

**The Upside Down Mountain** by Mags MacKean

Sample chapters

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(**Publisher:** O Books, JHP: 29-1-2016. Copyright)

## Introduction

Disguised as a twinge, she has an answer for anyone who questions. For the most part she remains silent, hidden in the shadows – crowded out by decoys, dead ends and false doors. She might make herself known, as she did for me, when purpose and progress, mythologized as a stairway to heaven, no longer makes sense. I know her as Grandmother.

Buoyed by a lifetime of conditioning to want more, do more and be more, restlessness was my constant companion. It wasn't until I felt my way into it and listened hard enough to its wisdom that I discovered the nagging call of Grandmother from the hidden depths of my being.

There's nothing exclusive about our connection, no matter how intimate it can seem. Maybe you have felt Grandmother call to you too. Sometimes I feel her as a little wing, unfurling at my shoulder blades like a tickle or as a sudden impulse to sing. Silent stalker, tender and fierce, she has chased me all my life – long, long before I had any idea I was being trailed. Even when she raged as fierce deadly storms, I was not yet awake to her reminder – the reminder that she was waiting to call me back to the place before the beginning of time, when the story of 'me' began – home.

Grandmother has come as a tarantula – charging me in the jungle, among a throng of people. As guardian of the dreamtime, she assumed a plague of spidery crabs. As harbinger of death, she brings new life. With life, she demands death. It is a reciprocal deal, which will be struck with or without my agreement.

My first encounter with Grandmother in a human identity, so unlike her wilder or more abstract guises, came after a long, long journey, located nowhere with a postcode. The murky waters of my daydreams sparkled with an iridescent phosphorous from the pristine depths into which I had to dive. Descending through the dark density of bone-breaking stillness, I found myself in a fathomless ocean, an unending dimension, the deepest to be found on Earth. Inside the apparently solid core, its hollow interior as vibrantly lit and abundant with life as anywhere miles above it, I was submersed deep within a dormant volcano.

I journeyed to Grandmother that first time with the help of a drumbeat. It propelled me down a tunnel, peaty and moist. My heart raced along as I felt myself pressed down deeper into suffocating darkness. A sudden downpour soon drowned out the rhythmic beats of my heart and the drum. My skin became irritated. How I longed to scratch it, rub away the fever burning through me despite the icy stabs of rain. The water overflowed until there was enough to float upon. I relaxed, weightless and adrift. Then, everything changed. The rain stopped and cheery birdsong filled the pale blue skies of an ordinary spring day. Not a cloud in sight.

A rich smell of damp grass drew me into an orchard teeming with rosy apples, a thatched cottage at one end. Grandmother was stooped beneath a tree, gathering apples to bake. Her white hair was in a bun, her dress too plain to recall. At first glance, her hands were strikingly large, but her eyes were the real giveaway – nothing was as it seemed. They did not belong to a fairy godmother, or a wise witch with a heart tender and expansive from eons of enduring the mixed fortunes of a very long life. No, the eyes that captured mine in the blue translucence of sunlit skies hinted of deep space, enveloping me in all the warmth of an Elysian garden, home-baked wholesomeness, a sanctuary of beehives and roses, blossom and robin-red-breasts.

Her eyes grew as I gazed into them, filling with a sinuous carpet of swallows, pulsing along as one winged bird. “You are the fledgling,” I heard her say in the unending stillness. “You are the little wing, the songbird who dreams to soar among the giants of the winged species. All my children are birds living for the only reason there can be.”

“And what reason is that?” I couldn’t help but ask. “All the little birds are here to sing their hearts out and remember their wings.”

I felt my heart open, as I watched Grandmother’s eyes change again. They were now galaxies, holding the mysteries of the cosmos, radiant with starlight. A comet flashed at speed until it blazed as the raging, transformative power of fire.

“You’re wondering if you’re making me up! But I ask you to consider, what isn’t story? Is something less real for being imagined? I ask you, how can any physical thing hold more credibility than a dream, when everything – every thought, sensation and whim, and awareness of those things itself – arises within the same space – a space without borders, origin or destination, without beginning and end?”

The earth felt as if it was sliding away from under my feet. The hypnotic flow of her words was seeping through me, releasing me from anything solid. Wasn’t everything Grandmother saying familiar, an echo of a distant memory?

“And what now?” I asked. “My life is only too real. But I have the strange feeling sometimes I’m not always in it – a spectator, wondering...”

She interrupted, mimicking my earnestness, “You mean wondering what on earth you are doing here?”

In my mind’s eye, there was a giddy blur of movement, countless reinventions of the same old me in work and play; holding a microphone, dancing, cooking, passport controls, mountain ranges, a throng of people, of every creed and colour; the beautiful Earth. If time had run out to live its marvels how I would yearn to live more and more! And wasn’t that the point – for all the everyday miracles, the countless reasons to be grateful, there was something not at peace – some...

“Make a friend with it,” Grandmother’s voice shattered my thoughts. “That very suffering, no manner of external love will heal. Your restlessness is your greatest ally, if you allow it to serve you.”

“It is?”

“Yes. It is guiding you back to the beginnings of the beginnings – to a whole new you. It is the doorway to a quantum world, the unlimited possibility of the unknown. There is an opportunity, if you’re willing to take it, to begin yourself anew, to recreate your life afresh.”

“How?”

“Go to Mount Bugarach, the ‘Upside Down Mountain’. The place of fire. Of purification. Feel your way downwards into its mystery, its very heart. Let it show its true nature – less of a place than a state of being.”

It was couched as an invitation to explore the very source of turmoil I most wanted to avoid – a journey demanding courage and determination to go beyond anywhere ever imagined and beheld. I was warned that to become identified with any feelings would ensure a hellish experience in the descent ahead. To behold my prospects as just a climb up a mountain was no longer a ticket to anywhere. It would only prolong my misery. There was only one place peace could be found, if compass needles could point to it. The destination, she pointed out, was deep within the molten lava fields inside the belly of the not so dormant volcano.

“Bugarach,” she said again, with the faintest trace of a wink. “Don’t get too drawn to its form. Like the bullseye, hold it within your sights as a blur, for a greater chance of making your mark. Then feel your way into its depths.”

Where I had to go was not only to be reached, she trilled in playful understatement. It was to be brought back, on the great return, as a living

memory. It had to merge with all other places held in time, as the remembered arrival it had become. This would be like a slow awakening from the deepest sleep. It was, she told me, the only medicine to soothe the thrum of the most persistent headache.

“You are going to Bugarach – beyond all that has ever been and will be. No one can take you there. It is a journey to be under- taken alone. This is your time to reinvent the story of who you are and have always known yourself to be.”

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## Chapter 1

### Meeting Mount Bugarach

After months of dreaming, days in the planning, my arrival at Mount Bugarach coincided with departing high pressure. The sunny morning had begun clouding over as the mountain loomed in the windscreen. Its striking faces rose from dense greenery in every direction, flattening into a gentle slope to the top. Hurling through the valley, there had been a few false starts: expecting it to appear after each sharp bend. “There she is!” Garth had declared, aware of my excitement. I clapped my hands.

A flurry of cars revved out of the muddy overflow at its base, as my friend swerved on to a bank of grass for an easy exit. A dark belt of cloud was inching closer – not the enticing blue skies of a ‘meant to be’ rendezvous with Bugarach I had so clearly imagined. Opening the door, I hesitated before straddling over a puddle to join Garth. Lean and tall, he had looked dwarfed squinting up at the well-worn route. He was chewing his glasses which made him sound as earnest as I was beginning to feel. “It’s impossible to get lost. But it is going to rain. A bit. Just stick to the path and you’ll be fine.” I hauled my kit out of the boot and made sure my waterproof gear was at the top. “There’ll be a place to pitch up near the summit,” he added. “You can’t see the flat bit I mean from here. Lots of room there.”

“Allow at least one hour ’til then, you said?” “Possibly two with that weight.” It took some effort to balance the pack, to close the clasp at my

hips. It lightened it a little – but it was still heavy, and I was out of practice with hiking under load. I only had the basics: gear for sleeping, two more warm layers and waterproofs, and seven bottles of water. Fourteen litres to last me four days meant fourteen extra kilos to carry. There was no accessible source where I was going. This trip was my version of the Native American rite of passage, a Vision Quest. Traditionally, the solitary immersion in nature equipped boys with life-changing insights and perspectives to be integrated

back home as they returned young men. Increasingly the practice bridged into the complex lives of Westerners of any age or sex: or burnt-out professionals like myself needing time out. I too was seeking inspiration. My life needed a kick-start, a fresh direction. Fasting, I knew, was powerful medicine. Going without water, as the original rite held, was too extreme for me. And so the burden of carrying water was unavoidable. Every drop was unlikely to be forgotten in the trudge, clamber and scramble ahead.

I struggled to think of something to keep Garth with me a little longer. Another question eked out our goodbye, about the six-hour long journey he was facing to northern France. He had well-paid work crafting a metal staircase which would fund weeks of rustic living. A blacksmith and artist, Garth had created a simple *belle vie* in a village not far from Bugarach. A school friend had introduced us via email and he'd put me up – lucky to coincide with his last night at home. Even then, at the outset of my venture, I hankered for one more evening of fun, of good chat and laughter, helped along by Garth's dry humour, the bottle of wine and tasty fare, most of which he'd grown himself. It really was time to get going, Garth said finally, adding he wished he could come too – nothing like reviving in a blast of nature! Next time? He reminded me of the large iron key between two loose bricks beside the front door to his barn. I thought wistfully of his cat Tigger prowling and leaping between high beams, a stray that had arrived one rain-soaked night and never left. Remembering my faded frayed waterproofs, I brushed aside the prospect of long wet hours ahead. It hadn't occurred to me to plan for weather more like winter than spring. "You could make day trips to Bugarach from the barn instead. Nothing wrong with that – I won't think anything less of you!" he smiled. I knew he really meant it. And my grateful refusal, in that moment of goodbye, had been just as sincere. Still, I felt a stab of uncertainty as I set off, wondering how long it might take to find a suitable campsite before heading on to the summit.

I was yearning to experience the unruly space outside the hedgerows of my everyday world – yet grim unease settled over me along the first gentle rise. Tonnes of mud churned by hiking boots and damp looked poised to slide, a viscous river of earth and stone. The path twisted through darkening tree line. Storm clouds gusted closer, lashing drizzle until my face stung. The upper mountain was swallowed whole, greyed as the verdant valleys. I lurched on up the squelching slope, gingerly edging along crustier, less slippery banks. Branches scraped against me and showered more water. A dull ache deep in my stomach was dread for the loneliness of my endeavour, and every other trial surely lying in wait. I paused to get breath.

The landscape looked agitated in the gusts of wind. Ripples of wind-whipped meadow could have been a churning lime-green sea. Not for much longer. Swirling fog was drifting over, limiting visibility in some places to a few metres. My intention to explore the famed corner of the east Pyrenees was

losing any romance. It was often said Mount Bugarach was no ordinary mountain. The high-energy magnetism of its limestone hulk had drawn many over the ages. It was a day tripper's ideal: accessible and remote. To my fresh senses, it was unfriendly and something else still – disconcertingly otherworldly. There was no one with whom to moan or commiserate. I had chosen to face this discomfort alone. My eagerness for a quest was growing limper by the moment. The key to Garth's barn flashed in my memory, a vivid taunt. With a sinking feeling, I moved on, overloaded and doubtful.

A glimmer of trail opened up ahead. Rock walls glistened in one direction, charcoal fortresses in my need to find shelter; steep forest the other. Even wild flowers blooming improbably among boulders and silt made the grey flat light more gloomy and hostile. Everything was thwarting my efforts upwards. I stopped again. Shivering, my hands were too numb to release the waist buckle of my sodden backpack. It had become a dead weight. Barely three hundred metres above sea level, it was hard to believe it was late May! The wind was tearing through my dripping gear. Being higher, there was little lee. Bugarach flattened like a field before the last scramble to the summit, as Garth had said. I had little choice but to press on: dash to the top and scout out a campsite before the weather worsened. There had been nothing lower down that would qualify as a last resort: soggy meadows, dense woodland, and steep slope.

I wrestled again with the buckle, eager for another warming layer. Mountains could alter in an eye-blink, but adapting as a fresh-faced visitor to their sudden transformation took longer. Time dragged in struggle. The start of a trip always required transition. My urban skin had to shed so that I could attune to the land's subtle intelligence. Gradually, I would become sensitive to sounds, movements and features, otherwise unnoticeable. So far there had been no such gentle exchange with Bugarach. I was being bludgeoned by its force; repelling my every plodding step, each one already a labour of will; nothing to distract me from the hammering cold and wet.

After one last yank, the backpack dropped to the ground. Only then I realised just how drenched I was, my jacket apparently porous. It had been brand new when I crossed the whole range just south, some eight years before. It had weathered the seventy-two day adventure, skirting the borders of France and Spain. It had also summited peaks in Alaska, the Pacific Northwest, Argentina, Peru, Europe, New Zealand and India. In recent years, it had barely had an outing, wedged at the back of an airing cupboard. It hadn't occurred to me to check over it before heading out to South East France. Not for the first time, I was struck by my blind faith that everything would work out.

My jacket and trousers, made of breathable fabric, allowing a dry exchange of sweat and air, were almost as wet inside as out. Unless the weather cleared dramatically, there would be no chance to get dry.

How the wisdom of Commander Goldsmith an old history teacher was again being vindicated – who branded me in one school report, “an over-enthusiastic butterfly”. I had been eight. As my colourful CV since testified, I quickly tired of routine. My life continually felt like an exhausting chase of distractions. An unedited version would have to read: actress, courgette picker, broadcast journalist, traveller, kitchen hand, mountaineer, Amazonian shamanic apprentice, author, coach, energy healer, teacher and speaker. Multiple reinventions of the same old me. Chasing new experiences had become something of a vocation – since quitting my stable life as a BBC journalist, with all its fun, privileged access to people and places, the variety and well-paid rewards – my sea-level life, with its office dynamics and rungs to climb. I had wanted a different sort of ascension – one with the wind in my face, where my hands did real work and my limbs ached. Mountains promised that: endeavour stripped to the quest of a summit and safe descent back into civilised life. And so I climbed, scrambled and roamed, did odd jobs along the way – wherever the whim drove me, until my new outward-bound routine had become as repetitive and exhausting as the one I had escaped from. The values of work or leisure were the same.

After dozens of high altitude trials, it was a relief to grasp I could live just as adventurously in dense concrete jungles – a short drive from the sea. I had virtually given up my mountaineering passion, determined to direct my energy inward – after all, I had reasoned, fed up with my nomadic lifestyle, wasn't life one great big mountain? So I embarked on a whole other journey, from silent retreats in the Himalayas, to the Amazon and its shamanic arts. After nine months of exploring the fear-filled realms within my busy mind, it was clear such efforts were clawing away at the very peace I sought. What was the answer now? The lonely freedom of having enough time and money to make self-driven choices could be just as dispiriting as the commute to work. I felt untethered with or without direction and its accountability. Until hearing of Mount Bugarach and my compulsion to visit it at Grandmother's prompt.

I opened my backpack. Inside were two more tops for warmth. Bedding. A torch. Penknife. A book and notepad. The water. At the very bottom, keeping true to the austerity fitting for a quest, was the lightest tent on the market – then a dubious credential in the stormy circumstances. Keen to lighten the load, I gulped some water back, surprised at my thirst. I looked at my watch. Less than two hours had passed since trudging off, in what had felt like hours of masochistic endurance. My natural optimism was overshadowed by a pragmatic assessment of my options. I was reluctant to leave my pack, in case I found a good spot for the night higher up and had to scamper down and retrace my steps. Given how time was slipping by, I would have to make do with whatever I found.

The wind was getting stronger, unhindered by the valley's undulations. The

upper mountain revealed itself before disappearing again. Dramatic serrations pierced the greyness, covered in green-blue mosaics of lichen thriving on the damp rocky spires. Mountain flowers, including mauve orchid and bursts of wild pinks, blues, yellows and whites, peeped between rocks resembling primitive faces. Ghostly faint voices carried in the wind, impossible to locate above or below. I pictured life slowing down far below in the valley. Venturing out was bound to be limited to essential travel and business. I was only feet away from cliffs and sheer falls. There was never room for complacency on a mountain, however small. I'd had many lucky breaks and chances over the years – learning how any minor error such as a slip in footing or navigation could be deadly. A crow cawed, shrill and throaty, startling me from its hidden perch. Its urgency sounded like impatience, a cue to get me moving. Further along, the grassy plateau Garth had suggested for a campsite was too exposed. There was just enough space to pitch among clumps of gorse, affording reasonable shelter. On closer inspection, a sorry effort had been made to hide toilet roll, with soggy balls of the stuff wedged among rocks. Suitable options for the night ahead were running out. The trail snaked along rocky slabs to the summit. A flattish spot had been cleared of rocks as a rudimentary windshield, with off-putting bits of torn carton, a beer can and orange peel worn into the dirt. It was also right next to the path, too public to feel secure. Surely wild camping, I thought despairingly, meant a place without a human trace. As I gained height, it was all too clear there was nowhere flat or sheltered enough to camp. I wondered whether Bugarach would seem as impenetrable if the sun was shining. In the build-up to coming, I'd imagined a gentle interplay with the mountain – paying homage after responding to its call. Nothing could have seemed less likely. I had yet to find my footing there. Perhaps this was why it was known as 'the Upside Down Mountain'. Bugarach had its oldest rock at the top and youngest underneath – inspiring one theory that it flipped over from the impact of a meteorite. Or perhaps tectonic forces ruptured the Earth's crust to form the mountain, as layers of geology reshuffled, pushing the oldest to the top of the pack. In any event, the area was charged with undisputed natural power. Such was its electromagnetism, compasses could be wildly affected, causing havoc with navigation. Whatever lay ahead on that rain-blasted mountain, the experience was bound to reset my inner compass. Already I had a sense of the unyielding mystery of Bugarach. Its distinctive flavour couldn't be compared to anywhere else. My tension hadn't let up for one moment. It felt like I was facing an initiation of sorts into the famed mountain's many aspects. It drew a spectrum of enthusiasts: the rambler, geologist, climber, caver, seeker, pilgrim, healer, romantic, UFO spotter, Magdalene worshipper, Cathar, conspiracy theorist, Ark of the Covenant quester, birdwatcher and botanist. From the moment I first read about Mount Bugarach, my imagination was captured: a mountain of distinctive geology and human appeal was going to have seams of hidden stories to be unearthed!

Until the Victorians, only an eye-blink ago in time's scale, the heights were



believed to house creatures of darkness, such as dragons and otherworldly beings. They were places of haunt and exile, as well as celestial promise. Those more daring pioneers who took off to explore them were branded hero or fool, the mountain as much a gateway to hell's inferno as heaven's peace. Lust, envy, hate and the rest were said to scream in the purification of extreme heat. For a sinner or seeker, drawn to fire or height, the mountain meant transformation. Any opening into the Earth, however large or small, was a gateway to realms beyond death. And, I reminded myself, my feet were plodding over a mountain famed for its passages and caves, doorways to stories outside the everyday. Bugarach's apparent solidity, to swallow the bravado of legend, was anything but. No wonder it had been a documented place of pilgrimage for centuries, for adventurers into the unknown. And for me.

Rounding the final twist to the top, I was almost knocked flat. The tapping of hiking sticks was carried by the wind, before an elderly couple in woolly hats and with altimeters strapped to well-proofed jackets bounded down from the hidden summit. They looked as if they'd hiked all over the world in a long marriage, with strong bronzed faces, walking steadily without showing any surprise at seeing me.

"Le pic est la bas, juste la?" I asked for the sake of it, gesturing to the only possible summit point.

"Oui, continuez, juste la... deux minutes encore... attention du vent!"

Such exchanges were comforting in unlikely places, for all their ordinariness. I dumped the pack, mindful of the cliffs the other side of a second path descending a steeper route. A hump of rocks signalled the highest point. I touched it as a point of pilgrimage. As if in answer, the wind gusted at a force I could lean into with nearly all my weight. With nothing to see, everything white, and my body supported, I could almost forget I had one. Opening my arms wide, like a bird, I felt airborne. Without putting up some resistance, the wind could have blown me clean off. The exposure was liberating, and wildness unchecked. There was no responsibility to anyone or anything except myself – flying on the peak of Bugarach!

Closing my eyes, I pictured the land hundreds of feet below, perforated with limestone caves and passages. "Whatever it is I'm really seeking," I thought, "may I be open to discovery, and accept all that comes my way... always in my highest good," I tagged on. Just in case. For life had always given me whatever I'd asked, even when I hadn't knowingly asked.

I raced down to retrieve my gear, enjoying my levity and ease leaping between rocks. Back on the plateau, I ruled out staying there, after another thorough search for a site. Beyond it on steeper ground was an intriguing formation of rock. It made me think of a cave, the best possibility for dry rest. Only a slope

of dense shrub requiring some crawling to get through separated me from perfect shelter – of that I was certain! Once again, I dropped the weight and twisted and crouched my way through the prickly undergrowth. I puffed up a narrow gully of scree, continually snarled by thorns. A sheer wall of rock became a handrail, shielding me from thin air the other side. I'd heard of hermits throughout the ages living in caves in Bugarach and half- expected some bearded robed ghost to materialise.

After exhausting effort, I reached a flat area where the scree levelled off. There was no cave as I had imagined, only a nook between rocks, with a sheer drop one side. They were still high enough to nestle against and shield me from the wind and some rain. The spot was hidden too; an advantage from straying hikers.

My positivity soon wore away during the arduous scramble back to my pack. Going down took as much persistence as going up. I couldn't face that again. Given my fast ahead and how wet I already was, it would be a struggle to keep warm. I had to preserve my physical energy. It was only a matter of time, of holding out, I reasoned: there was the perfect campsite waiting to be discovered lower down. It had simply eluded me on the way up.

The path widened at the tree line, still too steep to camp. The fog clouds had turned the woods into a moist fairyland of moss, bracken, toadstools, guarded by giant boulders. I felt watched, imagining elves and goblins peering out from behind trees and hidden burrows. The path wound on, reaching the fields approaching the lower slopes. The decision of where to stay my first night was decided. There was nowhere else but the mud nearing the car park, or the other side of a fence, where the grass was long and land flat enough to guarantee soggy conditions. I scouted out the driest surface among some pine trees.

It was a challenge unearthing my camping gear from plastic liners without getting everything else wet. I regretted packing my down sleeping bag – warmer and lighter than a synthetic one, but impossible to keep dry. The tent pitched, it took an age fumbling about getting everything organised inside. Everything felt damp – my spares, my bedding – and I hadn't even spent a full day on the mountain. The low front wasn't going to lift any time soon. There was no chance of drying out during the rest of my time on Bugarach.

I unravelled my mat and sleeping bag and tucked myself up. A choice of two sorry apples, the sole prospect of food before the fast began, preoccupied me next. Which one first – red or less red? A small puddle had gathered at my bent elbow. Water was seeping in from underneath. I sighed, too tired to swear, too despondent for any reaction more dynamic. Only an unanswerable question: What am I doing here?

My voices of rash and reason began to battle it out: well, this was the plan, and

it was on track! If everyone on a vision quest gave up at the first sign of challenge, the rite of passage would never have outlasted thousands of years of evolutionary culture. The effort of optimism was too tiring. The train of a small spider roaming the damp floor reminded me of my own solitary vulnerability. What am I doing? Yes, what was I doing? I had no reason to choose such discomfort, and no motivation to prolong it – for it had been a long road since I left my London life, pension, Notting Hill flat and thriving network. “It was a new life, a fresh start, a dream,” I had explained rather smugly to those who labelled me brave. Well, it had taken a little longer and many social collisions later to work out lasting change could not be external. You could tweak the environment, climb some mountains, try out a new boyfriend, live in a new home, forsake the office life. You could move to the Amazon, train with shamans, reinvent yourself ad infinitum, flirt with different continents, places and people, never quite taking the plunge to commit to life as it is right now – every decision invested with a sense of tomorrow. You could set yourself up as the world’s most inspired motivator or coach or change consultant – after all, a life committed to change, such as mine, knocked up some first-hand authority; publish a book, write some more, speak about it, meet audiences just as inspired to escape their life, and then meet some more. The airport could trigger the same rush as getting high – the ticket to a new horizon, the thrill of adventure, possibility, endless new influences. The merry-go-round of seasonal themes, the cycles, patterns, and déjà vu moments, the doomed love, broken dream, the mended, hopeful, eager heart, the hollow words of arrival, “I’m really sorted now, this is it!” Or false start: “This is my vocation – what I’m born to do!” There was always one common denominator, and that never changed. It followed me, pursued my every move a hungry shadow, no matter how stuffed my suitcase, and how far flung or extreme my destination. For, time and again, being out ‘there’ and waking up to the only place there had ever been and would be – ‘here’ – could only mean that no matter how hard I climbed, danced, loved or laughed, cried and celebrated, meditated, quested, retreated, tranquillised, inquired, chanted, fasted and prayed, there really was – and always had been – and (if that was not exhausting enough to accept) there always would be... no-thing but me!

I peered out of the tent and took a deep breath to clear my mind. “Mount Bugarach,” I invoked silently. “I’m here to open up to whatever has pulled me to this unlikely place – given I don’t know what that is. I’ll stay all week if that’s what I need to do. But please – help me to know – just give me a sign!”

Almost at once, I sensed a reply. “The way up is down.” I closed my eyes again, intending verification. It was too easy

to imagine what I most wanted to hear. “To go up, you must go down...” Clarity was a wonderful thing: when you knew you knew,

and until you knew, you didn’t know. Suffering and sacrifice, which I had

tasted, were not apparently a requisite to path finding or way-showing. A quest with the prospect of bed, dry, hot food – why not? I had to trust there was another design, another way...

Within minutes, the soaked tent was stuffed into my pack. I would have to relay my gear, not having the energy or will to reorganise everything to fit in as it did dry. Already 7pm. I smiled, remembering Bugarach's 'Upside Down' nickname. The way up was down. Stomping back towards the valley, I relished my retreat to civilisation, wishing I could share the unlikely twist with Garth, who would surely be imagining me hunkered down with spirited discipline. Having explored with dogged persistence a life moving uphill, who was I not to investigate, consciously, the opposite direction? What did 'down' mean anyway that I hadn't before experienced – and where could it lead? Surely, it was just a case of being open to signs, and following their very simple instructions.

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## Chapter 7

# Jungle Medicine

Time, unlike a river, is said to flow in both directions. Events upstream and those downstream course along the Here and Now of the Present, a harbour for all destinations, past and future. Nowhere is ever fixed. Where there are witnesses, there are as many landscapes. Perception shifts what there is to see; hindsight or projection also casting their shadows over what is really present. My story, as I frame it, can spring alive with a backward glance, brightening and darkening in different ways from how it was lived at the time. With the perspective that time brings, with wings to survey, I understand a far greater narrative unfolding through me as I then stumbled within labyrinths of crushing darkness towards a pinprick of light.

Some four years before Mount Bugarach loomed in my own life's trajectory, I heard the Amazon whispering to me – like an unmistakable rush of distant water. The jungle could be felt many thousands of miles away, a whole ocean between us. It shimmered in my dreams and took life in my imagination as a mysterious entity, vital and intelligent. Its intensity became a coax, taunting me as the unrest that had always been there. It was only a matter of time before I would visit, for the river's calling, I now know, was a summons, beckoned by her, the guardian of the psyche's deepest depths. Like the urgent call of the 'Upside Down Mountain', the feverish pull to the jungle, it was to turn out, was her summoning me all over again. Only I didn't know that at the time. I was only aware that I had to visit the Amazon.

Known in some tribal tales as the womb of the planet, the river's irrepressible power is as much about the mulch of death as the life it generates. As certain plants and medicines in Amazon lore are affectionately coined 'mother' for their nurturing qualities, I was to adopt my own nickname for the mother of them all: Grandmother – the mother of all mothers, all such intelligent life forms, green or blue, and every colour in between. Grandmother is as familiar and intimate as she is elusive and impersonal. It is an exacting relationship: she demands death for the fullness of life to express. This is what I was to understand much later as her invitation: to make the journey of descent 'consciously' this time round. Raking over the ins and outs of past drama, trawling through many mind-expanding or heart-opening moments, is not my intention. Allowing feelings not fully expressed their light of day is the only reason to voyage deeper into memory. Awareness was the first step, feeling through a doorway of buried emotion the next. Venturing downstream, back to the Amazon, is a choice to relive the darkness that swamped me there – and feel it transform.

I bought my first ticket to the jungle two weeks after a friend had enthused about a life-changing experience there. She had taken part in a shamanic ceremony in which the psychotropic brew ayahuasca was served. The vine, held as sacred in Amazonian culture, has transformative powers known to illumine the most buried depths of the psyche. It was regarded as the ultimate mind and heart-expanding medicine, offering in the main an unforgiving dose of no-nonsense wisdom. As a psychedelic escape, caution was required: demons and dragons, angels and deities could also hop aboard for the trip. Ayahuasca, most agreed, stoked up hidden turmoil a seeker might not want to confront.

Hearing about the brew's excavating nature attracted me at once. It sounded like a piercing ally for self-inquiry. Generally I was grateful for many things: good health and friends, managing a time-rich, cash-poor balance that had not strayed into debt. There were always short-term jobs to pick up here and there, including freelance writing. Still, a tension lurked behind my gratitude. I didn't swallow the positive hard line of New Age thinking and its investment in happy outcome – the resolve to 'grin and bear it', or 'smile and keep smiling until you can bear it'. I knew how perception changed the world, but denying the grit giving rise to less desirable feelings as unworthy to the cause of 'one day enlightenment' at least fired up the very irritation I was supposed to have meditated out of myself. Whatever I had tried or denied, nothing was ever enough, other than a simmering impatience that rarely exhausted itself. The fact was no manner of good friends and fortune, of 'growing' prospects, and no amount of self-improvement events and books could ever quite hammer out of me a sense of leased peace. The twinge, as I have called it, might subside for days, weeks, and often months at a time. But it would be back. When I heard of ayahuasca for the first time, I only knew then that imagining the Amazon and

its plant medicines quickened something in me – an excitement to change my life story, and to live that change.

My travels began downstream in Iquitos, the biggest city in the Peruvian jungle. The sultry climate promised all the sensuousness and charge of fatal attraction. Iquitos was a chaos of modern and traditional forces, a sprawl of faded colonial charm. It had sprung from rubber trade more than a century before, thriving as the main world supplier until competition opened up, plunging the boomtown into oblivion. Rapid expansion had since destroyed tradition: auto-rickshaws and scooters overrunning the narrow boat and canoe. Oil, tourism, research and charitable social infrastructure were the lifeblood of Iquitos. Encroaching the city, the jungle's natural contrasts were unending; bursts of colour among sullen, earthy hues, dragonflies and butterflies of every pattern and size, flocks of squawking birds commuting over the canopy beyond each morning, returning at dusk. Being close to the equator, day and night swung equally, twelve hours apart. Within extremes so evident lay an exacting balance.

Iquitos also carried the distinction of being the launch pad for seekers of ayahuasca, like myself. On that first two-week visit to the Earth's largest garden, I discovered a vivid snapshot of nature and her laws. Ayahuasca itself was not only a portal to subtle realms beyond sensory reach; it was an invitation to embrace the whole of life, in all its unseen possibility. Such psychic recesses were usually only accessed by shamans, master voyagers of worlds and everything in between. Ingesting ayahuasca opened those spaces for everyone else.

I had found a shamanic centre a short drive outside Iquitos that had two head shamans, or Maestros. To be qualified for that title of mastery demanded years of immersing with the plants, and practising their medicine. One was a *nativo*, the other an American, one of the few Western Ayahuasceros with enough experience to hold ceremonies for large groups. There were enough stories on the grapevine of predatory, power-crazed shamans or incompetent ones, preying on the wallet or vulnerability of naive gringos. Some would emerge from the jungle lost, and in much worse shape than when they had arrived. The set-up I chose had a reputation for combining tradition with the reassuringly familiar language of Western psychology. Such a combination inspired my confidence, offering a steady bridge into the uncharted territory of an opened psyche. It felt safe. It meant I could dive into the unknown feeling fully supported.

In darkness, the shamans sang hauntingly melodic songs called 'icaros'. They were like sonic wings guiding a ceremony's flight through the labyrinthine worlds of ayahuasca. Sung in Spanish, English, different jungle dialects and also a 'plant language', playful and sweet, they often inspired elevated insights and wisdom. As the energy within the ceremony built, so did the visionary

effect of the medicine, known as ‘mareacion’. The brew’s gifts were often presented with sweet tenderness, other times as a glaring spotlight on hidden truths. Such a rich mix was an expression of the vine’s vibrant home, where the epic drama of survival and death played out vividly; predator and prey battling on a stage of growth and decay.

Similarly, ayahuasca could open up delicately interconnecting realms of intense vitality or barrenness within my vision. Life and consciousness, as it showed me, were one and the same thing.

Ceremonies were demanding physically too. Ayahuasca was a purgative. True to its prehensile form, it could probe and extract from deep within the body anything ripe to be expelled. Tension and nausea escalated until they were purged – through sweating, yawning, shaking, laughing and crying, vomiting and defecation. The physical release of dense energetic forms could be gruelling, as layer upon layer of personal history were shed.

In that first taste of the jungle, it was evident how shamanic practices and their potential for healing probed far beyond the symptoms treated by clinical cures and formulas. Illness was seen as soul sickness, imbalance manifesting from within the matrix of relationships – among people and families, their environment, diet and society. In traditional medicine, disease was as much a state of the spirit as it was the body. To fix an ill body without addressing what made it that way only suppressed its real causes. Like the jungle’s complex web of relationships, human dynamics were just as interwoven with forces either nurturing or destructive to one’s well-being. Ignored over time, they could attack with cancerous intent.

Ayahuasca tourism was beginning to boom: more and more Westerners seeking holistic treatment for their mental and physical health. The shamans warned those of us preparing to return home that materialism carried a price: divorcing from the true source of food, shelter and clothes killed the spirit of community. We had forgotten where we came from. And it was true, feeling refreshed after an immersion in such pure verdant space, I started to remember the glare of electric skylines and urban stresses from which I had relished my escape.

Settling back into my routine in England, I knew I’d only scratched the surface of the medicine’s dimension – and my whole being yearned to explore more deeply. The opaque world of cause and effect was fascinatingly interwoven. Nothing happened in isolation. Exploring what lay behind a symptom could open up a warren of twisting trails. No matter how disease might manifest – physically, mentally or emotionally – there was a similar root: wounded self-relationship. It reminded me of the fairy tale *The Princess and the Pea* – no amount of mattresses could flatten the pea at the bottom of the heap.

I read everything I could about core shamanic practices, and began an intensive eighteen-month training in energy healing rooted in the Andean tradition of Peru. I learnt how to journey into altered states of consciousness, using the sound of a rattle or drumbeat as guides. My senses became more attuned to the invisible world of energy and how to map it. Before long, I was able to deepen and practise the discoveries I had made for myself drinking ayahuasca – and the underlying relationships sabotaging a healthy mind and body. Sometimes the link wasn't so obvious. I wanted to understand more about the origin of disease, to support others to explore the source of their own anxiety however that might physically play out. New discoveries were also being made each week in the Amazon among the cornucopia of barks and leaves. The healing arts were an unlimited science – and I was eager to learn whatever I could. A psychotropic medicine to open up the more impenetrable layers of the mind, and its relationship to the body, kept calling me to return, as clearly as a broadcast invitation.

Ten months after that first experience with ayahuasca, I was back in the jungle for a stay of two months. Three months after that, I moved there. Like the snap of an elastic band, my enthusiasm would face a prolonged engagement with a teacher of equal intensity. My life's direction, it then seemed, was a one-way ticket to the Amazon, to explore its inexhaustible medicine bag.