His childhood idol and role model was a master fabricator. His name was Antoine.

Castaneda's writing career lasted more than three decades. But only in the final book, *The Active Side of Infinity*, which was published after his death, does he write about growing up on his grandparents' chicken farm in rural Brazil.

It wasn't until late in life that Castaneda realized the "source of strength" in his house was his grandmother, who raised and looked after him. A deeply spiritual woman, she relied on the advice of a *curandero*, a shaman-like person whose powers are firmly rooted in the traditions of rural South America.

Antoine was his grandmother's adopted son, and Castaneda worshipped him. She spared no expense or effort in ensuring Antoine's success, sending him to Europe to receive a formal education. He returned to Brazil for visits looking dapper, often clad in cashmere and bearing leather suitcases. Castaneda was in awe. His uncle was a man of the arts, well-mannered and full of life. Antoine epitomized a world that was far removed from the manure, chicken droppings, and humble confines of the farm and from their boring relatives.

"My family were corpses that walked," Castaneda writes.

But not Antoine.

"He was the personification of elegance and savoir-faire," Castaneda writes. Antoine represented an escape to young Carlos, a chance to explore the world and become someone in it.

They bonded like brothers. In their own ways, both were orphaned boys seeking a place in the world. Antoine wanted to become a famous author and playwright, but he lacked the talent. He could not write.

"The only thing I don't have is the only thing I want," Antoine admitted, as Castaneda recalls in his book.

So he faked it. He resorted to copying plays and plagiarizing famous poems, staging them in town and circulating them as his work. While his deceit was seen through by many, Antoine was adored by his mother. He was so beloved by her that she announced she would leave him all her land and holdings. To thank her, he wrote a poem in her honor and read it to her. It was so poignant and well written that it brought her to tears.

But then, as Castaneda describes the scene, she cracked a smile and asked, "Plagiarized, Antoine?"

"Of course, mother," he replied. "Of course."

Back in the desert, waiting for my burrito and watching those two hawks circle, I think about how they each represent the forces of Castaneda's childhood. One was the *curandero*, the folk healer, who had to convince the patient—through any means—of the cure. The other was the fabrication artist, who had a willingness to take dramatic license, to distort the truth or make it up, as a means of survival. Both courses seemed to be routes to success. Antoine took the latter and triumphed. So why couldn't Castaneda take both paths with Don Juan?

When *Time* magazine later questioned him about factual discrepancies in his texts, Castaneda shrugged off the reporters. Real-world facts didn't apply to him.

"To ask me to verify my life by giving you my statistics," he said, "is like using science to validate sorcery. It robs the world of its magic and makes milestones out of us all."

I see the road signs for Death Valley. The floor of the desert shimmers in the heat, pulsing in the bright daylight. I roll down the windows, and hot air sweeps through the car and hugs me tightly. It smells of sagebrush and old stones, of time itself. I descend farther into the valley and am enchanted as the park reveals itself, a merciless tableau of nature's beauty and dangers. It is a living hell here, summoning fortune hunters to come with their mining pans and axes, luring outlaws like Charles Manson to take refuge with drugs and guns, and drawing others, too, like Partin, looking for that crack between worlds after the death of her cult leader.

I gas up at the Panamint Springs Resort, an old motel and the only one for miles. The shingles on the roof are weary and worn, and a few gas pumps stand in a line like tombstones. This motel is important, critical even, I think, to understanding Partin's

death. According to Wallace's book, Partin likely drove here and checked in after Castaneda died. Behind the motel shop, I spot a cluster of cabins. This is perhaps where Partin called Pohlman in a state of panic. Pohlman then drove to the motel, entered Partin's room, and found her.

She was covered in blood. She had tried to kill herself.

"I'm worthless, a total failure!" Partin said, repeating the line over and over, then grabbing Pohlman's leg, her hands presumably also covered in blood.

Pohlman later told Wallace that she tried to convince Partin that there was no need to kill herself. She was young and talented. She had the rest of her life in front of her. Just because Castaneda had died and the other witches had disappeared did not mean Partin had to follow them. And then there was the money.

"I brought her a lot of money—a lot!—and told her to go to Ireland and start a printing business," Pohlman told Wallace. "Why not? She has her whole life ahead, and all that money!"

Soon after, Partin went missing. Her red Escort was found at the end of Big Four Mine Road, near the trail that leads to the Panamint Dunes.

`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HU7Bnc9RCGY`

Using a free tourist map, I drive along one of the park's primary thoroughfares, trying to locate the access road where Partin's car was found. But when I find the road, it looks closed. I continue anyway, following a loose trail of tire tracks in the dust. It is slow going. The path breaks up in parts; occasional boulders jut out, and I maneuver around them. Ahead of me await a series of soaring, golden sand dunes that look like those in *Lawrence of Arabia*.

An hour or more passes. The desert is a trickster, playing games and producing illusions. My car drives forward, but the dunes look no closer. Everything here is emptiness and silence, and I consider the way that wind and sun have left their signatures on the faces of rocks. I think of a poem that Partin wrote for the *Warriors' Way*, a publication outlining the cult's spiritual framework.

> *and at that moment,*
> *a coyote howled,*
> *sending a chill of longing*
> *through the woman's womb.*
> *That chill was all*
> *she brought into this world.*

The sun is falling, and it will be dark soon. I park at the far end of the path and notice that I am not alone. A hiker has stopped his camper here and sits beside a cooler filled with ice and bottles of beer. He raises a Corona my way.

"How long to the dunes?" I ask.

They look so close.

"About three hours," he answers.

I stuff a backpack with trail mix and a water bottle. I start my hike, snaking around the scrub brush, scanning the desert floor for an old key, a belt buckle, or any other possible trace of the missing witches.

The sun somehow feels hotter as it nears the horizon. I can feel the sweat running down my back and soaking my socks. The corners of my mouth are dry and start to cake up.

I take my shirt off and keep going. I spot others ahead. I overtake a dad and his son, who carries a snowboard to surf the dunes. Then teenagers pass me carrying pup tents, sleeping bags, and a guitar.

I remember my conversation with Chris Ahlvers. Dee Ann's older sister had her own theory about Partin's remains being found in Death Valley. "Those witches did not want that little girl coming with them," Chris said of Partin. "They told her to go to the desert and this is where they'd be. And then she got there, and they weren't there."

Death Valley was a ruse, she felt, a way to ditch Castaneda's "daughter."

"Dee would have hated a person like her," Chris said, based on what she knew about Partin. Having grown up as hard as she did, Dee Ann had little respect for those without discipline and a strong work ethic. "Dee hated people who could not take care of themselves."

For Dee Ann and some of the other chacmools, Castaneda's death must have presented an opportunity, a chance for them to break free, to live without the burdens of their recent pasts—and Partin was one of those burdens. "She was another thing that kept their freedom from them," Chris said. "She was a challenge they didn't want to deal with anymore."

Partin and her dolls, her moods—the other five saw her as an annoying distraction. "She wasn't coming with them no matter where it was that they were going," Chris told me. "If they were going to shoot themselves, she wasn't doing it with them. And if they were taking off for Brazil or South America or whatever, she wasn't going with them there, either."

Maybe Chris was right. Maybe Dee Ann and the others told Partin to meet them at the Panamint Springs Resort, and once Partin arrived, she learned that they had lied and abandoned her. The pain of rejection can be vicious, and maybe that is why Partin tried to end her life and then called Pohlman in a panic. Maybe.

As you walk toward the dunes, the desert becomes a sanctuary, a silent place to be alone with your thoughts. I review the possible scenarios. It's Pohlman's brief presence in Death Valley that piques my interest. I imagine the scene at the motel. Pohlman arrives to find Partin covered in blood, having attempted suicide, and begging for help. If Wallace's account of the event is true, then why didn't Pohlman take Partin to get medical care? Why didn't she drive Partin back to the L.A. compound to recover? Why not call the police? Was Pohlman hiding something?

Pohlman's story about bringing a great deal of cash to Partin is also problematic. Like other top chacmools, Partin was the recipient, in Castaneda's will, of a lump


CHACMOOL
PATRICIA PARTIN
Cult name: Nuri Alexander, Claude, the Blue Scout
Born: 1957, in Pasadena
Last seen: Her red Ford Escort was found abandoned in the desert shortly after Castaneda's death, its license plates stripped. Her remains were discovered by hikers five years later.
Role: She lived as Castaneda's daughter and acted like a seven-year-old.
From Castaneda: "You should see my daughter naked. She is gorgeous, and her sexual organs are not human."

Alta

payment of $100,000 and a share of future royalties. If Pohlman brought the money with her, then what happened to it? Did Partin carry it with her into the desert? Or did Pohlman take it back to the compound? Moreover, why did Pohlman have Partin's share of the estate?

Pohlman. I whisper her name to myself, dreaming up more questions. Did she really drive all that way to help Partin only to leave her to bleed and suffer, returning straight to L.A.? How long did Pohlman stay with Partin? A few hours? Or did she spend the night to ensure that her "daughter" was all right, heading back to L.A. the next morning? Is what happened as simple as Pohlman showing up and then leaving? And Partin driving to the Panamint Dunes, dumping her car, and then wandering amid the dunes until she collapsed and died?

The closer I get to the dunes, the less I believe that Partin would have killed herself out here. How could she have done it? If she'd used a gun, someone likely would have found it. Pills were also an improbable method. If she'd had pills with her, then why not pop them in the motel and avoid the bloody mess of cutting herself up? And cut yourself one day and take pills the next? The odds are against this outcome. The studies are clear: the majority of those who survive a suicide attempt never try again.

I listen to my footsteps crunching against the sand and the sound of my own breathing. I start to walk faster, hoping to reach the dunes before sunset. But then I stop and realize that I've found what I was looking for. It's obvious. The missing chacmools never came to the Panamint Dunes. Nor did Partin commit suicide out here. So many questions, all leading to one more: If Partin did not kill herself, how did she die out here?

I need more information, from someone with access to crime databases and 20-year-old police reports. Back on the main road, I drop by the park ranger's station.

I am desperate, I tell one ranger. I've been searching in the desert for hours. I ask politely; I beg and plead. Does this ranger know anything about Castaneda's witches or know anyone with any information? If she knows any retired rangers, who would be best to contact?

That last line causes the ranger to look up, as if a name has popped into her mind. She takes down my contact info. Nearly two weeks later, back at home, I receive the following email: "I was the one who found the missing person's car."

I call Ranger Dave immediately.

Chapter 8: The Bullet Hole

Dave Brenner spent three decades working in Death Valley and can see things others cannot. He started his career as a tracker, he says, alone for weeks at a time in the desert, camping under the stars, tracing the footprints of bobcats and the escape routes of fugitives. Eventually, he parlayed his ability to navigate the desert into a park ranger job, donning a uniform and responding to the valley's eclectic inhabitants—snakes, hikers, soul seekers, and mischief-makers.

Even in retirement, he occasionally stays in his bunker nearby, he tells me on the phone. The desert is that powerful. He can't seem to escape it.

"Death Valley is timeless," he says. "It changes as you're there, and there's a fury and intensity and tranquility all at the same time."

I've been thinking about the desert as a living embodiment of nature's ever-changing spirit. I ask him to describe the park in a word.

"Infinite," he says.

I perk up, looking at my office ceiling, wondering whether I've heard him straight. I find it peculiar that Brenner, a seasoned law enforcement officer, used essentially the same word to describe the desert that Castaneda, a self-proclaimed shaman, used for the afterlife. Castaneda had been fixated on the spiritual energies of the desert while pursuing a boundless existence, liberated from the shackles of time. But infinity was not a concept to him. Infinity was a destination, and the path to get there depended on one's intent.

"In the universe there is an immeasurable, indescribable force which shamans call intent," Castaneda said, "and absolutely everything that exists in the entire cosmos is attached to intent by a connecting link."

Brenner was the first law enforcement officer on the scene.

"It was odd," he recalls, describing how he stumbled across Partin's red Escort.

Normally, when cars are dumped in Death Valley, it's in parking lots or on the side of a main road, he says. Tourists abandon their rentals near places where they can call a taxi or be trailed by one. But Partin's car was not found near a parking area or pavement of any kind. It was almost, Brenner says, as if the driver had chosen to continue through the sand until their auto puttered out and keeled over.

"This was a one-way trip," he says.

Brenner remembers the day well. May 2, 1998. Wearing his flappy ranger cap to block the sun and equipped with a Pentax camera to snap images for his report, Brenner inspected the unattended car closely. He peered through the front windows, the back windows. He checked the handles of all the doors. They were locked, he says.

He used a slim jim to open one of the doors and then searched the interior. He carefully examined the front and back seats, the console, the glove box, the drink holders.

"This car was clean," he recalls.

Nothing was inside. No coffee cup. No loose change. No stick of gum. It was suspicious.

"Wouldn't you carry a wallet? Your purse?" he says, wondering why the owner of the car (or perhaps a companion?) had removed any identifying elements.

He moved around to the trunk. He was scrutinizing the rear of the car, looking for any dings on the bumper, when he noticed that the license plate had been stripped. The front one was missing too.

"There was nothing there," he says.

Brenner went into tracker mode. He scanned the ground in every direction for footprints. He combed the dunes for tire tracks. Using a law enforcement database, he checked the vehicle's identification number and learned that the car had been registered to Partin. The address and contact info were for Cleargreen in Los Angeles, the company through which Castaneda and the witches conducted their workshops. When Brenner called the office, the employee who answered did not seem to care about the missing car.

"It was like, 'Ho hum. Blah, blah, blah. No, we have not seen her,'" Brenner says.

He remembers thinking that the person's cavalier attitude was strange. The lack of empathy and concern for Partin gave him pause. "They were never like, 'Oh, is she OK?'"

I ask Brenner whether he still has the photos from his investigation. Incredibly, he's willing to search and promises to call back. A week later, I receive another message: he's found the negatives. He emails the images to me to review along with him.

"Surprisingly, I have found a possible clue to add some [intrigue] to the missing person's car," he writes in a follow-up email, directing my attention to the trunk lock. "It appears on the first examination to be???"

I zoom in on the negative in question. The image is not in focus, but I can see what he's referring to. The shape is circular, and it looks like a dark, empty hole. Its diameter could be the width of a dime or maybe a nickel, and the edges are frayed, as if something tore right through it. Wait, really? *A bullet hole?*

Brenner's not sure how he missed this possibility. Could there have been foul play?

Why, yes, I tell him. Partin was one of the main beneficiaries of Castaneda's estate, along with the missing chacmools.

Brenner's voice perks up. "So, the beneficiaries are either dead or missing, yet the company continues to collect their assets?" he asks.

That could explain the clean car, I think. Someone wanted to keep Partin's disappearance a secret and went to great lengths to dump her vehicle without leaving a trace.

I enlarge the old negative again and inspect what might be a bullet hole to see whether I've overlooked something. Is it possible that Partin was not on a one-way

trip to infinity and was instead the victim in a dispute with one or more of the other chacmools following Castaneda's death?

At night, I find myself dreaming of papers. By day, I'm searching for them. Any papers. Castaneda's tax records. Old letters, lawsuits. Anything to show the flow of money and illuminate the darkness around Castaneda's will and estate.

In my earlier research, I came across an old lawsuit. It had been filed by Adrian Vashon, a businessman with a personal connection to Castaneda. Long before his rise to fame, Castaneda had claimed Vashon as his son. But the more popular and wealthy Castaneda became, the more Vashon's mother, Margaret Runyan (she and Castaneda had eventually married), found herself on the outs with him. At one point, Runyan had sought to divorce Castaneda. He initially resisted but finally acquiesced, she said, only to have her sign false dissolution papers. Technically, she said, she was still married to Castaneda.

Among other things, the lawsuit contended that the will had been changed while Castaneda was under duress and that his signature had been forged. After learning that his father was dead and that all his assets had been assigned to a small group including the chacmools days before his death, Vashon filed a suit against Castaneda's estate lawyer, Deborah Drooz, and the beneficiaries of the will.

Vashon now lives in the suburbs of Phoenix. I call out of the blue, asking for an interview. Reluctantly, he agrees.

"See you when you land," he says.

Thomas Ropp
Adrian Vashon with his mother, Margaret Runyan (left), and his ex-wife, Lisa, at his Arizona home.

Chapter 9: Written Out of the Will

The outskirts of Phoenix are an endless procession of stoplights and strip malls and football fields. Here, amid this maze of cul-de-sacs and rancho-style mansions, I pull into a circular driveway and park behind a sporty Thunderbird convertible. The license plate reads "SHAMAN." Yep, this must be the place.

The place has pretentious, new-money vibes: out front, a pair of lion sculptures paw the air, and the grass is trimmed like a putting green. I go up the front steps and there, waiting for me, stands Vashon. He is tall, well over six feet, and with his frosty blond hair, piercing blue eyes, and powerful build, he comes off as a Viking lifeguard.

Vashon's creation, his very existence, was all part of Castaneda's design, his blueprint for an heir. No more Peruvian genes. No more dark skin.

"My dad told me he wanted a big, blond-haired, blue-eyed warrior," Vashon says. "So I would be the most powerful brujo on the planet."

Vashon is not the writer's biological son. Castaneda was not able to have children; it's rumored that he had a vasectomy after the birth of his daughter in Lima. But he carefully orchestrated a plan to have a child nonetheless. It involved a Swedish friend of Runyan's.

The three met at an Indian restaurant to negotiate the terms. Some 40 weeks later, in August 1961, Castaneda waited in the hospital to sign the birth certificate, declaring himself the father and naming the boy Carlton Castaneda.

"My chocho," the writer affectionately calls his son in letters.

The new family lived together for a time. Then Runyan moved from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., to raise the child on her own, although Castaneda provided some financial support. He visited several times a year. Unlike his dad, Carlton chose a path in business, previously running a coffee shop franchise and now in marketing. Apparently, he found success—but not as Carlton Castaneda. He adopted the name Adrian Vashon—Adrian after the birth name of his biological father, Vashon after a character on the television series *Hawaii Five-O*.

Vashon's place (he's since moved) is sweet, complete with a tennis court and a pool that resembles a tropical oasis and has a waterslide built from rocks. He takes me on a tour, pointing out the home's sunken living room and fluffy carpets. He shows me personal artifacts: a sculpted bust by Castaneda from his arty days, a framed poster for *The Teachings* that Vashon removes from behind a dresser, and a photograph of father and son. In the image, the little Viking warrior is nestled in Castaneda's arms. "This was during our trip to New York to collect his first million-dollar paycheck," Vashon says.

We settle in the kitchen over glasses of water. I steer the conversation to his father's cult and the chacmools. Did he remember Ahlvers? Pohlman? Marquez? Simko? Thal? Partin?

"They were my babysitters when I was little," he says.

The witches took him to Castaneda's classes and played with him. As his father aged, however, Vashon says, the women began to exploit Castaneda. "They sunk their fangs into him and didn't let go," he says.

The story of the missing chacmools is not one of an egoistic cult leader manipulating his followers, Vashon says. It's the other way around. He insists that the chacmools and others took advantage of Castaneda's failing health to seize control of his wealth. They used the Castaneda name to file petty lawsuits in order to reap fees and establish their own mini-empire centered on New Age workshops and books. "Classic money grab," Vashon says.

In the kitchen, his dogs come and lick and paw at his legs. He wears short athletic socks, and he twitches his feet while telling more of the story. His face turns flushed as he recounts the costly and painful lawsuit he lost.

"This story is like *Weekend at Bernie's*," Vashon says, referring to the 1989 comedy in which a dead boss is carted around by his young employees.

Consider the basic facts, he says. At the time of his death, in the spring of 1998, Castaneda was 72 years old. His lively mop of curly hair had long ago turned gray. According to the death certificate, the writer died of liver failure stemming from late-stage cancer and of metabolic encephalopathy, a condition that occurs when vital organs stop functioning properly and that causes a person to suffer from personality disorder and memory loss and to have difficulty thinking.

Yet in this foggy and depleted state, and only four days before his death, according to legal documents, Castaneda signed a new will. Instead of leaving a part of his estate to Vashon, the document transferred his real estate, royalties, intellectual property rights, and possessions to the chacmools and other disciples.

The timing is suspect to Vashon. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that he was mentally incapacitated," he says.

Further, the witches kept quiet about Castaneda's death. Two months after his father's passing, Vashon received a call from a reporter at the *Los Angeles Times*. It was only after calling Drooz that Vashon learned he had been written out of the will. Completely.

Vashon filed his lawsuit, and a lengthy discovery process followed. The witches had spent weeks before Castaneda's death burning photos, documents, and all his records, according to Wallace. Nonetheless, Vashon and his legal team collected reams of files to document the estate's holdings.

The case eventually went to probate court. Drooz attempted to paint Vashon as an estranged acquaintance from another time, only now emerging to seek his payday. Vashon's attorney claimed that the witches had methodically sought to take over the estate and controlled Castaneda's correspondences.


CHACMOOL
KATHLEEN POHLMAN
Cult name: Muni Alexander, Carol Tiggs, Muni Aranha, Elizabeth Austin
Born: November 24, 1947, in Los Angeles
Last seen: On May 12, 2023, she answered the door for Geoffrey Gray at her home in Pacific Palisades.
Role: Appointed by Castaneda as the leader of the chacmools, she worked at Cleargreen, which oversaw the cult's business operations. She considered herself a kind of madam for Castaneda.
Notable quote: "I'm the only one who knows what really happened, and everyone wants me for that!"

Alta

After hearing the arguments, a judge ruled against Vashon. Now drained of resources and energy, and with his aging mother in poor health and also suffering financially, he declined to appeal.

"I just had to move on," he tells me.

I wonder about the discovery documents, the files he and his lawyer dug up to prepare for the case. Does he still have them?

"Out in the garage," he says.

Any chance, I ask, of going out and taking a look?

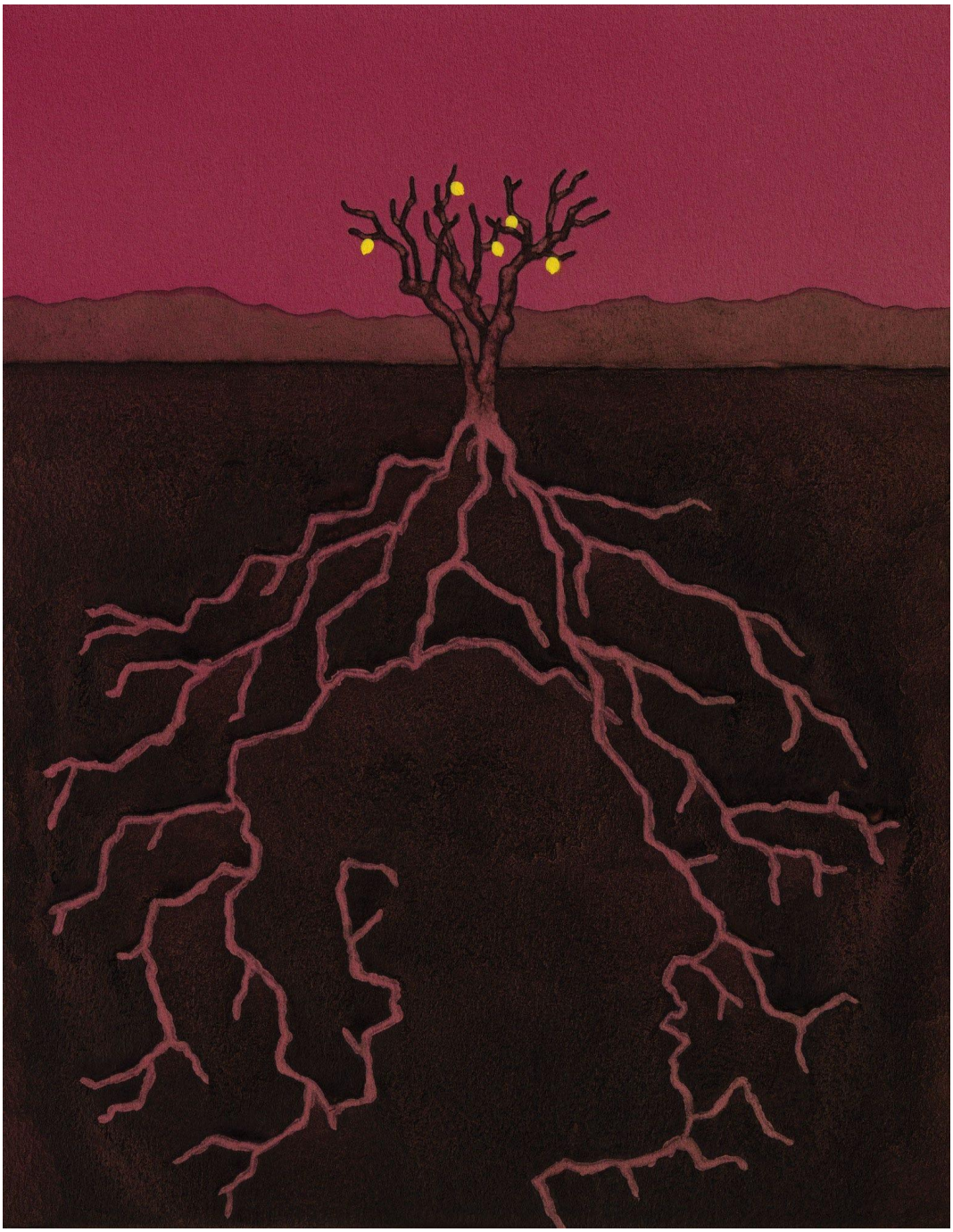
Vashon observes me more closely, his blue eyes bearing down on me. A pause ensues; we stare at each other. And just when I think he is about to kick me out of his kitchen and send me back to the airport with nothing, the big Viking warrior nods and goes to fetch a ladder.

I follow him to the garage. Near the ceiling, he's built a storage space. It's lined with old boxes, plastic tubs. He places the ladder at the lip of the crawl space and holds it steady with both hands.

I climb up, snaking my way into the tight space. I'm on my elbows, searching around.

"Get that one," he says, guiding me to a plastic bin.

I pull it down. He pops the blue lid open. Inside, there are folders and more folders of court papers. He pulls them out and hands them to me. Jackpot!



EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 10: Mysterious Bank Accounts

Back in my office, I clear my desk and spread the documents from Vashon's garage in front of me, next to organized piles of every photo, printout, and book I have collected in my investigation thus far. It's an accumulation of court papers, tax records, receipts, letters, shamanic guides, and treatises on dreaming.

I pull out the most important—and controversial—of all the documents: the last will and testament, a six-pager that was questionably signed by Castaneda just before his death. Beside it, I lay a copy of "The Eagle's Trust," a legal document that is marked confidential (I found it buried in files pertaining to an unrelated matter in the L.A. County archives) and that specifies how the cult leader's real estate, fortune, and royalties were to be dished out among the witches and other disciples.

Chris Ahlvers was correct. According to the trust document, her sister was due to receive the same lump-sum payment and shares of future royalties as Thal, Pohlman, Simko, Marquez, and Partin. According to the chacmools' probate filing, Castaneda's estate was worth just over $1 million.

That number feels low to me. One million? That's it? Castaneda was a global icon. Over the years, he had published 12 books in the Don Juan series, many of them international bestsellers, with millions of copies sold, translated into multiple languages. (For more, see "Castaneda and His Followers' Cracked Universe of Books.") And the titles are still in print! Shouldn't his estate have been worth more? A *lot* more?

I call Vashon to ask about this, noting that in his lawsuit, he argued that the chacmools' lawyers were lowballing his father's net worth.

"They didn't want to pay estate tax," Vashon tells me. "My dad was worth far more, and he had many properties around the world."

In the estate documents, I find a reference to the Pandora Avenue compound, but missing in the accounting, Vashon says, are other properties that his father owned—a beach house, for example, and another property in Brazil.

SHAMAN is right. In one tally, I see that more than two-thirds of the estate was spent on taxes, an amount far beyond estate tax rates at the time. I can't help but wonder if this was an overpayment of sorts, made to avoid scrutiny on missing assets, or if it was made to cover an old tax bill? If Castaneda had other funds, where were they hiding?

In one ledger from the court files, I come across $1,057,692 in a retirement account at City National Bank. There's another $68,495 in a checking account at the same

bank. City National Bank is based in Los Angeles, with a branch only a four-minute drive from Castaneda's compound.

Flipping through the documents, I find blank checks for another account, one under Castaneda's and Partin's names. The checks are from Mellon Bank, an investment house that was headquartered in Pittsburgh.

Strange, I think. If Castaneda kept another bank account, and one at an institution that specialized in investments and stock portfolios, why was it not listed on the estate's balance sheets?

At the bottom of one of the court documents, I find the name of the CPA who prepared many of Castaneda's estate forms. Thomas Cajka is now the owner of TCA Management Group.

I dial the number and pray for him to pick up the damn phone because nobody picks up the damn phone anymore. But Cajka does.

"How you doing today?" I ask.

"Good until you called," he says with a laugh.

Cajka has never been quoted in any story or book that I know of. He sounds uncomfortable.

I ask whether he remembers the chacmools and how they were never seen again.

"Heard that story," he says. "Complete dead end."

I ask about the ledgers and tax filings. According to a 1998 court record, Cajka managed Castaneda's personal and professional accounts, including tax returns, in 1992 and 1993 and again from 1996 on. He also managed accounts that were part of the estate. So, why the dead end?

"I don't ask questions about a lot of stuff," he says.

He sounds defensive, as if I've cornered him. I do my best to soften my tone. How could a trustworthy and well-regarded CPA like him not ask any questions about a high-profile client like Castaneda?

"I just do what I need to do, and I move on," he says.

Who was giving him his instructions? Castaneda himself?

"I only met him once or twice," he says. The meetings were short. No more than 15 minutes.

What does he remember about the aging writer?

"He had a pretty good sense of humor, I remember that," Cajka says.

But that's all he recalls, or will admit to. I ask him for advice. If he does not wish to speak with me, is there someone else who might be more willing? Who else should I call?

"Find a new story," he says.

My exchange with the accountant bothers me. He wasn't exactly stonewalling. Maybe he had plucked his lines from a mob movie. I picture Cajka hunched over his ledgers, taking orders, keeping his mouth shut, signing on the dotted line. But if that's what was going on, who was calling the shots? If not Castaneda, then who?

For answers, I need to find someone who has an understanding of the cult's businesses. He's mentioned in Wallace's book, and he's known to my pal Bucher. I arrange an interview with the person Castaneda chose to be his successor.

Casa Tibet Mexico
Marco Antonio Karam was groomed by Castaneda to be his successor. They parted ways in the mid-1990s.

Chapter 11: The Success Speaks

Shaded by a canopy of jacarandas and palms and other leafy trees, the Roma neighborhood in Mexico City is a hipster enclave, lined with cafés, yoga studios, and groovy places that serve enlightenment by the cup or by the class. Tarot dealers linger in storefronts that also cater to shamans with supplies like dried herbs,
animal-skin drums, or copal—incense for *limpias*, or soul cleanings, a local tradition. Roma is a neighborhood where you can unite your spiritual and intellectual sides, and at its very center lies Marco Antonio Karam's Casa Tibet Mexico.

Around 1985, Castaneda began grooming Karam to be his successor. Not only to follow him as the nagual of his group, but to follow him in a lineage of shamans from ancient Mexico, each of whom passed their knowledge on to the next in line. In his books, Castaneda writes about shamans from previous centuries who possess the magical power to slip between dimensions and enter that crack between worlds.

Now in his late 50s, Karam has built Casa Tibet Mexico into one of the premier Buddhist educational and cultural organizations in Latin America. I ring the bell and walk a few flights up to his office. The mood here is quiet and pensive, the dark carpet soft under my shoes, the light cream walls serene. I pass Tibetan flags and a series of framed ancient texts before reaching Karam's stately workplace.

He points me to a wing chair and shuts the door.

"This is not simply the story of a cult leader who fabricated everything," he says. "There was something there."

In his beige chinos and polo shirt, Karam comes off more logician than lama, more up for an insurance conference than for trekking with his students into the mountains and temples of Tibet.

As Karam tells it, he was a spiritual prodigy. As a teenager, he was already reading Buddhist texts. He was gifted a copy of *The Teachings of Don Juan* and was awestruck at the similarities between the Indigenous Mexican traditions and those of the Dalai Lama and Buddhism. It was comforting, he says, to discover that so many of the Eastern principles he believed in also happened to be rooted in his native Mexico.

He and Castaneda met under curious circumstances. At the time, Karam was uncertain that the author was even a real person, considering all the questions that were raised about his books. "Imagine my shock," Karam says, laughing as he recalls hearing an announcement that Castaneda would be coming out of hiding and lecturing at UNAM, Mexico's largest university.

There was tremendous hype, and "the auditorium was completely packed, filled to the rim," Karam remembers. But Castaneda was late, the organizer said, stuck in

traffic. An hour passed, then another. Most people left. The cleanup crew came to fold up the seats. Karam waited, by then with only a dozen or so diehards.

"Then [Castaneda] came out from behind the curtains," Karam says. "He gave this incredible lecture and presentation."

Afterward, the author stayed and conversed with the small crowd. Before leaving the auditorium, Karam pulled him aside. Castaneda apparently enjoyed the conversation so much that he invited the college student to visit him and the chacmools at their compound in Los Angeles.

"He was addictive to be with," Karam says. "You couldn't distance yourself from it." **S**oon the visits were regular, and they went on for several years. Castaneda began preparing Karam to replace him as a spiritual leader. Their time together often followed a routine: Castaneda and some of the chacmools would pick Karam up at the airport and drop him at a hotel near the compound. Karam would then wait in his room until he received a phone call from Castaneda.

"He would pick me up at odd times of the day," Karam says, "and tell me all types of stories. He had this incredible ability to generate in you this exalted state of consciousness simply by his narratives, by the way that he talked. He would hypnotize you in many ways."

Often, they drove to the beach. Or grabbed a table at a diner or restaurant. Or just walked around. Time with Castaneda was a blur.

"He would pick me up at four in the afternoon, and then we would finish talking at three or four in the morning," Karam says.

Inside the compound, he witnessed the tensions and power struggles among the chacmools. "It was like a [game] of musical chairs, where everybody was fighting to be the flavor of the month and receive his attention," he says.

It was all by design: "He manipulated everybody to compete with each other. He was very brilliant at it, like all cult leaders."

Despite the atmosphere of conflict, the chacmools were so fiercely loyal to Castaneda that they talked often about committing suicide together when he passed away, Karam says. He recalls that Thal had a pilot's license: "She always said that when he died, if they could not follow him [into the next life], they would fly into a volcano in Hawaii." **T**he arrival of Kathleen Pohlman changed the dynamic. When Castaneda appointed her to be his spiritual counterpart, the female nagual, there was blowback from the other chacmools. Pohlman did not have the spiritual training, or the time logged with Castaneda, to be their leader, they argued. She lacked gravitas. "They didn't believe in her," Karam says.

Yet as part of his initiation into the cult's inner circle, Karam says, Castaneda instructed him to have sex with Pohlman, whom Castaneda had also married. It was presented as an honor befitting his anointed successor. Karam remembers checking into a hotel with Pohlman during her trips to Mexico City, two disciples following their master's orders. Castaneda told Karam and Pohlman that their lovemaking was

a ritualistic exercise, uniting energies and seeking to align the "spiritual genes" of his group.

"It was not a passionate thing," Karam says of the encounters. "It was simply like a mechanical thing you have to do to get that gene."

He recalls Pohlman being emotionless about her role: "She was told she had to do it, and she did it."

Slowly, Karam says, he woke up to Castaneda's falsehoods. "He had invented so many different things that were not real," he tells me, "and he sustained these lies as truths."

Castaneda was also abusive. Not hitting anyone or getting physically violent, but "manipulating people," Karam says. "Making them break their family ties, making them hurt their families."

Sleeping with the witches was also a way to control them. "This sexual, predatory attitude he had to all of them was not the sign of a person that was spiritually developed," Karam says. "I saw through the years how manipulative he had become.... I started to recognize there was something wrong in the lineage, something missing, that something had gone astray in him."

Karam remembers the last time he saw his mentor. One day in Mexico City, they stopped for lunch at Sanborns, a diner-style chain restaurant attached to department stores throughout Mexico. This particular location, in the historic city center, was special, Castaneda felt, because he believed the diner had been built on top of an Aztec temple and thus was imbued with centuries of ancient powers. The dining room was impeccable, with towering walls that were cloaked in grand murals and framed by ornate golden borders that caught the glint of the chandeliers.

Castaneda had an agenda. He had been waiting years for this lunch. He told Karam he wanted him to become the nagual, offering the young man the opportunity to succeed him as the leader of the chacmools and his other followers, who, counting workshop attendees, numbered in the thousands. The offer, on the surface, was irresistible. Castaneda was wealthy; Karam would never have to worry about supporting himself again. There were also the chacmools, who would care for him.

"This is the moment you have to decide," Castaneda said. He was getting older. He needed a successor and did not have much time to put his plans in place.

Karam declined.

"Then I cannot spend any more time with you," Castaneda said, his mood changing. His tone became sharp, his voice filled with anger.

"I've lost a lot of time with you, grooming you, and now I won't have an heir!" he said. "Our lineage is coming to an end at this moment!"

Castaneda stormed off. They never spoke again.

"At the end, everything fell apart," Karam says. Without a capable leader to replace Castaneda, the burden fell to Pohlman, who Karam says was not equipped for the role.

Before leaving Casa Tibet Mexico, I ask Karam to help me determine what happened to the missing chacmools. He knew all of them well and was familiar with their


CHACMOOL
MARYANN SIMKO
Cult name: Taisha Abela
Born: Unknown
Last seen: Leaving the cult compound around the time of Castaneda's death, driving a new Ford Crown Victoria.
Known for: While in Mexico, she disguised herself as a gringo named Ricky, placed an artificial penis in her pants to seduce women, and lived as an "Ape Girl" in a tree house for over a year.
Notable quote: "Sorcerers as human beings are perceiving creatures, but what they perceive is neither good nor evil. Everything is perception."

Alta

personal quirks and the cult's business operations. He had been handpicked to run it all.

He thinks for a moment and then explains that the chacmools' disappearance had nothing to do with mystical ideas like the quest for infinity or the pursuit of a shamanic lineage. Other motives, he believes, were at play.

"Follow the money," he says.

APPLE MAPS

The exterior of Castaneda's compound, located at 1672 Pandora Avenue in Los Angeles. He died there in 1998, with the chacmools by his side.

Chapter 12: L.A. Confidential

I'm on another airplane, to Los Angeles again. This time, I'm armed with solid evidence. I have the will. I have the trust document. I know who is getting paid. I can see their names on the list of recipients. But I don't know how much, if anything, each person is still receiving from the estate. Twenty-five years later, the Castaneda trust records remain sealed.

I search online for Drooz, the executor of Castaneda's estate. Before she finished law school, Drooz was a reporter with the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* and later a poetry editor and contributor for *LA Weekly*. As a young lawyer, she joined the firm of Barry Langberg, the noted trial and libel attorney. Drooz represented Castaneda in the 1990s in lawsuits against two individuals who were once friendly with her client, Victor Sanchez and Margaret Runyan.

Sanchez was a Castaneda aficionado. Based in Mexico, he lived among Indigenous peoples for decades and wrote *The Teachings of Don Carlos: Practical Applications of the Works of Carlos Castaneda*, a book published in 1995 by Bear & Company, a small press that was then based in New Mexico. After seeing the cover of the book, Castaneda went on the offensive, suing the author and the publisher. Sanchez fell into financial ruin as he struggled to defend himself against the lawsuit.

Drooz also facilitated a lawsuit by Castaneda against his ex, Runyan, for planning to include letters from Castaneda in a book. Drooz argued that Runyan lacked his consent. The lawsuit was dropped after Castaneda's death.

Most of the key documents of the estate—like its tax records—are not open to public scrutiny. Nonetheless, I make a trip to the probate department inside the Stanley Mosk Courthouse and then to the Los Angeles City Archives and Records Center, prepared to pore over filings and scroll through miles of microfilm.

Much of what I read is unremarkable—the kind of procedural flotsam that goes back and forth through the courts. But somewhere along the way, I notice something. For about the first year and a half after Castaneda's death, five of the missing chacmools appear on service lists as recipients of certified mailings, with all of them residing at the Pandora Avenue address. It is as if nothing has happened and they are still living there.

Then, starting in January 2000, the five names—Thal, Simko, Ahlvers, Marquez, and Partin—no longer show up on the service lists. Curiously, Pohlman's name now appears on them. Why? The paper trail is maddeningly incomplete.

I email Drooz a number of requests for an interview. No response, no surprise. Feeling lucky, I try her on a cell phone number that I've come across.

She picks up, but says she's at the dentist. "I'm getting a root canal," she says and disconnects.

I call again, send texts, and write more emails asking to speak with her. Crickets.

The chacmools were not only devoted followers. They were business partners. Each of them had a role in Cleargreen, which held conferences and workshops around the world. According to the company's business filings, several of the missing chacmools each earned shareholder payouts totaling about $70,000 during the late 1990s, about $130,000 in today's money. But in a court filing, Vashon had claimed that Cleargreen and Castaneda's combined yearly income surpassed $5.5 million.

Then there was Hollywood, where Don Juan had been hot intellectual property ever since Castaneda invented him, although no film or TV series adaptation would be made in the cult leader's lifetime. Which is why talking to Bruce Wagner is so important to me.

Four decades ago, Wagner was struggling to piece together a living in L.A. He'd dropped out of high school and was working as a chauffeur at the Beverly Hills Hotel. He met Castaneda at a brunch, or so his story goes. Wagner went all in to secure the rights to Castaneda's works. He went so far as to join the cult using the alias Lorenzo Drake and spent years getting close to the aging author, as his own career as a well-regarded Hollywood novelist and screenwriter was finally taking off. He then introduced Castaneda to Tracy Kramer, an aspiring producer and a friend of Wagner's from high school. Kramer joined the cult too, using the alias Julius Renard, and became Castaneda's agent.

I call Wagner and send him emails. No response.

I call Kramer and get the machine every time.

"You have reached the home of Julius Renard and Tracy Kramer," the recording goes, an eerie reference to the same person.

Using a real estate database, I find that Kramer (under the name Renard) paid more than $1.5 million to purchase a home in Pasadena in 2015. I decide to take a little drive.

I pull up to the address and can't see much from the street. The house is hidden far behind a row of trees. The gate to the long driveway is locked.

I buzz again. The place feels deserted. I try the house next door.

"He is very secretive," Kramer's neighbor tells me. He's never received an invitation from Kramer for a friendly beer, let alone a knock on his door to borrow a cup of sugar.

I'm starting to think that Cajka, the accountant, was right. My Castaneda journey seems over, locked up like Kramer's driveway gate. Yet there's got to be more that I can learn. I just know it's there, hidden behind trees and hedges, buried under a mountain of bogus names, fishy shell companies, and secret bank accounts.

I'm out of ideas and am ready to give up. I remember a line from Castaneda's *The Second Ring of Power* that feels truer than ever. "It takes all the time and all the energy we have," Don Juan says, "to conquer the idiocy in us."

Who was I to think I could find the witches? Ego, Castaneda writes, is always the problem. "Self-importance is our greatest enemy," proclaims Don Juan.

Perhaps I was wrong about Don Juan, and everyone else? Earlier in this quest, I had emailed Korda, Castaneda's editor at Simon & Schuster, now an elderly man.

"Have always believed Carlos, 100%," Korda wrote me back. "I still have the stick which Don Juan gave Carlos, and he left it to me."

Really? Or was the walking stick just another hoax?

I drive back to Los Angeles, through its pinball machine of ramps and expressways, and again find myself parked in front of 1672 Pandora Avenue.

I walk outside the property, remembering what one disciple found in the trash after Castaneda's death: snipped-up credit cards bearing the name Kylie Lundgren, another alias of Dee Ann Ahlvers's. I peer through the hedges and into the darkness of the windows, imagining the final days of Castaneda's life. The liver cancer had ravaged him, and the fading guru was sequestered in his room, binge-watching rented VHS tapes of his favorite war movies. He'd watched so many, the witches had run out of fresh options. According to Wallace, the final film he watched was *Stalag 17*, and his last words before dying were "Who's the asshole who bought this stupid fucking video?"

Outside the property, I ring the bell again, leave another note in the mailbox, and drive back to the hotel in an even gloomier mood. I find my way to the bar and order one of Castaneda's drinks of choice: an Atom Bomb, a combination of vodka and kumquats. The recipe—like so many other things in the author's life—came courtesy of Don Juan.

Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that the bartender needs instruction on how to make the cocktail. I relay the ingredients and consider the futility of my undertaking.

I take a sip and am reminded again of a bit of wisdom that Castaneda professed to have received from Don Juan—his sage advice to would-be spiritual warriors: "All paths are the same: they lead nowhere.... Follow the path with heart!"

Yes, Don Juan. All paths do lead nowhere. At least my investigation does. I'm done. Pick the path that has heart. I know where that path leads. It's time to head home.

Back in my hotel room, I turn on the shower, ready to wash away my wasted efforts and wounds. I've left my phone on the sink, and as I get in, I notice that it's ringing.

"I'm calling about your message about 1672 Pandora," the person on the other end says.

His name is Stephen Ross, he's a doctor, and he received my note in his mailbox. He knows all about Castaneda and his witches. "He used to live in the home that I'm living in now," Ross says.

I press the phone to my ear to hear him better.

"We bought the house from the witches," he says, and he puts his phone on speaker. Juliet Taff, his wife, gets on the line too.

What? That means that at least some of the chacmools had not disappeared. They had to be alive to complete the real estate transaction in 2009, nearly 10 years after they went missing.


CHACMOOL
REGINE THAL
Cult name: Florinda Donner-Grau
Born: February 1954, in Caracas, Venezuela
Last seen: Packing things around the Castaneda compound shortly before the cult leader's death.
Known for: Racy talk, karate skills. Big-sister vibes. Snappy dresser.
Notable dream: "I had a toy farm...and I made all the dolls mate and breed, not only the cows and pigs. I controlled them all, and I loved it!"

Alta

"One, I believe, was German," Taff says. "Is that correct?"

Yes! Thal! Soaking wet and grasping my towel, I can't believe my luck. While we're talking, I dry off my hands and send them pictures of her over email.

"Yeah, she does look familiar, actually," Taff says after receiving and examining the photos. "That's the one."

Ross explains that the women were instrumental in his and Taff's purchase of the compound. Other offers had come in from developers. "They didn't want the house torn down," he says. "We were just going to remodel it. They liked that a lot."

"There's so much garden," Taff adds. "One came back and told me if I removed any plants, she would come and pick them up immediately."

The shower has not stopped running. Plumes of steam are filling the room like a Turkish bath. I am wet and in my towel and laughing at my good fortune. Pick up the plants? The chacmools had not gone missing in 1998! Some of them might still be alive!

EDWARD KINSELLA III

Chapter 13: The Nagual Woman

I wake up buzzing, desperate to find the deed or any other clue that could place the missing chacmools in Los Angeles, hidden in plain sight, ready to water their old plants. But I come up empty for all of them—except Kathleen Pohlman. She apparently never disappeared, never even left Los Angeles. I find an address for her in Pacific Palisades and jump in my car.

The sun is out, and waves off the Santa Monica Pier are rolling in just so. The fresh ocean air, whiffs of salt in my nose, and the potential that the nagual woman may still be alive have me feeling electric and turbocharged.

As I drive past the lifeguard stations on the beach and the paddleboarders in the surf, I hear Pohlman's voice in my head. She is cackling to Wallace, saying, "I have all the power now! I do! I'm the only one who knows what really happened, and everyone wants me for that!"

I sense a trace of resentment in those words. In the pecking order of the cult, Pohlman held the highest position. Although Castaneda had anointed her as a kind of First Lady, her responsibilities were nevertheless banal, largely administrative. "I was Pimp Number Two," she once joked to Wallace, a reference to her duties of recruiting younger, attractive women from the group's workshops and presenting them to Castaneda as "energetic gifts."

But to Castaneda, Pohlman was more than his in-house madam. She represented a portal to another dimension. I remember how Castaneda was convinced that Pohlman was possessed by the Death Defier—an ancient, otherworldly force from Mexico. Would I see that in her too?

It all started in Tula, a holy place in central Mexico. Before the Aztecs and the rise of their king Montezuma, Tula was the capital of the Toltecs, then the reigning tribe. It was also home to the Chacmools, that series of stone sculptures believed to have represented fallen warriors and spiritual guardians. The mysterious figures recline, as if resting and waiting to come to life.

Pohlman claimed that as an art student, she had traveled to Tula, about two hours north of Mexico City, to view the famous sculptures. Like other tourists who make the pilgrimage, she stopped at the old cathedral in the town square, entering the smaller sacred chapel. And that is when, in her telling, she encountered the supernatural. In front of her eyes, an ancient Chacmool statue came to life, and a powerful spirit appeared. Its name was Xoxopanxoco—the Death Defier.

Xoxopanxoco was known to take many forms, Pohlman claimed, but it appeared to her as a woman. The apparition was wearing a long dress. Yet she spoke in a deep voice—a male voice, gravelly.

The spirit wanted to cut a deal. For centuries, it had been trapped in the bodies of shamans, passing from one to the next. "I want you to lend me a hand and free me from my chains," it said.

The bargain was Faustian. In exchange for permanent residence in her body, Pohlman could have any superpower she wanted. "If you want to be a man, I will make you a man," the spirit said. "If you want to be a super pussy, I will make you a super pussy."

Pohlman was intrigued.

"What does it mean to be a super pussy?" she asked the spirit.

"Well, you could take any man or woman you want," Xoxopanxoco explained. "You could have orgasms through your nose.... All of you is a pussy."

Pohlman liked this arrangement. She would never be rejected by another man or woman again. She accepted the spirit's offer and chose to use her new superpower on Castaneda himself.

"Carlos hates me," she said.

The supernatural events continued, as Castaneda miraculously appeared, naked and lying on her lap, in the park outside the Tula cathedral.

"The only thing Carlos and I could do was to merge together," she said. According to her, they made love for the next nine days. Through these sexual acts, she later told members of the cult, she was able to imbue him with this immortal spirit.

Or so her story goes.

Your destination is on the right," the voice of the GPS says.

Ritter Avenue, Pacific Palisades. I am getting close to Pohlman's home, and getting nervous. Am I really about to meet one of the chacmools? How will I relate to a someone who believes she is possessed by an immortal spirit from another dimension? What will I say?

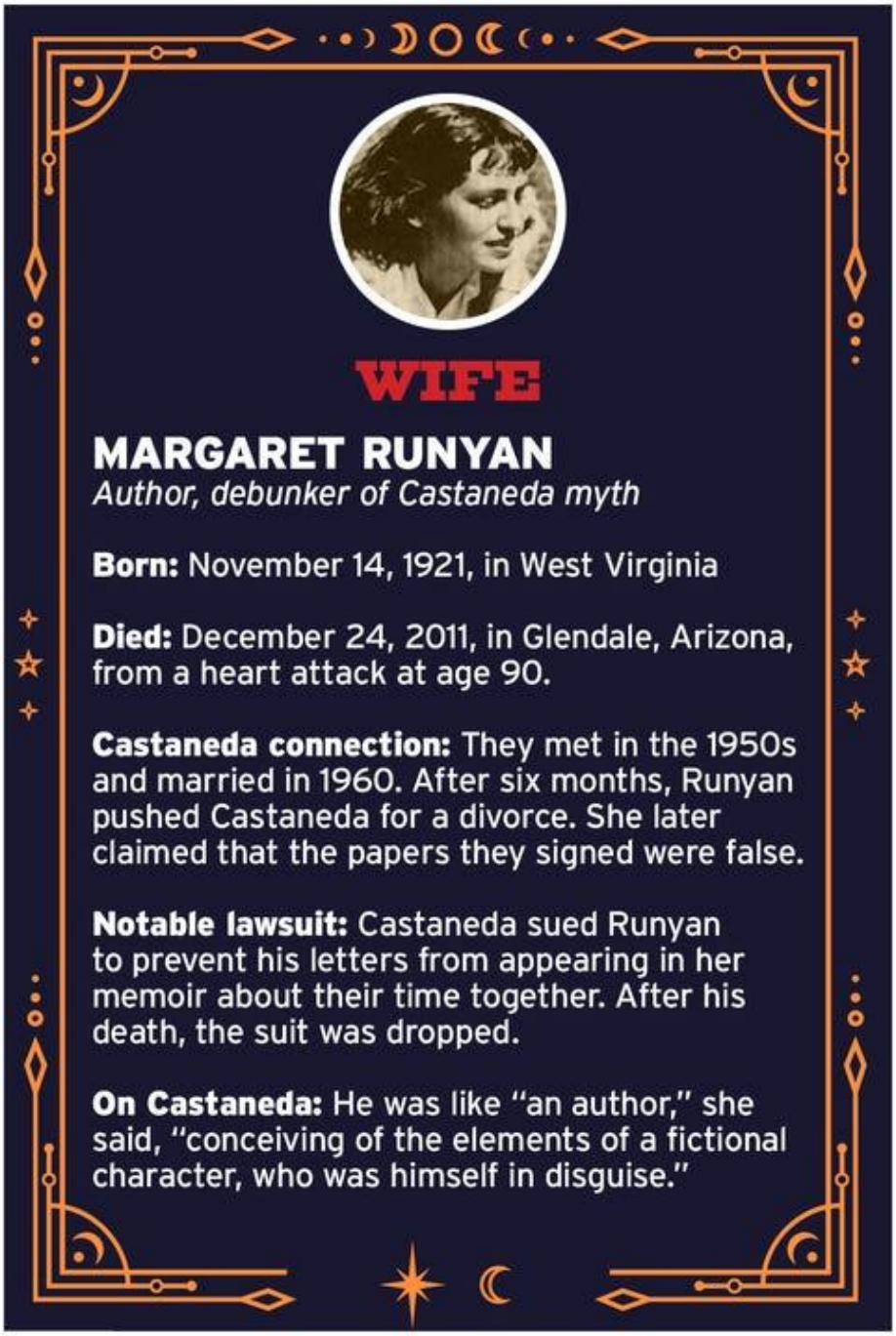
I worry that I'm being drawn into the cult's crazy beliefs and circle the block to compose myself. Surely, the story that Castaneda and Pohlman told about the immortal spirit cannot be true. Don Juan is all a hoax, a Castaneda invention. The Death Defier tale has to be cooked up as well, right?

I step out of the car, notebook in hand, and set off amid the cul-de-sac to find the nagual woman's condo. In front of me, a little boy in a blue baseball cap pushes a toy truck in the road. His dad watches over him in sandals. I walk over.

"Do you know where..." I start to ask the dad and go blank.

The nagual woman has gone by so many names—which one should I use? Carol Tiggs? Elizabeth Austin? Muni Aranha? Muni Alexander? Given the more than two decades that have passed since Castaneda's death, I wonder whether she has dropped her sorcerer's identity and is living under her birth name.

"Kathleen Pohlman," I say to the dad.


WIFE
MARGARET RUNYAN
Author, debunker of Castaneda myth
Born: November 14, 1921, in West Virginia
Died: December 24, 2011, in Glendale, Arizona, from a heart attack at age 90.
Castaneda connection: They met in the 1950s and married in 1960. After six months, Runyan pushed Castaneda for a divorce. She later claimed that the papers they signed were false.
Notable lawsuit: Castaneda sued Runyan to prevent his letters from appearing in her memoir about their time together. After his death, the suit was dropped.
On Castaneda: He was like "an author," she said, "conceiving of the elements of a fictional character, who was himself in disguise."

Alta

"Oh, you mean Kate," he says and looks at an apartment across the street.

My gaze tracks his.

"Yeah, she lives there," he says.

I follow the path to her condo. The stone stairs wind up the bluff, and I feel a sudden chill in the air as I make my way around the bushes that line the walk. From under an open window, I can hear someone talking. It's a woman's voice. It's her. The nagual woman.

I stop. I listen. Pohlman is on the phone. I am so close to the condo that I can hear her feet as she paces the wooden floors just above me. Who is Pohlman talking to? Should I come back? What if I miss her?

I can't blow this opportunity. I take the path around the bend and to the front gate. Then I spot them everywhere. Seashells. Clamshells. Starfish. The shells are lined up in front of the house and around the front door—a minefield, each shell precisely placed, perhaps amulets to protect the sorceress from pesky reporters like me.

I open the gate and try not to step on the shells. I march up to the door. I take a deep breath, ring the bell, and think of what I might say. No, don't think, I tell myself. Forget words. Think of energy. Think Death Defier. Logic has no place here. Not now.

The door swings open. Pohlman—nagual woman, keeper of secrets—stands in the frame. She does not look like a witch. She gazes at me through a pair of cool, chunky, black eyeglasses, the type graphic designers wear. She's stylish and well put together, in a white pressed blouse with black clamdigger pants, the cuffs cut above the ankle. Her feet are bare, toes manicured. How hard can this interview be?

"I'm not interested," she says and starts to close the door.

I introduce myself, make my case, and putter through my points. I want to learn about her story, too. Genuinely, I do.

"Only a few minutes," I say.

Her phone is nesting in her neck, her eyes are gray, her hair a silvery black like a raven. She starts to close the door, and I see the scene in slow motion, my moment to extract the truth fading, my one cubic centimeter of a chance vanishing.

I'm desperate. I think: Please, Kathleen, wait. The questions I have been wanting to ask her for months reel through my mind: Is it true that you and the missing chacmools purchased guns at the end? If so, why? Is it true that you drove out to the Panamint Springs Resort with all that money only to find Partin bloody in the room? Why didn't you seek medical help? Did you accompany Partin to the Panamint Dunes the next day? Did you notice that Partin's license plates had been stripped? Did you notice—as Ranger Dave did, many years later—that there was something resembling a bullet hole piercing the trunk? Forget the car. What about the money? Did you know that Partin was the co-owner of that Mellon investment account? How much was in there, anyway? Please, Kate. Just a few questions.

"I'm going on a trip," she says and turns inside. I watch the door close and hear the cylinder of a dead bolt click into place.

Chapter 14: The Path Taken

Back on the tennis court, I am gripping my racket tighter than before, racing to each ball with fervor, looking to expunge the frustration of spending nearly a year chasing a missing band of witches and the ghost of a literary fraudster—and the humiliation of having Pohlman look me in the eye, hear my plea, and close the door in my face. The encounter felt like an ending, the final step of my desperate and failed search.

Changing sides after a game, François Bucher, my tennis partner and the guy who got me into this mess, asks the question I've been hoping he won't.

"So, how is your investigation going?"

I have no answer. The main villain in the tale, I tell him, is Castaneda. He should not be a literary icon or New Age hero to anyone. He was a creep.

Bucher laughs at me and my naïveté.

"Shamanism is not good or bad," he says, but a series of tactics. "It's just a practice."

We sit and chug water and try to make sense of things that don't. The world that Castaneda created—real, imagined, invented—was a different kind of place, Bucher says. It was an illusion, a cover for a universe of energy strains, and the only way to enter it or understand it was to suspend belief. You had to look around and imagine that everything was not real.

Castaneda's lectures often started this way.

"I would like to invite you all to suspend judgment," he would say. "The practices that you will experience in this class will challenge your perceptions and the ideas of who you are and of the world around you."

To find anything conclusive, I tell Bucher, I will need to change my approach. I'll have to suspend my beliefs and look for the chacmools not where they are but where they wanted to go, the place that Castaneda and his inner circle considered their spiritual headquarters, a site they returned to each year: Tula.

After all, I say to my friend, Tula is the crossroads. It's home to the Death Defier, the capital of the ancient Toltecs and their pyramids, the site of the giant warrior statues. And as it happens, Bucher has a contact there, a guide who can help me navigate the modern and spirit worlds.

"He sits around the pyramids and has this hat full of feathers," Bucher says. "His name is Apolonio."

I start the drive early, before the sun takes over, and pass signs for one village after another: Atlacomulco, Jilotepec, Xhimójay, their names written in Nahuatl, the predominant Indigenous language in central Mexico. I feel as if I were moving back in

time as I pass by farms and see mules pulling plows in the fields. Things seem to slow down.

Tula sits at the midpoint of the old turquoise road. It's in a valley rich with a wide variety of minerals, and it's easy to pluck stones like obsidian from the ground. The Toltecs (and later the Aztecs) knapped this black stone into knives so sharp that they could carve the hearts from the chests of enemies (or fellow citizens). The beating organs would have been placed in the stone baskets of the Chacmools and offered to the gods.

I pass signs for Doxhicho, Dexcani Bajo. Struggling to read these names, I remember that the goal of those ancient societies was not to live a long and easy life. The main goal—in fact, the highest achievement—was death itself. To be sacrificed was an honor in the Toltec tradition, and the temples of Tula were deemed a spiritual launchpad into other cosmic dimensions, a takeoff zone to the next life.

I pull into town, expecting to find the charm of the Pueblos Mágicos in the colonial highlands. But I don't spot any Spanish terra-cotta roofs or cobblestone streets or groomed horses ready to cart me around the town square. Tula and the once-sacred valley that surrounds it are now an industrial hub and a national leader in pollution per capita. I see the pipes, flames, and smokestacks of a monster oil refinery, one of the biggest in the country.

I pass a string of tortilla mills, rotisserie chicken joints, and michelada stands. From the windows of passing cars and from speakers in the street, the music blares and the beats pound. I peer into the old market, at its stalls of fruit and the carcasses hanging from the butcher stands. I look down streets that are choked with scooters and maneuver around trucks loaded with watermelons. It's hot and dusty. It's hard to picture Castaneda's chacmools wanting to be anywhere near Tula. I feel alone, foolish. The only gringo around is me.

The ruins of the old pyramids are on a plateau overlooking the town. I leave the town center and drive up and around to the designated parking area. There's a visitor booth, and I sidle up to it. I ask for Apolonio, my new friend in the feathered hat.

"He only comes on Sundays," says Jesus de Tula, the guide on duty.

I am a day early.

"Tours are 400 pesos," Jesus says, and without any other option, I accept the price and follow him to the old warrior statues.

Jesus is a curious escort. He wears glasses with a set of Coke-bottle clip-ons and then another set of tinted clip-ons as sunglasses over those. Establishing eye contact with him is a challenge, with all the reflections of his eyes looking back at you. He is from a rural town nearby, he says, and grew up speaking Nahuatl and other Native languages. The local folklore customs are familiar to him.

As we walk toward the warrior statues and the pyramids, Jesus becomes a flurry of activity. He points to this edible plant and that one. He ducks under trees and scurries into bushes, picking leaves and berries. He bundles them all together carefully, in ceremonial fashion.

"We must ask permission from the plants before we eat them," he says and hands me the sheaves.

I need to earn my guide's trust, and so I show interest in his historical explanations—lengthy monologues about the feathered serpent, the sacrifices at the giant altar, the eating of babies in tamales—before finally squeezing in a question about Castaneda.

"Carlos lived here for two years, writing *The Art of Dreaming*," he says.

Jesus tells me he even met Don Juan once.

Really? Where?

"I saw him as part of a peyote ceremony," he says.

I size Jesus up carefully, unsure whether he's putting me on yet not wanting to doubt him and risk offense. This is one of my frustrations in chasing Castaneda and his witches. I'm on shifting terrain. In his world of spirits and shamans, anything could be possible.

We approach the stone stairs to the perch where carved columns of Toltec warriors tower over the valley. "The warriors are not only battlers of war," Jesus says. "They are warriors to battle the wars of the self, to achieve a higher power."

And that's when we pass the Chacmools. The statues adorn the temple stairs, holding offerings that they beam to the cosmos. Pointing at the stone warriors, I ask Jesus whether he knows about the chacmools who went missing after Castaneda's death.

He does.

"They meet here every year," he says.

I am stunned. Wait, the chacmools gather here in Tula? Where?

"In a house over there." Jesus points across the valley. I follow his finger past the bell towers and spires of the cathedral and toward a hill in the distance.

He knows the story of the five women's disappearance. "One version is that they placed [Castaneda's] ashes on the altar here," he says, and then each witch went in a different cardinal direction—north, south, east, and west. "And they would reunite here every year, in the house of *divinadoras* over there."

I want to go to this house of the fortune tellers. Does he know where it is?

"Yes."

Can he stop the tour and—for a few extra pesos—take me there now?

"Yes."

Soon we are in my car, heading to the house of the *divinadoras*. I am trembling with nervous jitters. How could the good spirits of the universe—no, the ancient Chacmools themselves—have delivered a guide as knowledgeable as Jesus, who is now taking me to the missing witches' home? If only I had a camera crew to film this encounter!

We drive into the valley, below the pyramids' ruins, and arrive at a bridge. Jesus tells me to pull over. He lowers his voice to a whisper, as if to avoid alerting anyone to our presence.

I get out of the car and brace myself. I tuck in my shirt, pop in a breath mint, and wait for the cue from Jesus. A year of research is about to culminate in something real. Jesus had said they come only once a year, but maybe it's my lucky day!

Jesus takes a few steps down the street, looks back my way through his many lenses, and nods in the direction of the corner.

"That's the house," he says.

He's now speaking in a tone so soft that I struggle to hear him.

"The house of the *divinadoras*," he whispers.

I look. I see only a concrete structure. A sign hangs in its window. "Lavala Malinche," it reads.

The place is a laundromat. I read the sign again. Its motto, translated from the Spanish: "Your clothes. Your time. In only a minute."

I step inside the place. There are no bedrooms. No chairs to sit on. And sadly, no witches either. Just cinder block walls and laundry machines chugging through their sudsy cycles.

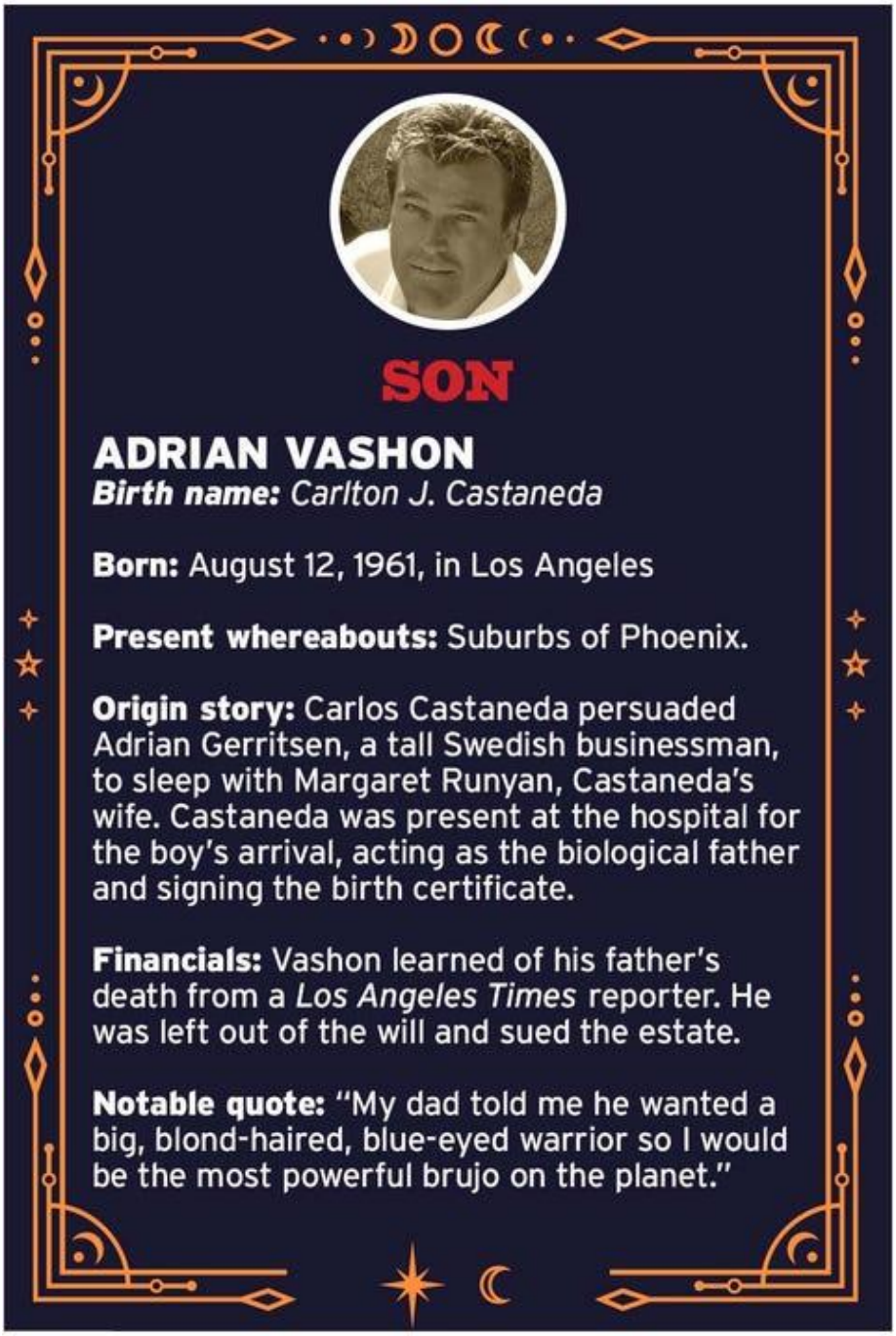
I need a drink, perhaps another Atom Bomb. I want to be alone and far from the guides and Toltec tourist traps. I yearn to tap into the same energy centers that Castaneda and his witches preached.

I drop Jesus off in the center of town and start to get lost. I roam through the market, past the piñata maker and sacks of beans and clay pots of mole and sausages sizzling on comals. I gaze at a slick-haired troubadour holding his tiny guitar, and I squint my eyes, imagining the luminescence around him, an egg-shaped sphere of energy that Castaneda and his crew claimed to witness. I do the same with a shoeshine boy and with a table of friends laughing in a corner of the market. In the restroom, I look in the mirror and imagine that I can see my own orb. Do I have enough energetic power to slip into another dimension, to enter that crack between worlds, and to summon the Death Defier spirit?

I buy a pack of gummy bears and hit some of the sites I've researched. I stand under the window of the hotel room where Castaneda allegedly wrote *The Art of Dreaming*, then under another window where he and Pohlman had their nine-day sex marathon. I keep walking, turning at random. As if governed by a gravitational force, each street leads me to the cathedral.

This walled compound of crosses and flying buttresses is the home of Xoxopanxoco, the Death Defier, the dark and shape-shifting spirit that feasted on the energy of shamans—and overwhelmed Pohlman, inhabiting her body and imbuing her with a kind of immortal spirit.

I recall a spell that Pohlman once claimed could summon the Death Defier. Its words call to me, I feel, and even though an ancient incantation makes no sense at all, walking through Tula, the magical place that the chacmools shared, I now feel that Pohlman wrote down the spell just for me, somehow knowing that I'd find it in my research.


SON
ADRIAN VASHON
Birth name: Carlton J. Castaneda
Born: August 12, 1961, in Los Angeles
Present whereabouts: Suburbs of Phoenix.
Origin story: Carlos Castaneda persuaded Adrian Gerritsen, a tall Swedish businessman, to sleep with Margaret Runyan, Castaneda's wife. Castaneda was present at the hospital for the boy's arrival, acting as the biological father and signing the birth certificate.
Financials: Vashon learned of his father's death from a Los Angeles Times reporter. He was left out of the will and sued the estate.
Notable quote: "My dad told me he wanted a big, blond-haired, blue-eyed warrior so I would be the most powerful brujo on the planet."

Alta

"To evoke her name in Tula would be like a cue to wake her," Pohlman had said of the Death Defier, "and that there could be some daring beings who would evoke her name."

I feel that after all I've been through, perhaps I am one of those daring beings. But rather than enter the cathedral, I borrow a pencil and a scrap of paper from a nearby travel agency. I scribble down the ancient spell to summon Xoxopanxoco and fold the paper neatly in my shirt pocket. Perhaps if Pohlman would not talk to me in her home in Pacific Palisades, the spirit that ravished her here in Tula will. Or, if Pohlman was truly taken over by the spirit, perhaps I can somehow unite with her...and the others, too. Finally, I may find Dee Ann Ahlvers, Chris's sister.

I wait until nightfall. The air is much cooler now, and the wind has picked up. The streets are lit only by the headlights of passing cars. The park benches around town are empty; the gates of the shops are half shuttered. I am cold and tired, not at all comfortable with being here any longer.

The cathedral gate is open. I climb the stairs and pass under the spire, following the same path that Pohlman took. I walk around the empty fountain in the courtyard and stare up through the dusky light at this historic cathedral. Dating from the Spanish conquest, this former home of Franciscan priests is itself a bank of secrets. I continue along the promenade, cedar trees swaying overhead, and pass through a set of wooden doors into a vaulted chamber. The rococo-style columns, I notice, are adorned with eagle talons. Near the altar, other signs of syncretism are at play. Scenes of growing corn, vicious storms, and Toltec warriors. I'm reminded that sacred places like churches were often first Indigenous spaces.

I put my finger to my chest, trace it against my shirt pocket, and feel the outlines of the folded paper containing the spell. I only need to follow the instructions that Pohlman has left me.

I walk down the aisle and approach the altar, just as Pohlman did. I duck into the chapel on the left. The space is smaller and very quiet. The pews are empty. I take a seat. In the corner is a collection of candles, flickering against the thick walls. The simple altar is inscribed with a message: "*No estoy yo aquí, que soy tu madre?*" The words spook me. "Am I not here, I who am your mother?"

I reach into my pocket and open the paper. I look at the words of the spell—written in Nahuatl, the Toltec language—and survey the chapel. The last bit of dusk passes through the window. I curl my fingers into fists, wanting to convince myself that I have the courage and enough energy to summon the Death Defier. What kind of bargain will I be offered? What will I need to exchange for immortality?

Suddenly, I'm not afraid anymore. Not sure why, exactly, but fuck it. How scary can a vampiric spirit that lives inside of me and lasts forever be? Bring it on!

"*Can a nicuicanitl huiya, Xochitl in noyollo ya*," I read aloud—roughly, "Oh, I am the singer of joy, and there are flowers in my heart."

"*Nicmana nocuic a ohuaya ohuaya, oh Xoxpanxoco oh Xoxopanxoco*" is the next phrase. "I offer my song, joy, joy! Intoxicated with total freedom!"

I twist around on the wooden bench and wait. The Death Defier, as I've learned, can appear in any form. A maintenance worker. A pet. A bride. I look up at the fading light falling through the chapel window and wait. For some reason, I am no longer curious anymore, either. I wonder whether all along I was supposed to be searching for something bigger, something more daunting, more important.

I close my eyes and breathe to relax and then find myself getting annoyed. Where is the damn Death Defier? I get up to leave. Then I sit back down, torn between worlds. The facts tell me to go. The desire to see the Death Defier pulls me to stay.

Maybe I read the spell wrong? I speak the words again under my breath. Then one more time.

I grip my knees. I scratch my head. The chapel is now dark, and a draft of cold air blows through. I hear a strange sound. It is the rustling of a plastic bag, followed by the tap of a cane on the marble floor. I turn around to look.

An old lady has entered the chapel. She smiles and shuffles her way toward me. The padding sounds of her feet are soft, sweeping their way up the aisle. She is getting closer now, ready to take her seat by me.

Correction: The print version of this story misidentified a photograph of the poet Octavio Paz as Carlos Castaneda. We have replaced the image online, and we regret the error.

Geoffrey Gray

The Case of the Missing Chacmools

Soon after New Age icon and bestselling author Carlos Castaneda died in 1998, a group of his most loyal followers vanished, and many believed they'd made a suicide pact. Geoffrey Gray investigates the writer's bizarre cult and finds himself entangled in a web of murky financial dealings, sex, possible foul play—and one death-defying supernatural being.

Jun 20, 2024

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<altaonline.com/dispatches/a60923618/carlos-castaneda-cult-geoffrey-gray>