

In Geronimo's Footsteps

A Journey Beyond Legend

Corine Sombrun
and
Harlyn Geronimo

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“I know that if my people were placed in that mountainous region lying around the headwaters of the Gila River they would live in peace and act according to the will of the President. They would be prosperous and happy in tilling the soil and learning the civilization of the white men, whom they now respect. Could I but see this accomplished, I think I could forget all the wrongs that I have ever received, and die a contented and happy old man.”

GERONIMO

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Introduction

I met Harlyn Geronimo, a medicine man and the great-grandson of the famous Apache warrior Geronimo in July 2005, in New Mexico, where he lives today. Together, we went on a pilgrimage to the source of the Gila River, Geronimo's birthplace, and were companions of a few months during which we shared and compared our respective passions for Apache and Mongol traditions, which, according to a certain Apache legend, have common roots.

Harlyn Geronimo initiated me to the virtues of medicinal plants, to survival in the New Mexican deserts, to the guiding rituals of Apache medicine. And I revealed the mysteries of Mongol Shamanic traditions to Harlyn Geronimo.

I was able to write this book thanks to our utterly fascinating partnership, thanks to his willingness to share it, and, above all, thanks to Harlyn Geronimo's exceptional account, which he granted me permission to record and translate, and for which I thank him again.

My interest in drawing a parallel between past and present led me to build this book into a two-voice narrative. Consequently, every other chapter is dedicated to Geronimo's life, told for the first time, and as it has never been told before, from his great-grandson's point of view. To this, I have interwoven the tale of my meeting and trip to the source of the Gila River with Harlyn Geronimo. In this present-time narrative, three main themes are developed. First, Harlyn Geronimo's take on the social and political conditions of the Apaches in this 21st Century. Then, I take an unprecedented look at the traditions of the Apaches as compared to the Mongol's, following the hypothesis of a common root. And finally, I focus on Harlyn Geronimo's life, his time in Vietnam, his battles, as medicine man, to save the environment and the traditions of his community, and his political, cultural, and spiritual choices. Lastly, I ponder his participation in the Skull & Bones investigation, a case, which exposed George W. Bush's grandfather Prescott Bush's involvement in the alleged profanation of Geronimo's tomb, from which he is said to have stolen Geronimo's skull and femur bones.

The details of Geronimo’s life put forth in this book do not claim to have any significant historical value or to amend any point of his life story. As his direct descendent, we cannot exempt Harlyn Geronimo’s account from a certain subjectivity, and his memories certainly aren’t accurate enough to reconstitute every detail of Geronimo’s nineteenth-century life today. So to recreate this tale, I also drew on—among many other sources—scientific theses put forth, in Oklahoma, by Anthropology Professor Emeritus and expert Morris Edward Opler in his book, *An Apache Life-way – The Economic, Social, and Religious Institutions of the Chiricahua Indians*.

I also based myself on the account of Karen Geronimo, a medicine woman and Harlyn Geronimo’s wife, who took part in our journey to the source of the Gila River but who preferred not to be mentioned in this tale. “I would like the contributions to remain Harlyn’s, exclusively,” she said, “rather than mine too.” I still wish to honor her. Her engagement in preserving her people’s traditions and her knowledge of Apache culture (Karen Geronimo is Apache Kid¹’s great-grand-daughter) allowed me to fill in the details of Harlyn’s account.

By putting into writing those Apache memories for the first time, Harlyn Geronimo, Karen, and I simply hope to invite readers to make an extraordinary journey into the roots of Chiricahua traditions and, by virtue of taking these symbolic footsteps with his great-grandson, to fulfill one of Geronimo’s final wishes for him and his people.

C. S.

¹ Raised on the San Carlos Reservation in New Mexico, Apache Kid was the first scout who was promoted to rank of sergeant. After being wrongly convicted of attempted murder, he escaped and, like Geronimo, became an outlaw. The State of Arizona offered a \$5000 reward for his capture, dead or alive, but he was never caught.

Prologue

Paris, February 2005

Dear Madam, following your request, I have contacted Harlyn Geronimo, one of Geronimo's great-grandsons and, without a doubt, the one most invested in keeping his memory alive. I spoke with him about your book project and I am pleased to inform you that he has allowed me to provide you with his contact information. I am including it here for your perusal. You can tell him I told you to contact him.

I wish you much success in the realization of your project.

Warmly,

René R.

I stand up. I walk in a small circle. It's become a habit whenever I'm overcome with joy. I repeat out loud the words of the Albuquerque journalist: "*You can tell him I told you to contact him! You can tell him I told you to contact him!*" I sit back down. What will Harlyn Geronimo's voice sound like? Will it sound like his great-grandfather's? I re-read the email a dozen times, time enough to convince myself that it's real. And then I thank the sender for his support and trust, assuring him that I will keep him abreast of developments in the process. I click "Send."

And suddenly fear rises in my stomach.

During my childhood, I devoured all of those Indian movies: *Bronco Apache*, *Broken Arrow*, *Day of the Evil Gun*, and of course *Geronimo*! As time went on, Geronimo became, like Superman, Peter Pan, or Mickey Mouse, a citizen of my imagination, a hero of that inside continent. But a fleshless, bodiless companion—a symbol, built by my mind, of the fight against injustice. So, you understand, making a phone call to one of his descendants is suddenly as extraordinary to me as having Peter Pan's grandson himself on the line. Inhale. Exhale. I grab the phone, stare at the keypad, my index finger. I smile. So it's not so hard after all to turn dreams into reality. I dial the first three numbers. I stop. What time is it? Four p.m. There's a seven hour difference between France and New Mexico, I checked. Are they seven hours ahead or behind?

Shit, I never remember. No way I'm waking up Harlyn Geronimo in the middle of the night. OK. The United States are West of France. So the sun rises later over there. That means they are seven hours behind. That's right, I can call him! I'm calling Geronimo's descendent! Having a hard time getting used to the idea. OK. I feel inspired. I dial the number in full. Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep. The tone, like the wick of an old memory, has just lit up to cross time. It throws its inexorable sparks at me, tracing a path of light into the present moment, here in my ear. One ring. Perhaps he isn't home? Two rings. "Hello?" The voice of a man, a deep voice, has just answered. Is that him? My stomach rumbles. I blank. Surely because of all the emotion. I don't know what to say. The voice grows impatient. "Hello? Who is this?" Come on, Old Thing, courage! Harlyn is a human just like you.

"Hum...Hello, my name is Corine Sombrun, I would like to speak with Harlyn Geronimo..."

"Yes, it's me! Glad to hear from you, Corine, I was expecting your call..."

That simple greeting feels good. Harlyn sounds friendly. And the journalist had informed him that I'd be in touch. So I go for it. I explain to him my desire to write a book on his great-grandfather. And to discuss it with him in an attempt to clear up certain points developed in *Geronimo: His Own Story*, the only existing tale of Geronimo's life, told by Geronimo himself, and commissioned by S. M. Barrett.

Harlyn immediately agrees. He says I was right to contact him. He is a medicine man too, just like his illustrious ancestor. So he will be able to discuss that aspect of Geronimo's life better than anyone. I raise my brows.

"Really? A medicine man?"

Harlyn confirms. I rest my brows. And I was initiated to Shamanism in Mongolia. Isn't that a pretty strange coincidence. One more coincidence in the path that has led me to this moment. Already some eight years ago, the person I was sharing my life died. From cancer. I left everything to take refuge in England, and then in Peru, at a Shaman's. Surely out of some need or hope to find answers to the question of death. For a few months in the Amazon jungle, this Shaman taught me magical chants called *Icaros*, which allow human beings to connect with certain plants that can supposedly transmit to humans an understanding of dreams, sounds, and anything else we might need to access the spirit world. At first, I found those prayers ridiculous. And the fact that I was

singing them, even more so. But it was actually after singing the Icaro that corresponds to the Ajo Sacha, a plant that teaches us to understand dreams, and after drinking a decoction according to a very precise ritual that I had this dream about following a course that would take me to Mongolia. It was such an incongruous event, there in the middle of the Amazon, that I decided to follow that dream. I had nothing left to lose anyway, no ties, no responsibilities. So in 2001, the BBC World Service, the radio for which I had already done a story in the Amazon, allowed me to go and do another on the Shamans of Mongolia². I didn't know, at the time, that this trip would upend my life.

The Shamans there told me that I had been chosen by the spirits. That I too was a Shaman. Should I tell Harlyn about it? No way! But why not? Harlyn doesn't let me think more before asking me if I know what a medicine man is.

“Hum... Yes...”

And suddenly, I'm not sure why, all of my fears dissipate. I can't keep from telling him everything. The Amazon. Mongolia. How there, Naraa, a friend, had agreed to be my guide so I could come into contact with some Shamans. Thanks to her, I was able to attend a ritual. In Mongolia, Shamans go into a trance when they play the drums. One small issue was: the sound of that drum had a very unexpected effect on me, for a Westerner. A deep tremor propagated throughout my entire body. My heart rate rose, my eyes rolled back, my arms began to flail, my legs jumped, my body leaped, images of wolves took over my brain, my nose began to sniff. I really felt like I had become a wolf. I felt myself slip toward this door created by the drum's sound. A strange thing for sure, certainly, but the most extraordinary part of it all was that I was conscious of what I was experiencing. I just couldn't control it. I kept on slipping toward that door. And then the beating of the drum stopped. In a nick of time. Right as I was about to enter. Someone shook me. I ended up opening my eyes. The Shaman stood in front of me. He asked me, with great concern, “Why didn't you tell me you were a Shaman!” My eyes finally opened with that remark. As far as I was concerned, he was wrong. I was not, nor had any desire to be a Shaman. But he wouldn't consider my objection. “If the drum causes this reaction in you, then you're a Shaman. The spirits have chosen you. You'll have to follow the secret teachings reserved to them.” This meant spending three years in the deepest recesses of Mongolia with a master Shaman.

² Cf. *Mon initiation chez les chamanes*, Albin Michel, 2004, Pocket, 2006.

And if I refused? His answer was clear. The spirits would cause me serious grief. According to him, my dream in the Amazon was not a coincidence, but a message from the spirits to inform me of where my “destiny” as a Shaman was to be fulfilled. Since then (this was in 2001), I have spent a few months every year on the border between Mongolia and Siberia following the teachings of a woman Shaman: Enkhetuya. She’s had a costume and drum built for me, she has taught me, thanks to my drum, how to navigate the world of trances, how to interpret its sensations, its messages, its visions...

My story told, I wait for Harlyn’s reaction. But he remains silent. The jitters return to my stomach. I regret. I never should have told him all of this. Thankfully, I didn’t admit the strangest part. It’s during one of these trances that Geronimo’s name appeared to me³. It returned incessantly. So real. I told myself that this “message,” as powerful as the dream I’d had in the Amazon, must have a meaning. But what? So I sought to discover it by writing an email to that journalist who was a specialist of the Apaches’ saga. I told him, at the time, about my desire to write a book on Geronimo. My desire to meet one of his descendants. Without revealing the source of my interest. He would have taken me for a madwoman and he would have been right. Your standard Westerner does not follow callings revealed in “trances.” Harlyn’s voice finally emerges, revealing what I never could have guessed...

“Your story doesn’t really surprise me...”

He stops speaking. I wait, having trouble understanding this lack of surprise.

“According to one of our legends,” he finally continues, “the Apaches are descendants of the Mongols. And actually our children have, like the young Mongols, a “blue” birthmark at the bottom of their backs. Sadly, we’ve lost touch with those roots and traditions. But I knew that one day someone would come and reconnect us with them. And today, you called. So for me, it’s anything but a coincidence.”

It’s my turn to remain speechless. All the pieces of this puzzle start twirling in my brain. Start assembling. Was I this link Harlyn awaited to reconnect the current Apache culture to the ancient Mongol one? Was this the reason for my vision of Geronimo during the trance? But why me? Perhaps Harlyn has the answer. No. I must not ask him. Not over the phone. And I need to think about it anyway. To give my reason time to accept what I have just heard. It’s so beyond any logic...

³ Cf. *Les Tribulations d’une chamane à Paris*, Albin Michel, 2007.

“Corine? Are you still there?”

“Hum, yes, sorry, I... I was thinking about what you just told me. It’s strange, isn’t it?!”

I hear a little burst of laughter. Then his voice again. Harlyn suggests that we meet in New Mexico, to see, very simply, where this “strange” story will lead us and where it might have begun...

Then Child-of-the-Water and Giant fought each other.
Killer-of-Enemies was already a man, but, afraid, he sat down in tears.

Finally, Giant spoke these words to Child-of-the-Water:
“So let us aim our bows at each other, to see which is the bravest.”

“Alright,” answered Child-of-the-Water.

Then Giant spoke these words to Child-of-the-Water:
“Stand in front of me. I will shoot first.”

Then, Child-of-the-Water spoke these words to Giant: “Alright,” he said.
And then stood in front of him. And Giant shot four times.
He missed every time.

So Child-of-the-Water spoke these words to Giant:
“Now, you, stand in front of me,” he said.

Giant stood facing him. His coat was made of four layers of silex.
He was not afraid of Child-of-the-Water.

Child-of-the-Water shot his first arrow. The first layer of silex fell. The next arrow
took the second layer off. He shot a third time. The third time, Giant’s coat fell off. And
then Giant’s beating heart appeared.
Child-of-the-Water shot a fourth time.
The arrow impaled itself into the very center of Giant’s heart.

Apprentice Warrior...

Large Leaves, the season when the sun was warmest, had just began, Grandfather. To protect you from snakes, whose were also in season, your mother had built you a small buckskin lace decorated with two turquoises that you had tied above one of your ankles. She also made you chew some osha leaves, and you had spat it onto your feet and legs. That plant's spirit was said to repel snakes. Finally, you had placed a pinch of pollen inside your moccasins. Buckskin moccasins, that came up to your knees, top rolled down, into which men sometimes placed a knife.

Thus protected, you could finally begin your training as apprentice warrior. You'd just turned eleven and the men in the tribe had considered you strong enough to start. A second level in some way because as from the age of seven, you had been trained to hunt squirrels and birds, first with a slingshot, and then with a small bow specifically designed for your size. You'd also been taught to ride a horse without a saddle, and controlled him only with a rope around his nostrils, prompting him into a fast gallop, stopping him on or making him jump over an obstacle, with you bent down on each side to catch some targets, oftentimes wild turkey. They didn't run very fast, so they were easy to hunt like that. With your friends, you brought them back to the camp where your mothers cooked them. Rabbits were a harder game. Still dipping down on one side of your horse, you struck their heads with a wooden club.

You were also trained to jump into rivers covered with ice, to come out of the frozen water without being allowed to warm up by the fire, or to stay outside for a day and a night without sleeping, to guard the camp. Without uttering any cries of pain, you spent hours hardening your hands against the bark of a tree, hours trying to stroke, with those same bare hands, branches as thick as your thighs, and burning sage on your skin until the ash had turned cold.

But all of this was nothing compared to what awaited you.

That morning, for the first time, your father woke you up before sunset. Before you'd even finished putting on your moccasins, which were well prepared to repel snakes, he ordered you to run without stopping up to the top of a canyon that looks down onto the Gila. It was a very steep climb, but one that your trained legs wouldn't

have too much trouble running up. Running hadn't seemed impossible. But your father added a terrible requirement...

You had to run this distance with water in your mouth and return from your run before sunrise without having swallowed or spat it out.

You didn't let your anxiety show—the face of a warrior must remain impassible no matter the circumstances—but you really thought you would not be able to accomplish such an exploit. Your father, without a single word of encouragement, simply said: “Running with water in your mouth will teach you to breathe better. You'll increase your endurance and strengthen your lungs. Never forget that, if you want to stay alive, no one must be able to run faster than you...”

Your mouth full of water, torso naked, with only a loincloth around your waist, you began, Grandfather. But you'd hardly started climbing that your feet got caught in the tip of your moccasins which, you'd never understood why, curled back around the big toe. You tripped, sputtering the precious water like some projectile vomit onto surrounding shrubs. You wouldn't give up under any circumstances; it would have been the greatest shame for a warrior. So you kept going, running faster, promising yourself that you would at least finish the journey before sunrise. To no avail. Halfway through the trip down, when some stones your speed had dislodged rolled around you, you came face to face with a snake whose nest you had surely disturbed. You had to stop instantly, as he was standing up straight, ready to strike, and had to recite, looking him straight in the eye, the sentences your mother had taught you: “I want to be your friend, you must not hurt me.” He ended up disappearing between the bushes, but the race was lost. The sun, in a halo of orange light, had just set the horizon ablaze.

When you arrived completely out of breath, your father only said: “You will start again every day until you succeed...”

You repeated the exercise for three moons until you finally returned before sunrise with your mouth full of water. But after that, Grandfather, you were capable of catching rabbits with your bare hands and of running next to your trotting horse without falling behind!

But your warrior's training did not end there unfortunately. You even regretted not being a girl sometimes because of how difficult it was. They were also trained to run, but only enough to scatter as fast as possible and shelter the children in case of an

attack. Their main responsibility at the camp was watching the young ones, fetching wood, water, picking berries, yucca fruits, and nuts. They then learned the names of medicinal plants, how to dry them, prepare them, how to sew moccasins, clothes, how to weave baskets, prepare meals, preserve foods, dry them, stock them...

But you weren't a girl, and an apprentice warrior isn't allowed to complain. After passing this last test, an even harder one awaited. There were eight of you young boys. You were separated into two groups of four, spread out at half a stone's throw. One of the two groups, not yours, was equipped with a slingshot and had for mission to aim projectiles about the size of three rabbit droppings at you. Your group had to stand in front of the attackers, but was forbidden from running off to avoid the stones. You were only allowed to move in a small perimeter of about an arm's length around you. This exercise was meant to improve your reaction time.

For an hour you served as a target. At first, in a complete panic, you jumped, spun around yourself, dove to the ground, but couldn't avoid the stones. They hurt very badly, especially when they hit your face. You kept the scars for a long time. But after much practice, you finally understood something essential. You had to focus on your opponent's movements. His gaze. He'd show you where the stone would go. So you learned to decipher each of your opponent's moves, to uncover his thoughts, anticipating each gesture, to unsettle him thanks to your self-assurance, and to make him lose his. You hardly moved anymore. Only an arm here, a leg there, you swayed your head to the right, or to the left a bit. You felt the stones' short breath, but none of them reached you anymore.

Your trainers then replaced the slingshots with bows, not the same ones as those used by warriors, but smaller, still equipped though with reed arrows whose bone points are as sharp as a needle. Now, you were truly afraid. You were all afraid. You thought it would be impossible to avoid those arrows, which were much faster than the stones. But to your fears, they answered: "You must allow your mind to dominate your body, to make it faster than those arrows, and stronger than your doubts. Nothing is impossible for an Apache warrior..."

Deeply focused, you faced your opponents again. Strong on your legs, chest straight, eyes locked in their eyes, the hardest thing was to control the terror that rose

in your stomach when, suddenly, beside you, one of your own fell, containing a holler of pain because the arrow planted itself into his eye...

If you came out of this test unscathed, a test that was repeated for some moons, you'd have to trot along the entire night after with enormous loads on your shoulders, only so you'd get used to being exhausted. This was how they selected the best runners. And then, the time after that, the best runners were armed with long and thin branches they used to whip the bad runners and force them to go faster. Luckily, you were among the fast ones, Grandfather.

But to improve your speed some more, you were put into a sort of wickiup where they threw water on some embers and made you sweat. Once sweating, you had to go outside, run along the hills around the Gila, and then come back, sweat, and run again some more.

Finally, you had to take two-day long journeys on horseback, journey during which you were neither allowed to eat or sleep. And as you were clever, an adult chaperoned you to ensure that you followed all the rules...

That is how, when you were barely fourteen, Grandfather, you became a true Apache warrior, as dangerous and elusive as the lightning...

Our car has just left the center of town, actually the main stretch where the *Gourmet Bar* and the stores were. I tried on all kinds of cowboy boots until a hot pink suede model finally struck my fancy. It matches our t-shirts! the girls said. I also bought a super lightweight straw cowboy hat, a square turquoise ring, and...ah yes! ... A shot glass decorated with a photograph of Geronimo. It's a souvenir, I told Harlyn, who looked at the thing with knit brows like, *You're not going to buy this thing, are you?* But I did. I bought it. And with my cowboy boots on my feet, we're finally all back into the car, where, with the AC blasting, we're now all on our way to our mysterious destination.

"That's my hospital!" Harlyn Bear suddenly screams, pointing behind her window at a mid-size building painted beige and grey. "That's where I go for my asthma."

I just have time to read Ruidoso Presbyterian Hospital on the façade before she shows me another bloc. The Emergency Room this time. Her mother brought her there the first time she had an attack.

"Do you have bad asthma?"

Without answering, she takes a green and red inhaler out of a little jeans backpack. Becotide and Ventolin.

"I must always carry them with me!"

The problem with these inhalers, Harlyn explains, is that she doesn't really know how to use them properly. And since she isn't able to empty the air from her lungs before breathing in the medicine, it doesn't work very well during an attack, so we have to take her to the ER. Luckily, she doesn't have too many.

"That's because you give her plants," Nia explains, appearing serious.

I look at Harlyn. He confirms. Medicine men use more than three hundred medicinal plants. His grandmother, Lana, showed them to him, one by one, over years. She taught him how to recognize them, how to prepare them. Certain must be ground, others cut into pieces, and the cook time matters too; everything is very precise in that art. The same plant may not have the same virtues when mixed with this or that other plant. I ask him which plant he uses for asthma...

"Apache plants, you wouldn't know them..."

"Can you tell me their names anyway?"

“They only work on Apaches.”

“Ok, but it interests me. In Mongolia, for instance, to cure indigestion, Shamans use a **langue de loup** decoction, a small plant in the shape of...”

Harlyn’s version of an answer is to continue scrutinizing the road. I don’t dare insist. But a few moments later, he points his index finger above the steering wheel.

“See, that tree, there...”

I turn my head toward the right. I see a big tree in front of a wooden house. It’s too far now for me to get a good look. It was an oak, Harlyn explains, a *Quercus gambelii* to be specific. He smiles. People often have one in their garden and don’t even know that it has powers...

“Indians made coffee with its bark,” Harly Bear says, rearranging her ponytail.

Shamans dry the leaves, Harlyn explains, grind them into a powder and mix them with those from a bush called *Diotis Lanata*. You can recognize it by its white bunched flowers. When someone is the victim of ill fate, the Shaman does a ceremony. He asks the individual consulting to bring four low-priced objects as offerings in order to obtain the spirits’ cooperation. Generally, a knife with a black handle, a new item of clothing, some tobacco in a small leather pouch, and money. Anything between \$30-\$50. He then puts the powder of his plants in some rolling paper and makes a stick that he gives to the person to smoke. The spirit of those plants has the power to protect and purify the person and to lead evil spirits away. He clears his voice.

“To purify himself before the ceremony, the Shaman must also smoke little white sage cigarettes and recite some prayers. Do you know about sage?”

“Yes, there’s a lot of it in France. My grandmother even used to say that keeping sage in your yard could prevent a visit to the Doctor.”

“Was your grandmother a Shaman?”

“No. Well, not officially at least. And for asthma then?”

He smiles, like, *You and your one-track mind...*

“We’ll see later. First tell me how you become a Shaman in Mongolia...”

No time for an answer, Nia’s forearm appears off to the left of my face.

“Look!”

She proudly displays a five-point star, freshly and conscientiously tattooed onto the inside of her wrist. I suddenly understand why she has been silent for almost ten minutes. Harlyn bought her the tattoo at the souvenir shop.

“I put it on,” Harlyn Bear points out softly.

The forearm disappears. Nia examines her star, eyebrows frowning, mouth pouting. Harlyn tells me that the Apaches used to tattoo themselves. On the inside of their arms, for the most part. The tattoos represented stars, like the one Nia has, or constellations. Shamans also tattooed themselves with lightning, to show the source of their power.

“And do you know how they did their tattoos?” Harly Bear asks me.

I shake my head *no*.

“With cactus spikes dipped in coal or cactus juice, I can’t remember which...”

“*Prickly pear* or *Opuntia humifusa*,” Harlyn points out.

“The spike must have hurt so bad,” Nia adds in her deep voice, lips contorted into a disgusted pout. “I prefer to stick them on!”

I feel like laughing but I abstain myself because Nia is contemplating the blue drawing with an air of deep reflection, imagining what escaped. Harlyn who hasn’t lost his focus in our conversation, asks me the question about Mongolia again.

“So how do you become a Shaman?”

After having cleared my throat a bit—the AC never does it much good—I answer that it’s often hereditary. But you can also be chosen by the spirits. In such a case, the chosen individual will suddenly suffer an accumulation of problems, such as the death of their cattle, of family members, they may also start going mad, lose consciousness, suffer epilepsy crises. In Mongolia, all of those events are interpreted as warnings from the spirit world, cautionary signs, which should lead their “victims” to understand that they are Shamans. I hear a huge yawn in the back. I turn around. Nia’s mouth is wide open. Harlyn, with an eye staring into the rearview, asks her to put her hand in front of her mouth. Done. He stares at the road again. I finish.

“But having those types of troubles doesn’t necessarily means that you’re a Shaman...”

“Well, then, how do you know?” he asks.

“The individuals who have been ‘targeted’ visit a Shaman, who questions the spirits to find out whether or not they are.”

“And you, did the spirits designate you?”

“In some way. In fact, you can’t really decide to become a Shaman in Mongolia. You become one if the spirits want you to, if they send you the gift, the “power.” Otherwise, you can’t be one.”

“It’s the same in the Apache tradition!” Harlyn tells me, seeming delighted with this similarity.

He, for instance, explains to me that he inherited his Shaman status. His grandmother Lana had chosen to transmit her “power” to him. But this power could have refused the transition. So when he was five, Lana held a ceremony to call the power to him. She recited prayers meant to protect him from evil powers. And then, four times, she applied pollen onto his mouth. The fourth time, the power was supposed to enter him. But it could have not come. He shoots me a quick glance.

“Is that how it works in Mongolia?”

I confirm. He knew that the “power” had chosen him because he’d instantly managed to memorize the prayers. Without it, he would have been incapable of it. So Lana organized a party where all of the food, the meat, the cabbage, the fruit, and the nuts were blessed with pollen. In the years that followed, his grandmother passed her knowledge on to him. How and with which plants to cure diseases, which of them help soothe cancers, headaches. She also taught him how to develop certain extrasensory perceptions, another characteristic of the Apache Shamanic traditions. He swallows.

“I know, for instance, when someone is going to come and visit me. Particularly individuals who have something to do with the puberty rite, you know, that secret ceremony for young girls that I told you about?”

He shoots me a glance, I nod. He resumes:

“As soon as one of them gets her first period, a family member must visit the medicine man to organize the ceremony. Well, I get a vision of that person at least two weeks before they arrive. In my dreams, they walk toward my house. I know then that they’re going to be asking me for a ceremony. And it never fails...”

With his index finger, he softly massages his forehead, right above his glasses.

“That’s also how I knew, for you...”

I look at him, awaiting an explanation. He smiles.

“I told you during our first interview that I knew someone would show up one day, as you have, to reconnect me with my Mongol roots...”

“Oh, yes! And so it was in a dream that you found out about it?”

He confirms, with a mischievous look. I smile. I’m glad to finally have this explanation, even if it isn’t very rational. But I’m in no position to discuss rationality. Am I not here because

of a “vision” of Geronimo? I rake my throat, only to let a giggle slip, which suddenly, really wants to come out.

“And the anonymous letter,” Harly Bear asks, “tell her about it!”

“Oh, right! I once received quite an unfriendly anonymous letter—like all anonymous letters. So I prayed to *Yusn*, with the letter in front of me, and I asked the spirit to let me know, within the next four days, who the person was. Two days later, I received a message. The person appeared in one of my dreams. I recognized them and was able to answer!”

“They were so embarrassed!” says Harly Bear, laughing.

“Those dreams are very powerful,” says Harlyn, hands still perfectly poised on the steering wheel at 10-and-2.

But it took him a while to understand it, even though his grandmother had told him about those types of powers when he was very little. According to her, all you had to do was pray to *Yusn* for them to work. He didn’t really take her very seriously. But one day, only once he’d become an adult, he decided to try. He said a prayer and it worked. Only then did he understand how powerful the power was and was happy to not have realized it sooner as he might not have used it with all the required wisdom. Despite being handled for centuries by the Apaches in a very efficient manner, that power must still be manipulated with the greatest of caution...

“Anyway, I began having dreams in which “the power” told me, little by little, what I was capable of, like to drive away or deviate a tornado for instance.”

My eyebrows go up. Luckily, Harlyn doesn’t notice, he’s still fixated on the road.

“It’s true,” says Harly Bear.

Harlyn looks at me, as though trying to convince me.

“Do you remember the tropical storm that hit New Orleans two years ago?”

“Katrina?”

He nods.

“I had a strong feeling that had I been five miles away from the storm, I would have been able to make it deviate a bit. I was certain I could do it. It’s like when I pray for snow or rain, it actually comes. But I don’t do it for fun. I do it only when it’s absolutely necessary. In the case of a great draught, for instance. Then I pray to my medicine. It’s incredibly powerful. Even if I don’t understand why and how it works...”

I stroke my right eyebrow with the tip of my index. How I gather my thoughts.

“Could you explain to me why you sometimes speak of your *medicine* and sometimes speak of your *power*, is there a difference?”

“No. Both terms have the same meaning.”

“Yuuuuuk!” cries Nia from the rear seat.

I turn around. With a disgusted air, she hands me a clear sugar lollipop that I also bought in the Ruidoso store. A huge worm, like the one at the bottom of a bottle of mescal, sits in its center. His gaze in the rearview, Harlyn asks Nia to please put the lollipop back where she found it. You don’t go through other people’s stuff! She lowers her head, replacing, with the tips of her fingers, the object of her crime back into its paper bag. I tell her that I’ll give it to her if she wants it. A new holler of disgust. Harly Bear bursts out laughing. “That’ll teach you!” Nia, apparently vexed, settles deep into her seat, arms crossed, nose and eyebrows in a frown, mouth contorted. All of her little faces really make me want to laugh. But I’m in complete control—not a hint of joy appears on my face. Nor on Harlyn’s, for that matter, who is still focused on the road. We are passing fields, prairies with horses, colorful houses covered with dried red chili peppers. It feels like Mexico is close.

“Back to the topic of Shamans,” Harlyn starts again, “each receives a “power” unique onto himself...”

“Yes, but how do they receive it? Is it inherited only, like in your case?”

“No, not only. The individual might not inherit their “power,” they might have a vision one day or “hear” an animal speak. Like Geronimo, but I’ll tell you about it later. So each Shaman, man or woman, receives a very specific power. Certain are capable of healing others, others of predicting the future, others can lead a hunt...”

“So you visit a Shaman based on their qualifications?”

“Yes. Geronimo, for instance, was a war Shaman. He said prayers before each battle and his power came to tell him where to go, what to do or not to do in order to win. He was rarely wrong, as a result he was consulted before each battle. That’s why the American soldiers were never able to catch him...”

“He handed himself in!” Harly Bear pitches, already visibly very invested in her ancestor’s path.

“Yes,” Harlyn confirms, “the soldiers had kidnapped his entire family and were threatening to kill them or never let him see them again if he didn’t hand himself in. A typical

practice by the military in their quest to annihilate tribes and force warriors to hand themselves in...”

A large truck overtakes us. In-draft. They drive really fast over here. Harlyn keeps the car nicely to the right. We watch the black mass slip in front of us. I’m surprised not to hear any comment from Nia. Is she sulking? I turn around. Yup. Her nose obstinately facing her window, her gaze is fixed on the trees that go by. She’s going to get nauseous, if she keeps it up. Harly Bear shoots me a glance in which I can read, *Don’t worry, she’ll get over it.*

“And the Shamans in Mongolia, what do they do, are they healers?” Harlyn asks.

“We don’t call it healing in the context of a Mongolian Shamanic ceremony, we call it mending. According to the Mongols, spirits are susceptible. If you do something they don’t like, they are offended and punish you. So the Shaman’s role is not to “heal” but merely to organize a ceremony during which the spirits are questioned as to the reason for their anger, then their answers are transmitted to the individual who has come to consult them and is provided guidelines on how to “mend” the offense...”

“In our Apache culture too, the origin of a problem is often attributed to an act that might have made our God Yusun angry.”

“Like what, for instance?”

“Well, whenever there was an outbreak, the Shamans would ask all the tribe members to summon to mind an act they might have performed which might have provoked Yusun’s anger. For instance, dishonoring our faith, or abandoning parents in need, or being unfaithful, or cowardly, or lazy...”

“And once the mistake was identified?”

“The Shaman would hold a ceremony and ask Yusun if was willing to forgive the mistake. But the person responsible was still banished from the tribe...”

“Banished?”

“The Apaches had no prisons,” Harly Bear intervenes.

“That, I suspected, but the Mongols only needed to present offerings to the spirits in order to appease them. They weren’t banished...”

“Banishment too was the worst punishment,” Harlyn adds. “Because any Indian who no longer belonged to a tribe was not only no longer protected by the tribe’s laws, but was also considered an enemy by all other tribes. So he could be killed at any moment.”

I frown.

“Killing an enemy, or stealing from him, wasn’t considered wrong?”

“No. That’s a girl’s question! Do you think they put soldiers in jail nowadays for having killed an enemy in Iraq? It’s like in every war, the more you kill, the greater of a hero you come back as...”

I nod, without a comment, because being a “girl,” precisely, is what makes it hard for me to understand that type of heroism. Harlyn continues.

“So, in the Apache culture, being banished was much worse than going to prison. It was quite simply equivalent to a death sentence. The person who was banished was forced to live entirely alone in the wild, could not count on the help of any other Apache. His only chance, really, was to unite with other banished individuals. But that arrangement also turned against us when the Whites arrived. Those who had been banished ended up forming small gangs. To survive, they would pillage here and there and the Whites unfortunately pinned it on the tribes. And we could do nothing to reason with them because they now eluded our laws. They weren’t bound to our peace treaties with the Americans either...”

“I feel sick,” Nia suddenly intones.

Without looking at her, Harlyn tells her to open her window. I turn around. Yup, her face is totally white. Still sullen, she presses on the button. Heat rushes into the air-conditioned car. Her little nose perks up.

“But if someone has hurt themselves, after a riding accident, for instance, what can the Shaman do?” Harlyn continues, obviously used to his granddaughter’s capricious moods.

“The same principle applies. If you’re the victim of an accident, it’s because the spirits are angry and your soul is a mess. So the Shaman must first and foremost hold a ceremony to mend the offense and ask the spirits if they are willing to leave you alone...”

“And what about the injury? What do they do about it?” Us Apaches, we make poultices with plants like hia, I’ll show you some if you’d like. We apply boiled leaves to the wound to stop the bleeding. We also make decoctions that help the bones fuse faster; they’re mended in two weeks with that plant. To fight infections, we also give Mormon tea decoctions.”

I explain to Harlyn that to purify a wound, the Shaman merely applies some juniper ashes to it. The Mongols of today are more likely go to the hospital to heal a wound and then to the Shaman to mend their soul.

Harlyn nods, lost in thought apparently. Nia still has her head resting on the edge of her window, which is wide open. And so it’s hot. Her short strand of her hair flies in the wind.

On the edge of the road, I notice a sign for “Roswell.” I ask Harlyn if that’s the place where an alien was found in the fifties. He shoots me a quick glance before staring at the road again. I wait. His answer will surely come in a few minutes. In the same way that he ponders his movements, he always seems to think carefully before answering. We skim the entrance to a ranch. There are fences as far as the eyes can see.

“There have always been lots of aliens around here,” he ends up saying. “But the Apaches don’t talk about it...”

“Oh really? And why is that?”

“We mustn’t. That’s all...”

He looks into his rearview mirror. Asks Nia if she’s feeling better. But with the wind in her ears she doesn’t hear. Harly Bear touches her shoulder and asks her the question again, loud enough this time. Nia turns to face her, a smile finally on her face.

“I need to pee!”

Harlyn puts his blinker on with a sigh. A hundred meters down the road, he parks the car on the shoulder. Everyone gets out. The heat envelops us. Dry. Harsh. Harlyn hands some Kleenexes to the girls. They disappear. As far as the eye can see, the road crosses enormous spaces filled with yellowed grass, fenced in by a single strand of barbed wire.

“This land all belongs to the same owner?”

“Yes...”

“In France, there’d be at least twenty different farms in the same amount of space.”

He smiles. He then asks me if I shouldn’t perhaps also take advantage of the pee break. Sure. He immediately hands me a Kleenex. The girls come back skipping, hand in hand. They climb back into the car in a good mood. It’s our turn now, Harlyn and I, to go and relieve ourselves. Him, in the little ditch under the fence, me, behind the car, as the road is deserted. Two minutes later, our little troop is reunited once again and driving along with wind in our ears.

“Close your window, Nia, I put on the AC...”

Without grumbling, for once, she presses the little black button. An electric sound. Clac. We are now isolated from the heat. Nia settles back deep inside her seat, seatbelt perfectly adjusted. We are still skimming the same fence. This ranch is really huge.

“So tell me how a ceremony goes in Mongolia,” Harlyn asks.

Concentration, deep inhalation. Go. Before the ceremony, the Shaman speaks with the person who has come to consult him, she tells him about her life and why she came to see him. It's a bit the work of a psychologist. Then, the Shaman crafts an *ongot*, a throng of some bands of fabric supposed to represent the person seeking advice. Then, the Shaman places the "problem" on the altar. He tells the person that if his problem is there, in front of him, it's because he must have made a mistake in his life and offended a spirit. To be forgiven and to calm the unhappy spirit, he will have to bring him some offerings...

"What kind of offerings?"

"Sweets, cakes, cigarettes, vodka, milk..."

"Everything that humans like, ultimately."

I confirm. After having given those offerings, the person asks the spirit if it's willing to forgive him. The Shaman then puts on his ceremonial costume, plays the drums to enter a trance, and asks the spirits the reason for the problem's existence. That is to say, what the person seeking advice or one of his ancestors has done to offend them...

"What offends the spirits?"

"Some of the reasons given to the Shaman can be very surprising. Like, *You walked around your Yurt three times* or *Your ancestor ate the meat of a stolen animal*... But whether or not the reason seems valid, this does not matter, because the Shaman's only power is to provide the person with this act to help identify the problem, to provide the diagnostic necessary to the mending process..."

His eyes still set on the road, Harlyn nods in silence, as though he were easily digesting this information. I resume.

"Penultimate step: the Shaman purifies the *ongot* that symbolizes the problem. By purifying it, he eliminates its evil power to transform it into a new ally for that person. Then comes the final step: the Shaman gives the person protective amulets for him and his home..."

"And the ritual is always the same?"

"With some variants depending on the problem or the goal that must be met. But whatever this may be, it's the spirit that instructs the Shaman on the process to follow. If the spirit does not want to speak to the Shaman, if he's protesting, the Shaman will be unable to give the person a single answer. He's only ever the interpreter."

His mouth slightly open, Harlyn nods and utters his usual “uh hum.” A kind of language tic. Like a little beat, a little cymbal stroke supposed to emphasize his words or his interlocutor’s.

“It’s exactly the same for the Apaches,” he ends up saying. “The Shaman is nothing without the intervention of his “power.” A bit in the same way metal conducts electricity. It’s the electricity that has the power to light the lamp. Not the Shaman.”

I smile. I like that image. I add that the spirit, during a trance, usually manifests itself as an animal. And that each Shaman has his own, which is supposed to give him the information he needs.

“And you? What is your animal? Does it speak to you?”

Inhalation. I always find it hard to “admit” those types of things.

“It’s... It’s a wolf...”

Anxious blink at Harlyn, who does not seem in the least bit surprised. He hasn’t even taken his eyes off the road. I resume.

“But I’ve never understood the wolf’s words until now. During the trance, I see him in front of me, he howls like a wolf, I do the same, as if suddenly, I had become a wolf, but I don’t know yet how to translate what he is telling me. Though I start making gestures that my mind doesn’t control. If a person is in front of me, for example, I start to “see” the parts of his body that are suffering. Without us having talked about it beforehand of course. My hands guide themselves along the person, making very precise, very exact gestures, as though according to a particular map known only to them. Sounds, breaths, and chants also come out of my mouth. As if my entire body were suddenly guided by a kind of, let us say, perceptive intelligence?”

Again, I glance over at Harlyn. He nods, he seems to be following. Still not surprised either. I ask him if he “suffers” from those types of symptoms. No. He doesn’t really practice trances. Not in this form, at least. But he’ll tell me about it later. First he invites me to resume the account about my gestures.

“It’s really hard to say, but I’m deeply convinced that I am being “pushed” to make those gestures, as though to reset the flow of some kind of energy...”

Harlyn punctuates with his usual “uh hum,” then remains silent, lost in deep thought apparently. I stay quiet. Not the time for comments; he must already think I’m nuts. The girls are asleep. The effect of the motor’s purring, surely. Harlyn ends up opening his mouth.

“So your wolf speaks to you.”

I look at him, bewildered. This time, I've landed on a bigger nut than me...

"What do you mean, he speaks to me? I told you, I can't make out any words..."

He turns his head toward me with a smile that says, *Okay, girlie, it's really time for me to explain this to you.*

"So what? Words aren't the only way information can be transmitted! If you're making gestures, sounds, if you're singing, it's because your wolf has passed his message along to you and that you've understood it. Those gestures are proof of it. So you're perfectly able to play your role of interpreter.

I answer with a sober "Mmmhh." He continues, glasses glued to the road once again.

"The spirit of the wolf exists in the Apache culture too. My grandmother spoke of a white wolf that came to "see" a woman who had been bitten by a dog. In the dream, the wolf told her to touch its four paws and to pray that her leg be as strong as his paws. She did what the wolf asked and was healed..."

"Mmmhh," once more, then I ask him if Geronimo also had a spirit animal.

"The coyote..."

Suddenly I want to laugh, to say, *Welcome to our kingdom of loonies!* but I abstain.

Anyway, Harlyn keeps going. The ceremony of the coyote, he says, is also used when someone gets bitten by a dog, a wolf, a fox, a coyote, or catches a disease that was contracted through them...

"Those four animals are associated in your tradition?"

"Yes, completely. So you and Geronimo have brother spirit animals..."

I frown. Could that explain my vision? And this adventure? Harlyn asks me what's making me smile. I look at him. So he was watching me from behind his glasses? No way I'm admitting. He seems to know though because he responds to my silence by resuming his explanation.

"Even if certain Shamans draw their power from the wolf, the dog, the fox, or the coyote, they are animals that inspire fear. In our culture, if a man even crosses their tracks or smells them, he risks becoming cross-eyed, having convulsions, trembling, or his lips might fold back and stay stuck that way.

I smile.

“It’s exactly what happens to me during trances when the wolf is in front of me! I feel like I have chops and paws. I also start trembling. Except that I become “normal” again once it’s over...”

On the edge of the road, three lined-up crows watch us go by. I show Harlyn the birds. The crow is Enkhetuya’s animal. A coincidence? No, says Harlyn. Just the manifestation of invisible bonds that make up the world. It is said that knowing how to find and recognize them is the very essence of Shamanism. Its secret facet. I pout. Secret, perhaps, but isn’t it time for an explanation now? I turn to face him.

“The information I perceive in my trance state, what causes me to make gestures and sounds, isn’t it—rather than a message from the “spirits”—just information emitted, in the shape of vibrations or waves, by what surrounds us?”

Harlyn turns to face me, looking sorry, and without another word, goes back to his road. I feel like I’ve just uttered the dumbest sentence in the universe. His earring has followed the movement of his head. It’s still oscillating. Like the air on the horizon of the plateau across which we are now driving. The AC cannot stop working. Harlyn suddenly raises his voice. Clear, precise. According to him, each element in nature possesses a spirit-equivalent. It is indeed spirits who speak to us to give us information. Not sound waves. I toss a dubitative “Mmmhh” his way. I won’t drop the issue. I insist.

“Have you heard of the discoveries made in quantum physics?”

His head says no. Time to gather my thoughts; then, go! It’s a branch of physics founded on the study of quantas, particles. As we now know, matter is made of atoms, which themselves are made up of different particles, including protons, neutrons, quarks, and electrons. But advances made in technology for measuring those particles has allowed scientists to go farther in the study of the mechanics of those particles and to confirm that electrons, for instance, might not only have the physical properties of matter, but also the physical properties of waves. In fact, an electron might not be an unbendable sphere orbiting around a nucleus, as it was believed for a long time, but a bendable cloud, a blob, which would have the particular ability to be both here and there, and whose speed or position would then be impossible to establish. This “blob” state would explain why, if we act upon one part of the cloud, the rest reacts instantly. Those particles, which are capable of causing an interference amongst each other, exhibit the behavioral signs of waves—whose defining factor is precisely that they are

able to cause interferences. I look at Harlyn. He's staring at the road. Even his turquoise is immobile. "Are you following this?" His head starts bobbing, he asks me to continue.

"Well, my question is, if electrons indeed behave like waves, why wouldn't those waves carry, just like radio waves, information that our brain would have the ability to perceive and "translate?"

Harlyn stares at the road in silence. I wait. The girls are still asleep. We are driving through little hills peppered with small trees shaped like balls. It looks like some poorly kempt French garden. Harlyn finally opens his mouth.

"So the messages from the spirits that Shamans perceive would in fact be "waves" that carry information?"

"Yes."

"And every brain would have that ability?"

"Sure."

"So everyone would be a Shaman?"

"Or would have the potential to be. But today only individuals who have developed those abilities, for whatever reason, are officially granted the status of Shaman."

"So the gestures and sounds that you start to make during a trance would be the brain's response to those waves carrying information?"

"Just a hypothesis, of course. But during a trance, when my hands start moving around the person in front of me, it's that they're responding to some kind of stimulation. In general, they aren't wrong. The body parts they "work on" are always areas that are in pain. I never know about them ahead of time, but my hands, thanks to that state, seem to "know" where to go. Where do they get that information from?"

Harlyn glares at me again.

"Are you asking me?"

I nod.

"Hum...surely, from that person."

"I wouldn't know where from otherwise. Their body must be sending me emergency signals, or some energy imbalance signal, or I don't know what, that my brain has the ability to discern and interpret through those gestures and sounds whose purpose is to perhaps restore some kind of balance that was there before the problem..."

Doubtful pout. I continue.

“Anyway, it all remains to be proven. You know, research in that field is in its infancy.

“And what would be the point of promoting this type of research?”

“Well, to understand the human brain and the invisible mechanisms of the universe!”

“But Shamans have already explained them!”

“Yes, but not in a scientific way. Consequently, Shamanism today continues to be associated with more or less doubtful practices.”

“Yes, but that often work.”

“But precisely, this remains to be proven...”

“Proven by what means?”

“Well, for instance, by agreeing to work with scientists...”

I tell him about my next trip to Canada, where I'll be staying in a mental hospital. He explodes into his duck-call laugh, tells me that it's not starting too well for me. I merely shrug, time enough for his laughter to stall. But I do like, anyway, how interested he is in my path. His mere willingness to listen, his questions, his way of bouncing back and even making fun of me a bit, show me, to what extent, little by little, we are becoming complicit. I resume my story.

“In that hospital, a neuropsychiatrist is going to run a series of tests, including multiple electroencephalograms of my brain. As a first step, to discover the physiological mechanisms responsible for modified states of consciousness—which areas of the brain are activated, what the consequences are.”

“And by admitting that our brain has an ability to perceive information present in its environment, what I call, messages from the spirits, do you really think that we'll be able to develop those abilities?”

“The point of those brain recordings would be to try, by elucidating those mechanisms, and discover how those abilities can be developed. But first we must prove that that the brain is capable of perceiving, analyzing, and providing responses to the information carried by those wave-particles. We would also seek to know whether those responses the brain provides, like the gestures and sounds I make during a trance, for instance, actually have a restorative power.”

He smiles.

“It will take a hundred years!”

“Yes, I know, but the study of particles also moves things forward.”

“Meaning?”

“Apparently, there might exist between certain atoms, a law of correlation that causes those atoms to be interdependent. Even at a distance from each other...”

Harlyn frowns. I start up again.

“Imagine two atoms, A and B. Well, certain studies have shown that if those atoms are correlated, they start to depend closely upon each other. Even at a distance from each other...”

“Do you mean that if I disturb atom A...”

“And atom A only, B will instantly be disturbed too, no matter the distance between them...”

Harlyn graces me with an “Uh hum,” this time, but asks me where I’m going with this.

“I just want to say that atoms have a way of communicating with each other at a distance...”

A mischievous smile starts to take at the corner of his lip. Mistrust...

“It’s because they have a telephone!”

He explodes into his jerky laugh. Not me. He must have noticed because his laugh stalls immediately. He starts talking again, apparently serious again.

“I’m joking, of course. But here again, Shamans have known for a long time, even if they haven’t provided scientific proof of it, that there are other means of communicating than just words and touch! Me, for instance, I don’t use trance to get information, I don’t have, either, like you or Geronimo, a specific animal, but the spirits...”

He looks at me.

“Yes, I prefer to continue saying “spirits,” if that’s ok with you...”

I nod. Anyway, his look doesn’t leave me a choice. He starts his explanation again, all the while staring at the road again.

“Well, those spirits communicate with me through dreams or in kind of waking visions...”

His voice has become hoarse; he clears it before continuing. Once, he had a very bad backache. It was in 1987. He had been working in the forest, but didn’t know if this pain was the reason for it. One night, the pain became so intense that he couldn’t do anything anymore. Even the plants didn’t do anything. So we said some prayers. Four *Hail Marys*, *Full of Grace* and four *Our Fathers*...

“But those are Catholic prayers, are you Catholic?”

“Yes, I belong to the Roman Catholic Church...”

“We go every Sunday,” Nia, who has surely just woken up, raises her deep voice suddenly.

I loosen my seatbelt a bit to turn and face her. Big smile and unkempt hair, her arms already raised to redo her ponytail. Harly Bear wakes up too, stretches, smiles at her cousin, then me, then looks out the window...

“Where are we?”

“Near Captain,” Harlyn answers. “Smokey Bear country,” he adds for my benefit. There are huge forests all around...”

“And a great rodeo in the summer,” Nia intones, arms still around her head.

Harly Bear comes in closer to help her, but gets rejected as usual. Harlyn continues.

“Geronimo was converted to the Christian faith during his incarceration...”

“Which faith?”

“The Reformed Church...”

“And he continued to practice Apache rituals?”

“Yes. He couldn’t see any disagreement between both practices. I don’t either, by the way. It means I have twice as many chances for my prayers to be answered.”

He laughs again. I like his pragmatic way of analyzing life. He asks me about my religion.

“Catholic. But I’ve never practiced it...”

Shoulder shrug.

“You do whatever you want...”

Along the road, there is a guy in a neon vest signaling us to slow down. There is some roadwork a little farther, so they’re alternating traffic. The girls straighten up to see. We stop in front of a temporary red light. A cluster of cars is coming from the opposite side. The road runs through green hills covered with little footpaths and little rivers bordered by long rows of trees. Harlyn takes this stop as an opportunity to play tour guide...

“Do you know who lived in this area?”

“Billy the Kid,” Nia cries out.

Harlyn scolds her softly. He hadn’t asked her the question. She laughs in reply. I ask Harlyn if it’s possible that Geronimo and Billy met. The answer is yes. They lived in the same region, around the same time...

“But if Geronimo had seen him, he would have slit his throat,” Harlyn adds, miming, with a hand as precise and swift as a knife, the movement across his neck...

The girls burst out laughing. I stroke my throat. Asking myself if, after all, I really would have wanted to meet Geronimo. The light turns green. Harlyn starts the car again. Now the road surface is grooved. Making a raspy sound, the car starts heaving as if it were hesitating between two furrows. Hop! We are back on the smooth tar. The silence returns, troubled only by the AC's heavy breathing. I look at the hills. I imagine Billy the Kid, there, under that tree, next to the river, his horse tied to a branch, his neck stretched down toward the grass. A rabbit is roasting over the wood fire. The grilled flesh starts to produce a delicious smell. Too busy drooling over his dinner, Billy has not foreseen the danger. Out of the bushes, a few meters behind him, Geronimo creeps forward, his long knife in his hand. I let out a little squawk. Harlyn peers over at me, puzzled. I apologize. It's nothing...

“So what about your back pain?”

He thinks for a bit, not seeming to remember. Oh, right! he resumes. So he'd said his prayers to try and relieve the pain a bit, and had gone to bed. But at two in the morning, he leaped awake. He'd just had a dream.

“I was in the Mescalero Church, and, just across from me, I saw mother Teresa, standing in front of the altar. So I walked toward her, knelt down, and she asked me, “How may I help you?” I told her I had a sharp pain in my back and that it had been troubling me constantly for a few days. I asked her if she could remove it. She answered: “Harlyn, say four *Our Fathers* and four *Hail Mary, Full of Grace.*” That's when I woke up. So I said my prayers, and I woke up my wife, Karen, to tell her about my dream. She told me I was right to have said those prayers.

The following morning, Harlyn went to see Father Larry, the Mescalero Priest, to tell him about his dream. Father Larry was surprised, but wasn't able to explain why Harlyn had had that dream. Father Larry just told him to keep on praying. Which he did.

“The pain disappeared progressively. Three weeks later, the pain was gone and I've never had back pain since...”

Harlyn stops talking. His voice has grown a little hoarse with his last sentence; he's visibly moved. It became warmer, like when he speaks softly. I ask him if he has other examples of messages he's received in dream. He thinks for a bit, scrutinizing the landscape, as if he were suddenly hesitating, surely out of modesty, to reveal one more bit of his personal life to me. But

far from being concerned about it, I realized how lucky I am. This complicity between us has already allowed us to come so far! And Harlyn's sudden modesty is only proof of the long path we have already completed. I regret now having not dared yet share my vision of Geronimo with him. I'm going to do it. Yes, it's time.

"You see," he ends up saying, a smiling face again, "three times a day, I say a prayer for Yusun, our Creator. And sometimes, during those prayers, I intercept messages, like future events. It's not unusual, I've had those types of experiences for a long time, but now that I am older, I take them more seriously. The night of September 10 to September 11th, for instance, I had a rather terrifying dream. I saw people screaming; there was the exterior of a building, there was dust, a very thick smoke, stones, papers flying everywhere. It was so real that I woke up and woke Karen up too who told me, "It's just a nightmare!" It was two in the morning. The next day, I received a phone call around eight o'clock. A friend was telling me to turn on the television because the Twin Towers had been destroyed by two airplanes. I turned it on and saw everything that had been in my dream. Then I realized my mind had probably been there and it was terrifying..."

He grows quiet, apparently lost in thought. Perhaps not the right moment to tell him about my vision. He doesn't give me time for it anyway; he's moved on to the topic of another ability. According to him, Apache Shamans also have the power to bring to light very dangerous individuals, like sorcerers, who are capable of put spells that kill people or make them ill."

"But what exactly is the difference between a sorcerer and a Shaman?"

"All Shamans are potential sorcerers."

"So how do they become sorcerers?"

"By accepting to receive their "power" from evil sources and by using it to do evil. They do it secretly of course, no one really knows who they are..."

"And Shamans want to uncover them?"

"Yes. When someone who has been a victim of their magic comes asking me for help, I hold a special ceremony, which allows me to see the sorcerer at the origin of all the bad luck..."

I frown.

"But how do you see it?"

“In my dreams. I told you, that’s how I receive messages from the spirits. So during the ceremony, I ask my powers if the person is a victim of witchcraft. If they are, the spirits tell me and, in my following dreams, I can see his face. Sometimes I can even identify his location.”

“Your power is a downright GPS!”

He shrugs in answer.

“And so what do you do after identifying the sorcerer’s location?”

“Thanks to prayers and secret rituals, I send the bad energies back toward him to destroy him...”

“And if you’ve got the wrong sorcerer?”

A small chuckle from the girls, who have been very quiet indeed for the last while. Glance into the back. Nia, thumb in her mouth, head lain on her cousin’s lap, is letting her head be scratched and, seeing her look of complete ecstasy, it shouldn’t be long before she starts emitting a purr...

“The power never gets the wrong sorcerer,” Harlyn answers, in a slightly dry tone. “And once the ritual is done, the medicine man cures the victim of their bad luck by blessing them with pollen. He also says prayers and does purification rituals. It’s very powerful...”

I feel like punctuating his story with a “Uh hum,” the way he does, but I abstain ; he’ll think I’m making fun of him. Couldn’t be further from the truth, though. It’s just that you give me two hours with them and I start internalizing the speech patterns of a person and imitating them despite myself. A bit like if I were tuning myself to a tuning fork. Surely due to my musical abilities. And actually, in the same style of inconveniences, I cannot hear a clock or an alarm clock without it setting off an internal metronome. The tic-tac invariably causes, like a primer, the advent of a little melody in my head. Harlyn shoots me a glance.

“Did you hear?”

“Hum...What did you say?”

Sigh. He continues.

“I was saying that the “power” is as powerful as it is dangerous. For instance, it can demand certain sacrifices from the Shaman in exchange for its help.”

“Sacrifices? But why?”

“To see if the Shaman is prepared to do anything for it...”

“And what kind of sacrifices might it require?”

“Well...for him to sacrifice someone in his life, for example...”

“To sacrifice them... Meaning?”

“To kill them.”

“And what if the Shaman refuses?”

“Simple. The power abandons him...”

“But that’s not fair!”

Harlyn smiles. That’s why, he explains, Shamans are usually feared by those around them. No one really wants to be their friend because they know that the power might require such sacrifices of them. Thankfully I don’t think it’s like that in Mongolia. At least, I hope not. Might Enkhetuya have failed to mention this slight “inconvenience”? Wouldn’t be her first omission. She hadn’t warned me that by virtue of practicing trance, my triggering threshold would drop and that other varied stimuli might trigger it too. Like an orgasm, for instance. I sure looked dumb the first time. Luckily, a Parisian neurobiologist cheered me up by telling me that I would learn to control the trance. In fact, my brain would end up remembering the start-up process and I would be able to cause it or stop it, according to my own will. Without a drum, that is. He was right. It took me about a year, but now I’m able to. And it’s actually thanks to this new ability that Professor Flor-Henry in Canada will be able to capture electroencephalograms of my brain. It would have been impossible to make those recordings while playing the drum since the electrodes placed on my head will be linked back to a machine. Ok. That’s all I need, now! For those Mongol spirits to ask me to sacrifice my loved ones or my friends. I swallow. Such haggling cannot possibly exist between our environment and us, can it? I look at Harlyn.

“Do you have a lot of friends?”

“Yes, why?”

“But have you told them that your power might ask you to sacrifice them in exchange for its help?”

With the tip of his right index finger, he lifts up the front edge of his hat a bit, which he has not once taken off yet, scratches his forehead a bit, just above his glasses, then puts it back, exactly where it was.

“No need, I don’t know a single Shaman this has happened to...”

I exhale. Couldn’t he have told me this before?

“But that’s still the reason why,” he continues, “we can’t place this power into anyone’s hands. We teach it only to those we know will respect it and not use it toward evil ends. It’s a very long and rigorous training too, with many rituals and hundreds of plants to learn...”

I ask him again, since he never ended up telling me, how you become a Shaman, when it’s not, like in his case, hereditary. Silence. Silence. Silence. This answer seems hard to craft.

“It’s a long story,” he ends up saying. “But again, the person can’t simply choose to become a Shaman. They have to be chosen. Exactly like you. And like Geronimo...”