

# Journey to Xibalba

*A Life in  
Archaeology*



**DON PATTERSON**

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**DON PATTERSON**

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Last, but not least, are the myriad Mesoamerican scholars and technicians who have taken this journey long before I did.





## OPENING LETTER TO JESSICA

*You cannot create experience.*

*You must undergo it.*

—*Alberto Camus*

Dear Jessica,

One day my *tocayo* (same name), Don Knoles, a painter and freelance reporter in San Miguel, encouraged me to write something about Mesoamerican archaeology for the public. He only requested that I not write about archaeological field methods and techniques, which he finds boring, and hinted that I might try to be a little philosophical.

So I began to reflect upon the possibilities. In the process, I asked myself if the sum or even portions of my life's journey would be interesting for others. This book began to take shape in my head, and you, Jessica, gave the book purpose.

You asked my advice about your education and professional life. You were at a crossroads and tormented by indecision. I understood this, having faced the same situation many times in my life. Indeed, I am tormented with indecision even as I write, because the fear of making a bad decision in my professional life is surpassed by my fear of giving you bad advice.

Although our lives have taken different paths, we have experienced some similar patterns. I have watched you traveling down the road of your life for twenty-seven years. You have migrated north to New York. This is the same age I was when I crossed the border south and came to Mexico. It was the beginning of something new and strange for me. While I did not end up doing what I thought I had prepared for, everything I had previously studied, when correctly applied, turned out to be useful. Like the person in Robert Frost's poem who stands in an autumn wood before a fork in the trail, you seem to have reached diverging paths in your life just as I did, as many of us do, at your age.

You recently expressed a desire to change your life, your dilemma being that you really like your boss but feel your job activities utilize neither your studies nor your potential. In all fairness, you do admit that you have learned something of human relationships and diplomacy as the Trade Representative to the U.S. Mexican Chamber of Commerce in New York.

I guarantee that you will be able to use these experiences in the future so that your time at the chamber has not been wasted. Just make sure that you utilize those social qualities and graces that you picked up there with your boss and fellow employees when you decide to leave. Unfortunately, I didn't always do this.

You have to make your own decision about what path you will take, but I have written the following tale so that you can examine a portion of the journey I took, the people and institutions that made it possible, and the decisions both good and bad that I made. So it is, each time I have sat in front of the computer to write, you have been present. You are the reason for the form and content that the text takes.

If there are any lessons to be learned from my life, it is important that I be truthful. Dr. Paul Kirchoff said, "If history is to be written, what really count are the events to which date and locality can be assigned—the rest are mere mythology." Hence, the people, places, institutions, and conversations in this journey are real, as my memory recorded them. If, on the other hand, I ascribe motives to any of the people in the tale, and I am correct, it is merely coincidental. Your

mother says that I am not a good judge of character of anything that is Mexican. There you have it.

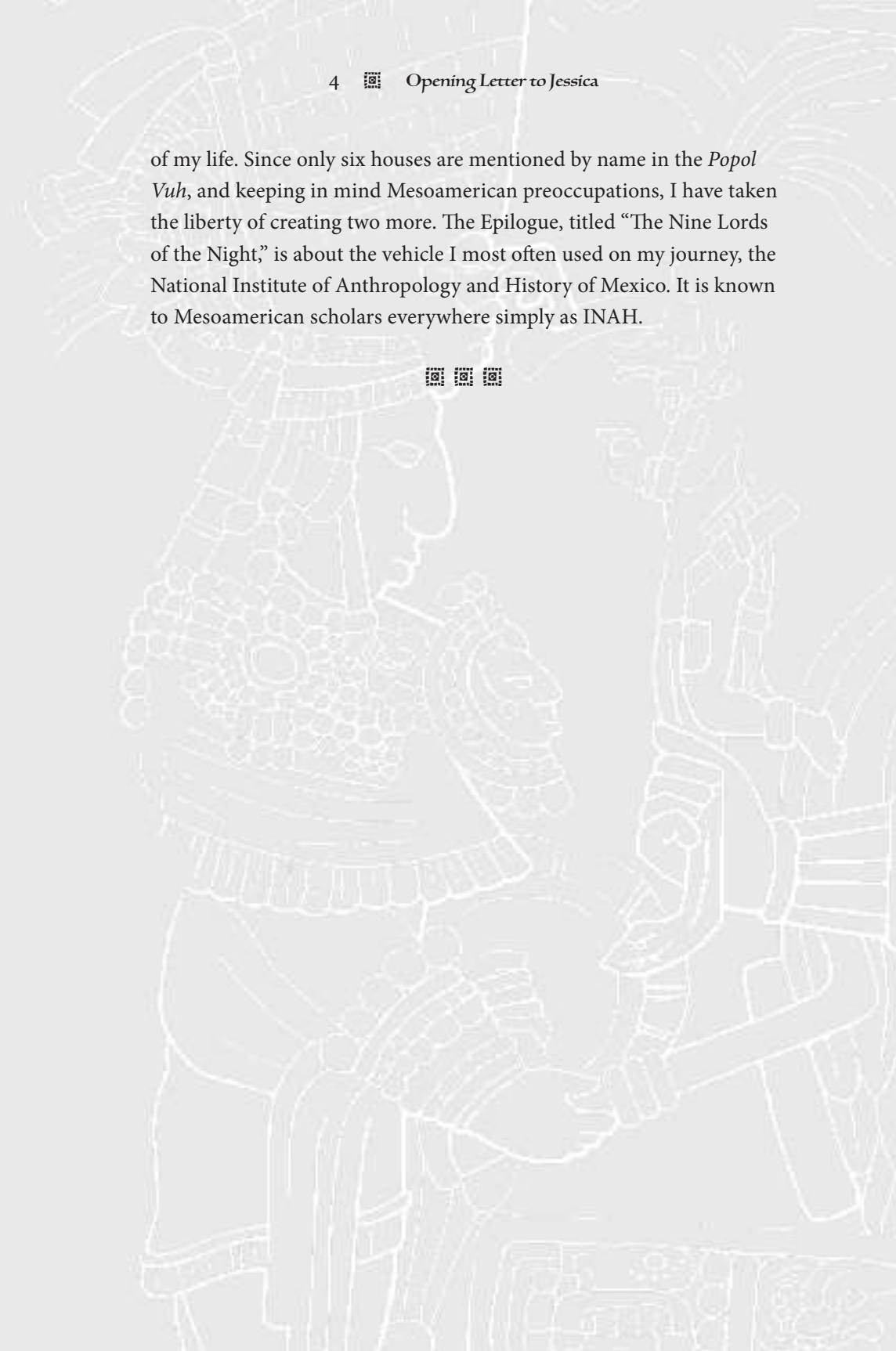
The Mesoamerican experience and my journey on the road to the world of Xibalba began in a book, the *Popol Vuh*.

Early on my adventure, I came across a reference in Coe's *The Maya* to an ancient sixteenth-century manuscript called the *Popol Vuh*. Miraculously, I found a copy of the first English translation of the manuscript a week later at a book sale at the public library in San Miguel. I paid eighty cents for the hardback copy of what the author of the edition referred to as the "Sacred Book of the Quiche Maya." It was difficult reading because of my complete lack of knowledge of the subject, and I was forced to consult all of the copious footnotes. This distracted me from the storyline so often that I had to immediately reread almost every page in order to make heads or tails of it. In spite of this, I couldn't put the book down. While I found the creation myths fascinating, I was particularly impressed by the story of the twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque, and their journey and experiences in the ancient Maya underworld known as Xibalba.

From the moment these young twins stood indecisively at the crossroads, to the end of the game they were destined to play, the twins were subjected to the deceptive trickery and punishments of dark lords that ruled the underworld with menacing, plaguelike names (Blood Gatherer, Demon of Pus, Demon of Jaundice, Skull Scepter, Bloody Teeth, and Bloody Claws). As one writer explained, "Even today their names bring to mind images of sickness, disease and death." Looking back with some amusement, I have probably encountered all of these archetypes during my journey and believe you will, too. That is why I have used their story as an analogy to our own journey through life. The mythical tale provides us with clues for the daily challenge of winning the end game.

There are eight chapters to this journey. I have named each chapter after the houses of testing in Xibalba. They are about the people, the environment, the financing, and the politics of the different archaeological projects I worked on over most of a thirty-year period

of my life. Since only six houses are mentioned by name in the *Popol Vuh*, and keeping in mind Mesoamerican preoccupations, I have taken the liberty of creating two more. The Epilogue, titled “The Nine Lords of the Night,” is about the vehicle I most often used on my journey, the National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico. It is known to Mesoamerican scholars everywhere simply as INAH.





## PROLOGUE

### *The Messenger from Xibalba*

*“Shake the cobwebs outta your head, boy.”*

I was expecting Lady Xoc of Yaxchilan, but instead it was the voice of my father.

*Funny isn't it? But almost every bit of advice and instruction that I recall from my father either started or ended with the word “boy.” He never called me son. He never called me Don, even though we shared the same name. He always referred to me as “boy.” As a teenager I hated it.*

*We were never close. We never had any of those father-to-son talks. Instead he enjoyed a singular vocabulary that consisted of the word “chores.” All of our communication focused on these activities, which, as I grew older, he added to and accented their definition by his direct manner, stern expressions, and the pronoun “boy.” “Shake the cobwebs outta your head, boy,” he would say each time he caught me daydreaming. He must have done some dreaming of his own because he left my mother when I was fifteen. A few months later, so did I.*

*My great life adventure began in the train station in Pueblo, Colorado. I can't say there were any “great expectations” when I found myself on my own. I can still picture the Redstone railroad station where I awaited the Colorado Eagle coming down the track from Denver. (Although I know it was impossible in 1957, the music of Simon and Garfunkel's “The Boxer” wafts softly in*

*the background.) I can still see, in the sweaty and trembling palm of my hand, the eight dollars and change that remained after I purchased a ticket to Lindsborg, Kansas.*

*I had no idea where Lindsborg was, but then it didn't matter. I did not have enough money for recognizable places like Wichita or Kansas City.*

*I didn't see my dad again until I was twenty-seven. I did not know what to expect after twelve years without communicating, but I soon found out nothing had changed. My father's first words to me were, "I might a known you'd a had a mustache, boy." Then he shook my extended hand and, grabbing me around the shoulder (he never hugged), ushered me into his house and presented me to my stepmother.*

*Ten months later I left Colorado again, this time on my way to Mesoamerica. Of course I didn't know it was Mesoamerica. I thought I was just going to Mexico. Nevertheless, here I was on the banks of the Usumacinta River kneeling in the eerie, bat-filled darkness below a candlelit lintel in the ancient Maya city Yaxchilan.*

*"Shake the cobwebs outta your head, boy."*

Damn it, Dad!

I must have answered the voice in my head because Thorrun, the Icelander, motioned me quiet. I tried once again to focus on the burning candles and to meditate. It wasn't going to be easy to bring Lady Xoc back. I was skeptical. I suspected that I would just keep bringing back my own ancestors.

*Reflecting on the last thirty-six years living in Mexico, I have come to the conclusion that my journey to Xibalba began much earlier, in some childhood portal of my mind. There, in the dim recesses of my past, I picture the five-year-old boy sitting on the floor in front of the Zenith radio, frustrated as he tries to adjust the dial to make sure that he didn't miss a single word of another adventure*

*of Jack, Doc, and Reggie in "I Love a Mystery." The episode that spurred his youthful imagination took place in some vampire-infested temple in the jungles of Central America.*

I will probably never know if that was the moment that I was sucked into a portal and down the road to Xibalba. But the journey has certainly been more fantastic than I could have imagined, even in my wildest childhood dreams.

I hadn't been in Mexico more than a few weeks when the Lords of the Xibalba sent me a messenger with an invitation.

It was 1970. I was standing near the edge of the lake just west of San Miguel de Allende when the messenger suddenly appeared. He seemed to materialize out of the thorny huizaches, mesquites, and cactus.

His complexion matched the color of the dirt where he stood. He spoke a few words in a language that I did not understand and extended his closed fist. The gesture was not aggressive. It suggested the game of "guess which hand contains . . ." but I wasn't sure, and, seeing my hesitation, he took hold of my hand and motioned me to receive what was in his.

He placed a string of beads and a pendant-sized ceramic snakehead in my hand. As I examined the string of beads, I saw they were hand-drilled pieces of shells, bones, and small stones. The string was new but the beads were old. The ceramic head of the reptile bore long, narrow scales that retreated from the eyes toward the neck and fanned out above it like feathers. It also had two drilled holes, and I wondered why it was not strung along with the beads. I lifted my eyes, smiled, and focused my attention on the man.

My impression was that he was poor, and his clothing indicated he was a farmer. He returned my smile and his yellow teeth showed years of neglect. Because of the bright sunlight, his wide-brimmed hat cast a dark shadow across his forehead, cutting a contrasting horizontal line at the level of his bushy eyebrows. The many lines on his face were like arroyos created by millennia of erosion. The rest of his features—eyes, mouth, and nose—were comically pinched together in the lower





*Figure 1 The Messenger (photo by Henry Miller)*

portion of his face like a baby. He must have had some kind of nervous twitch because he frequently squinted his eyes closed. It wasn't a blink, because they closed completely and very slowly. But it was his tiny nose, curved and pointed like that of a barn owl, that tempted me to laugh. A strange odor emanated from him that reminded me of the smell of clothes after spending the night around a campfire. I was surprised that his feet, shod in the typical leather huaraches of the region, were without scars or calluses. "How does he avoid cutting his feet in all those thorns?" I remember wondering to myself. He was the earth itself. His dark eyes penetrated through my own shallow urban facade, making me feel uneasy.

Without speaking, he slowly turned his head, looking over his shoulders to the right and then to the left. As I followed his gaze I saw mounds of dirt and rocks behind him. Somehow, without any past experience, I knew that they were not part of the natural topography, but rather some ancient, man-made structures that were buried beneath the dirt and vegetation. When he caught my eyes anew he seemed satisfied with my puzzled expression and extended his hand outward once again, this time with his palm up. Without a word I returned the items to him. He smiled and turned to walk away into the *matorrales* (bushes) in the direction of the mounds.

I supposed that he wanted me to follow him in order to show me the mounds, so I started after him. But as I picked my way carefully through the thorny bushes my eye fastened on something black and shining on the ground near my right foot. I stooped to pick it up, and when I lifted my head again the man had disappeared. I took a closer look at the black, shiny object in my hand. I held it up to the sky and decided that I had picked up a small flake of obsidian. But when my focus returned to the earth below my feet, the magic occurred. It was as if a veil had been lifted from my eyes. Everything on the ground had taken on the characteristics of humanity. There were more obsidian flakes, pottery shards, and other broken fragments of the past lying at my feet. Ten minutes earlier I had walked over this past with no awareness of it. Something told me that I would never let that happen again.

In hindsight, this amazing moment brought together all of the elements for an equally amazing myth. Was it just one of those outrageously improbable coincidences that I had held in my hand the face of *Quetzalcoatl* (feathered serpent) and the power of *Tezcatlipoca* (smoking mirror) that day?

After describing the incident to my gringo friends in San Miguel, they suggested that the man was trying to sell me the artifacts. My mestizo friends suggested that he was an Indian and had spoken to me in his native language. There were still Otomí-speaking people living in the valley, they told me. They thought the old man's motivation was probably nothing more than his pride of the past, and that he had shared these elements with me as a courteous gesture. Nobody ever attached anything metaphysical to the moment but me.

That was the beginning. I have spent the past thirty-six years studying the ground, looking up only to encounter the Mesoamerican earth-colored people with strange histories, stories, and myths that even now continue to stir my emotions. Let the journey begin.

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE HOUSE OF GLOOM

*San Miguel de Allende Project*

## SAN MIGUEL DE ALLENDE

Back in 1973, everyone in town knew the director of *Bellas Artes* (the National School of Fine Arts). In retrospect his name, Miguelito Malo y Bueno, fit his character appropriately. Miguelito, the diminutive for Miguel, was a small man, and, like all of us, he was both a little *malo* (bad) and a little *bueno* (good).

Don Roberto Lambarri, the town historian at the time of the tragedy, told me that Miguelito began his professional life as a pharmacist and suggested that was how Miguelito became interested in the pre-Hispanic history of the valley of San Miguel de Allende. Attending the ailments of *campesinos* (farmers) who had little money, Miguelito sometimes accepted pieces of pre-Hispanic art in exchange for medicine and services.

Whatever the circumstances, Miguelito put together a collection of artifacts and created a small museum in the corner room of his house. He never tired of dragging visitors off the street into his home, where he forced them to view his collection.

Once I met a couple from the United States on the corner of Hidalgo and Mesones, near Miguel's home. They stopped me to ask directions, and during the conversation they mentioned an interest in pre-Hispanic art. So we crossed the street and knocked on Miguelito's door.

It was impossible not to admire Miguelito's enthusiasm. We spent an hour in his house. After showing off his little museum, he took us into a bedroom and began to pull pieces out of drawers. He showed

us, among other artifacts, a necklace of small, intricately carved jade seashells. I suspected they did not come from any of the sites in the local valley. Then he took us down the narrow patio to the far back wall where we climbed two small flights of stairs. On the roof was a small locked room. Inside, the floor was covered with piles of broken bones and pottery. Almost everything in the room still had patches of damp earth stuck to them, making the air musty. The space was so cramped that there was only a small dusty area in the center where we could stand single file among the artifacts. I noticed that three neatly bound boxes near the wall by the door were addressed to a museum in Houston, Texas. The top and front sides of the boxes were captioned in English with the notice, “Fragile–Talaveraware.”

As we returned downstairs I asked, “Don Miguel, ¿Qué vas hacer con todas esas cosas?” (Don Miguel, what are you going to do with all those things?) He smiled and explained that when he died he was going to leave a museum to the community. “Pero no las piezas buenas!” (But not the good pieces!), he exclaimed, pointing downward to the landing we had reached. Below, I noticed a series of *tragaluces* (skylights) that indicated a room underneath the landing. “Las cosas buenas van enterradas conmigo” (The good things are going to be buried with me), he added, stamping his right foot emphatically upon the landing. I remember thinking that somewhere in his passion for the pre-Hispanic, Miguelito had crossed over the line into madness. I was also very curious about the contents of the room below us. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to find out what was there.

A few months later, in the patio of his house, Miguelito Malo y Bueno shot himself in the mouth in front of a federal agent and an archaeologist from the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH). His suicide was provoked by the new laws passed by the federal government concerning Mexico’s national patrimony. As it turned out, Miguelito was just one of the twenty-two foreigners and Mexican nationals in San Miguel who were under investigation by the federal government in connection with the indiscriminate looting of pre-Hispanic sites and unregistered collections; some were accused of trafficking artifacts.

Miguelito's tragic suicide brought gloom and despondency to the community, and it was difficult for the residents of San Miguel de Allende to understand. He was a highly respected man in a community so small that everyone knew practically everyone else, and every third person was a cousin. Was not Don Miguel a pharmacist, a teacher, a historian, and the director of Bellas Artes? Was he not a humanist? Did he not treat the poor with charity by giving free inoculations and medicines when necessary? Did he not correspond with the great archaeologist Alfonso Caso, publish a guidebook, and write articles on the pre-Hispanic history of San Miguel?

Since then, I have often asked myself, "Why did Miguel, the illustrious son of the village, take his own life?" I figured that though it was a day like many others, he was caught in the middle of change. One day his activities were not illegal and the next day they were. Aside from this, I would love to excavate his cemetery plot to see if someone made good on his wishes.

In the community's mind the government was responsible for the suicide. The INAH was blamed, especially the archaeologist who was present at the time of Miguel's death.

The massive disappearance and/or destruction of the archaeological patrimony along the middle portion of the Río Laja took place during the twentieth century from the late fifties through the early seventies. Every site in the valley was affected.

Dozens of these pre-Hispanic settlements disappeared under water when the Allende dam was inaugurated in 1969. Ironically, this may have been a blessing. While they are unavailable for investigation at present, the large amount of silt deposited on these sites over the subsequent decades may actually protect them for future research. The majority of the sites in the valley suffered damage due to "pot hunters." Although some of the looting was casual, there was a semiorganized group of individuals who in one way or another assisted in the systematic destruction of these sites. And it involved some of San Miguel's most prominent foreign residents: Stirling Dickinson, Robert Somerlott and Bob Scott, and Janet and Mack Reynolds, to name just a few.

While most of the campesinos in the valley call the pre-Hispanic mounds *cuecillos*, the people of Tierra Blanca de Abajo call them *pan-teones* (cemeteries). In personal conversations with me, they compared their involvement to that of a *tianguis* (market) around the cemeteries. The buyers from San Miguel would line up along the sides of the diggers' pot holes and directly purchase artifacts held up to them from the burials. The activity clearly shows the financial motivation of the diggers: they had a ready market for the pots they had dug up.

The acquirers' motivations were a bit more varied, though no less destructive. Some, like Miguelito, were academically curious about the ancient peoples of the valley. Others in the community were simply collectors and displayed the artifacts to curious visitors on shelves or specially made cases in their homes. Some, like the campesinos, were motivated by commerce and sold artifacts locally in their stores and shops. Still others shipped the artifacts abroad.

I knew many of these people personally, and their attitude about their involvement was nonchalant. Response to any criticism was answered with the packaged phrase, "Everybody does it!" They treated these excursions into the countryside as "outings" or picnics. "We went to the peanut fields near Salvatierra for a dig last Sunday!" one collector exclaimed.

Far from the legislative palaces and academic debate at universities concerning pot hunters, most of those involved locally were stunned in the aftermath of the new laws governing the national patrimony. One of the intellectually curious, Robert Somerlott, confessed to me years later that although he had broken no laws prior to 1973, he felt guilty about the loss of information and the damage that had been done to the sites in the valley.

Ironically, Miguelito's death and descent into Xibalba had at least two positive results. First, the rampant looting of the sites in the valley stopped for nearly three decades. Second, since I accidentally inherited nine pre-Hispanic ceramic pipes from his collection, it indirectly inspired me to find out more about the pre-Hispanic history of the valley.

My mother-in-law, Doña Maruca de La Sota Zamorano, owned a bakery store across the street from Miguel's house. Although it was a

small, one-room bakery, the property that extended behind it was large. One day she asked me to examine the property, as she was thinking of building some rooms back there. In order to get a better view of the property I climbed a ladder until my head reached the roof of the bakery. There on the roof in front of my eyes were pieces of broken pottery.

I knew immediately that at least some of the shards were pre-Hispanic. Deer antlers and primitive heads of birds and lizards were grouped together right under my nose. I was so excited that I completely forgot why I was standing on the ladder. I scrambled to collect the shards and discovered I held what appeared to be a number of broken ceramic pipes in my hands. There was no question in my mind that Miguel Malo y Bueno had thrown them across the street from the roof of his own house, perhaps on the very day he committed suicide.

I gathered up the shards and placed them in a plastic bag from the bakery. I spent the next few days patiently gluing the pieces together. When I finished, I had nine amazing zoomorphic ceramic pipes that I was afraid to show to anyone. In accordance with the new laws, I wasn't supposed to have them. At least that was what I thought at the time. Fearful that the *Federales* would descend upon me at any moment, I carefully wrapped them in paper, put them in a cardboard box, and stored them on a shelf in my library. They stayed there forgotten for some time until one day a young archaeologist friend, Ben Brown, asked if he could consult one of my books.

He returned from the library with the box in his hands and an accusatory expression on his face. After I explained how the pipes came into my possession, he suggested I get in contact with Emilio Bejarrano, an archaeologist who worked for INAH in the state of Guanajuato. I reluctantly agreed and asked Ben to introduce me. That was how I first met the young archaeologist who had been in the patio of Miguelito's house the day of his suicide.

Because of the rumors and gossip making the rounds of San Miguel after Miguelito's death, I was expecting a troll. The most disconcerting rumor was that Bejarrano had shot Miguelito in the face. I was very nervous that morning as I awaited his arrival.



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