

the mayan magician and other stories

jim

musgrave

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"Like some cult religion that barely survives, there has always been at least one but rarely more than five or six devotees throwing the knuckleball in the big leagues... Not only can't pitchers control it, hitters can't hit it, catchers can't catch it, coaches can't coach it, and most pitchers can't learn it. The perfect pitch." -Ron Luciano, former AL umpire.



The Mayan Magician

Prologue: "The Dream"

I turned around, thinking that he was discouraged, but he caught me by the arm before I could leave. He was a tall, blonde and strong man of thirty-something, and I could see the sun going down behind him above the trees, and the Mayan ruins that were all around this hotel gave me a sudden vision of a scene from the recent movie, *Apocalypto*, and it made me wince. I saw myself at the top of Chichen Itza's giant *El Castillo*. In slow motion, the priest's sword lopped off the head of the sacrificial victim, and this head was promptly handed to me, and I was wearing the colorful robes and feathers of a priestess. I smiled, went into my windup, and threw the head. Instead of rolling down the steps of the pyramid, however, the head flew into the air like a knuckleball, dipping and floating crazily down to the bottom.



Chapter 1: "The Windup"

I was born in Oxtapakab, a very small Mayan pueblo almost an hour south of Merida, but my family worked in a tourist hotel on the beach near Merida. As a child and tomboy, I played baseball with my four brothers, who grew-up to play minor league baseball for the *Yucatán Leones*. I always expected I would one day go along with them when they left to play ball at the *Parque Kukulcán* in Merida. And that is exactly what I did.

But first, I learned how to throw the knuckleball from an American, Joe Meister, who had dropped out of the San Diego Padres organization because of his drinking habits and moved down south where the rules weren't so strict toward pitchers who liked to enjoy a beer every hour or so. Did I mention that throwing a knuckler is an art form? Yes, it is, and I, Isabel Juanita Perez-Velasquez, or "Dipsie Izzie" and "The Mayan Magician," as I was called in the National League during my season there, became the best artiste of this one pitch that there ever was.

I suppose this is one of the main reasons why I was hated by so many of the major league batters I came up against. First, I was a woman, and I was the first woman ever to be signed to a major league contract. Second, I threw "butterflies," which to major leaguers is the equivalent of a pro soccer player trying to stop another player who can scramble around like a prima ballerina. Or, it's like a basketball player who has to try to shoot into a basket that keeps moving on him.

Joe Meister taught me how to throw the pitch while he was vacationing at the hotel where I worked near Merida. The *Hacienda Xcanatun* is a picturesque 18th Century Mayan coastal resort with 18 rooms. Joe found out I was a pitcher when I was tossing large bars of soap down the hallway outside his suite to the other maids who would catch them on the fly and put them inside the bathrooms.

"*Hey, ése es un poco de brazo que usted tien,*" he told me, sticking his head out the door.

"I know. I pitch to my brothers who play for the Yucatan Lions," I said, and that's how Joe found out I spoke fluent English, which I had learned from the British Catholic Priest in my village, Father Gerald Cook.

"That's a coincidence!" said Joe. "I pitch for them."

That's when I told him I wanted to learn to pitch for them also, and I wanted him to teach me. The look on my face was deadly serious, and Joe knew right away that this five-foot-four Mayan female had the courage to learn. "You do understand that the Mexican leagues don't permit women to play?" he pointed out.

"I know that the Lions are in last place. I also know from my brothers that baseball is a business and that if they believe they can win with me on the mound, then they will make an exception," I said. "However, I would like to learn a pitch that will make me an equal with the men. Do you know of such a pitch, *señor*?"

Yes, Joe knew of such a pitch, and it actually surprised him to think there had been no American woman who had thought of this before. It made sense. Throwing the knuckleball did not require a man's strength or stamina. In fact, power was a liability. Also, a woman's smaller hand would make it easier to grip the ball the way the knuckler required.

"Tell you what. I've got some gloves and a ball in my room. You've got a pretty mean margarita that you serve in your *cantina*. I'll meet you in the tropical garden in fifteen minutes. It has a long stretch of grass where we can practice throwing. You meet me there with about a dozen of those margaritas, and I'll show you how to pitch the equalizer, the knuckleball."

Joe Meister didn't know it that day but what he was about to teach me was to be officially inscribed on a piece of laminated parchment on a plaque with my picture, inside a glass case, inside the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame. His instructions to me will also forever be emblazoned in the memories of the 257 major league baseball men who went down swinging that year I pitched for the Padres, swatting vainly at Izzie's floating dipster. How quickly I adapted to these instructions to create my unique brand of knuckleball was what made me "the magician":

"To get a perfect knuckleball grip, hold out your thumb, and the first two fingers. Then place your thumb tip and first two fingertips on the ball all at the same time, and not on any seams. Then push the ball with your left hand into the palm of your right hand, leaving your fingertips in place. Your fingers will curl. Then use your ring finger and/or pinky to gently hold the ball so it won't slide out the side of your hand. Some people use only the ring finger; others use just the pinky and place the knuckle of the ring finger against the ball. It's really whatever you're comfortable with and whatever works. Most people try different grips until they get one to work consistently.

"Then rev back and throw it. Remember, don't snap your wrist down like a fastball, and don't push the ball like a shot-put. It's a relatively normal throwing motion. Let the forward momentum of your arm create speed on the ball as it rests against the palm, and then let your fingers push the ball out when the momentum shifts to the release point. You'll find that you release the ball a little earlier than if you were throwing a fastball, mainly because of the grip. You'll take your ring and/or pinky finger off of the ball just before you release and just as you start to push the ball out with your fingertips."

By the time the sun was setting over the garden, there were fifteen tourists standing and marveling at the dark-skinned, twenty-four-year-old, in the maid's uniform, who was tossing flutter balls with accuracy to her American coach. In a few hours, I had mastered the grip and had developed a wind-up that I would gradually perfect, in the months to come, until Joe believed I was indeed ready for my audition with the Lions. My future agent was one of those tourists that day, and he introduced himself to me after Joe was exhausted and needed to reinforce his alcoholic constitution inside the hotel *cantina*.

"Good evening, Miss Velasquez. My name is Andrew Wilmington. I am an agent for professional athletes in San Diego, California. I was watching your progress with quite some interest. Have you ever thought of contracting yourself with a professional women's softball team? In fact, I am in touch with some very . . ."

"Excuse me, but I am contracting with the Yucatan Lions. I want to play professional baseball," I said. "My brothers play for them, and I want to join them. Come with me to my village, señor. I will show you why I want to pitch," I told Mr. Wilmington, taking his hand as the sun finally sank behind us into the ocean's waves.



Chapter 2: "The Pitch"

We drove out to my village in the twilight, and I couldn't see anything outside, except the grass and the twin dirt paths made from the many used cars and trucks that had gone before us, which I watched in the headlights' beam. I told Mr. Wilmington a story about a governor of Merida, one Felipe Carrillo, who fell in love with an American, Alma Reed, a writer for the *New York Times*, during the early 1920s.

"We still sing a song about them, and they are my personal patron saints. Carrillo formed *ejidos*, or communal farms, legalized birth control, gave women the right to vote and had the constitution translated into Mayan. Our people thought we might be saved from abject poverty."

He was curious. "What happened?"

I flashed him a dark look, as the engine in my old Ford Explorer popped angrily. "Reed and Carrillo promptly fell in love, and he nicknamed her *Peregrino*, or pilgrim. Her articles helped Mexico to recover artifacts Americans had pillaged from the ruins. The lovers planned to marry in January 1924, and Reed returned home to San Francisco to prepare. Days before the wedding, hacienda owners angered by Carrillo's reforms marched him, with Reed's intended wedding band in his hand, to Merida's cemetery and executed him by firing squad. The bullet holes are still visible in the wall near his grave."

"How tragic! I can see why you admire them."

"Yes, the Maya was once a powerful civilization, but the Spanish and now the gringos have taken it over. We work as laborers for their tourist investments. Many people believe we want to bring back our past, but they are wrong. We want modern advancements, just like you have. iPods, cell phones, health care, air conditioning, you name it. But we cannot advance as long as we are conquered to be peasants, just because we are Maya."

We pulled into the *hacienda*, and it consisted of one main building, where an elderly Mexican family, the Ortegas, still lived, but the main Mayan population, about two-hundred families, lived in small, thatch-roofed huts and concrete blocked houses that faced the concrete strip running down the middle of the road. There were only two street lamps powered by an old gas engine generator that could be heard chugging into the night, and as we

pulled in front of the three concrete blocks that I said were my family's home, I couldn't help but again feel sadness for these once-noble natives. Conquered by the Spanish, subjugated by the Mexican Government in cooperation with the North American investment community, we were now banished to the pueblos next to the old *haciendas* of our colonial overlords.

Inside the largest building, which served as our family's living room, my four brothers, Juan, Pedro, Alfonzo and Ricardo, were watching the Mexican National Soccer Team on the tiny color television set, up above in the corner. There was also a long display of holy articles and flowers on a wooden shrine next to the wall. The rest of the room was furnished with inexpensive chairs and a small couch from Merida's new Wal-Mart, covered with a multicolored, homemade Indian blanket. The mother of our family, Dolores, was sitting on the couch with a bowl of fruit, which she was carefully slicing up for dinner. Our father, Alonzo, had died three years before from a heart attack. His picture was up on the same religious shrine in the center of the room.

"You must excuse my family," I said. "They can only speak Spanish. I am the only one who finished school with Father Gerald. I try to teach my brothers some English, in case they get drafted by the Padres, up north, but they haven't learned much. *Es correcto, mi hermanos? Ustedes estais un manojito de burros, no?*"

Each man stood up and shook Mr. Wilmington's hand.

"*Es un agente para los jugadores del beisbol en America,*" I told them, and their eyes brightened.

After I explained to my family that I had today learned a new pitch that was going to get me into professional baseball, not one of them seemed to scoff. I have a strange power over my family, as if they believed I was, indeed, a magical creature.

As we ate dinner with him that night, Mr. Wilmington also became convinced that I would succeed in my baseball quest. He told my family that I seemed to exude that spark of desire he had seen in other athletes—mostly males—but it was the same flash which told him I would do anything and pay any price to achieve personal greatness.

"It is the same spirit that harkens back to those boys who pitched against barns in rural America. There is also the present crop of Caribbean and Mexican players who sacrifice time and energy on the rock-pitted playing fields, playing until dark, playing until their hands are blistered, their knees

and elbows are bloodied, and their muscles are sore, playing until they get that call from the men in those offices far above them. These owners know the spark that I know so well and who know the glow that separates these athletes from the masses of others who have neither the talent nor the urgent dream to get them to the top of the heap." He smiled at me as I translated his words, and, one month later, he negotiated my first contract with the *Yucatan Leones*.



What Were You When You Were Alive?

The sweeps came that day. We saw homeless people being rounded up in police vans outside Mussolli's place, and it wasn't a pretty sight. Some of them put up a fight, and San Diego's finest just shoved and manhandled them into the vehicles to be transported outside the county. Usually, the city would just move us past Market Street, but the Republican Convention called for more stringent action. When we heard the screams of our compatriots, our resolve became stronger. When the police came for us inside our diner, we were ready.

We knew most of the cops who came for us. They also knew I was a bit of a rabble rouser, having demonstrated each year, during the Veterans' Stand Down upon the grounds of Balboa Naval Hospital, asking for tents to be constructed where we could stay all year. We even got some press coverage last year, but I would always just give up and get drunk, but this time it would be different.

"Hello, officers," I said, when they entered Mussolli's. "We meet again. I suppose the stress of this convention must be quite trying on you. I can empathize. However, it is my duty to inform you that we are not vagrants. We are, in fact, exercising our constitutional right to enjoy a moment of calm in the day and partake of a cup of java with our good friend, Mr. Barney Mussolli. Won't you join us?"

The senior officer, Sergeant Palmary, a tall former marine with a bushy mustache, came up to me and looked me up and down. He then glanced over at Riley.

Riley said, by way of greeting, "I always take my wife everywhere I go. She always finds her way back."

"So, it's Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. I never thought I'd see you two again. I don't have time for your shenanigans. There are going to be

convention people here any minute. They don't need to see the likes of you to spoil their day. Let's move out."

When the officers attempted to manhandle us out of the establishment, the *San Diego Union-Tribune* and KFMB Channel 8 journalists took their cue. Their cameras began to record Riley and me as we passively resisted their efforts to drag us out of "A Wing and a Prayer."

"We shall not be moved!" I shouted, digging my desert boots into the floor.

"You're going to have the biggest law suit you've ever had," said Mussolli. "These gentlemen are attempting to stay sober for one day, and they are veterans of the United States Armed Forces. They have every right to be in my place!"

Palmary looked at the cameras, then over at the journalists madly writing in their notebooks, and then he made a decision. "Okay, hold up. I'm going to get some help here. We're not going away, and you'll be moved, Spencer. You're a no good bum, and this city has had enough of your drunken ways."



Turning the Law Wheel

Following her job at the Shanghai Wild Animal Park, Meiyong Connors is chosen to sell Marla King Cosmetics. She knows it is because of her Occidental looks and the wheel of law.

Her father, Army Sergeant Charles Connors, is a black Korean War prisoner who was transferred to Beijing in 1969, and then she was born, in 1986, into a family that is usually considered a pariah to the People's Revolutionary Party. Meiyong's mother, Xiao-xiao, dies when Meiyong is born, and Meiyong spends most of her developmental years on the road with her father making movies for the Communist Party.

Because of Sergeant Connors' American good looks, Meiyong's father is used as a propaganda tool. Films are made by the Ministry of Culture about how communism is so much more compassionate to "people of color," and Charles is viewed by audiences lifting bales of hay on a communal farm and smiling and joking with his fellow workers. Or, he is seen standing with some Party dignitaries at the launching of a new war ship or some other new weapon meant to stop the "tide of Western Imperialism."

Her father is later employed in Chinese movies as the "evil American officer" who is always defeated by the People's military hero. Even though she knows her father secretly drinks too much and smokes big cigars, she also understands that he loves his job because he believes in China's future. In fact, he tells her, just before he dies of a heart attack, "Back in Alabama, where I was born, I would be lucky to be just another poor nigger working in the fields or inside some factory. In China, I am a movie star. The world has awakened a sleeping giant, my daughter. China will now lead the way."

When her father dies, the government has a big funeral for him out on Tiananmen Square. That's where Meiyong first meets Colonel Wang Dongbin. Colonel Wang is the Beijing head of the People's Ministry of Culture. It is here at her father's death celebration that Meiyong is given her first chance to work for the government.

"The Shanghai Animal Olympics are to be the great precursor to the World Olympics," Colonel Wang tells her at her father's funeral.



Sirens

I used to drink in all the high class bars and nightclubs. You know, those swanky places downtown where one tips the waiters (all six of them) and the hostess, and one can smell the cologne on the cloth napkins? However, ever since my business investments have gone sour (I was part of the subprime mortgage crew), and I have acquired my new-found conscience (it's funny how alcohol makes one introspective about life), I like to hang out at what my mother, a grand matron of the Hudson River Valley, would have called one of the "seedier" establishments.

After the Fascist take-over by a succession of mayors in New York, it's really difficult to find a seedy bar to drink in. However, I like a bar that's on the Hudson River near Cortlandt. It's called the Paradise Bar & Grill, and it's located in the hamlet of Verplanck. I know, you're saying to yourselves, "Verplanck? Cortlandt? That's the suburbs, man! Westchester. You can't throw a quarter in there without hitting a Mercedes." Yes, it's true, we are a Yankee community, steeped in Revolutionary War tradition and marinated in Daughters of the American Revolution. The joke inside the Paradise is, "How many Verplanck fishermen does it take to screw a Daughter of the Revolution? It takes 1,776. One to shtup her and 1,775 to envy him."

Why do rich people envy? Think about it. The world of the wealthy consists of making certain you keep up with the other rich people. Not only do you have to stay rich, but you also have to have the latest cultural icon, family historical tree, patriotic connection or any other classy-sounding link with the rich tradition that abounds in this neck of the Hendrick Hudson woods. What's my link, you ask? My link is that I first heard the Sirens.

In most taverns, I would be the guy who sits on the corner of the bar, next to the bartender (in this case, his name is Vito, as the Paradise is an Italian tavern, and Vito is the owner's brother-in-law), so he can get the best vantage point to view the cocktail waitresses, who scurry to and fro from the bar to the tables. As a former New York City lawyer, I can keep Vito and the girls mildly entertained with my combination of gutter humor and satirical jabs at the wealthy town folk, until I get too wasted, and then Vito just

kindly calls me a cab, and I am shuttled off to my boarding house room on the Point, the Campbell House, a former Federal building that used to house real fishermen who traveled up and down the Hudson from New York City to Albany. Today, I get a pretty good price for my room at the Point, because the Campbell house is soon going to be bulldozed to make room for private enterprise. No more Federal buildings in Verplanck, by God! Private enterprise is now the Yankee tradition.

The first Siren I heard was the night following the Verplanck Easter Egg Hunt. A lot of the townspeople were in the Paradise that night, as they wanted to get away from their kids for awhile and have a cold one (why is it always "one" with these normal drinkers?) and discuss the latest gossip.

I was seated on my usual red-cushioned bar stool, asking Maureen Flaherty, my favorite cocktail waitress and single parent, whose kid goes to Our Lady of Mt. Caramel School, if she knew what was black and white, black and white and black and white? She said she didn't know, so I told her, "A nun rolling down a hill," and she actually laughed. But, just as she turned to go, and I was watching her nicely shaped legs as they vibrated their stocking selves out toward the mass of boozing humanity, I heard the first great wail.

At first, I thought it was the Verplanck Fire Department testing one of their new sirens for us, as our town has more employees in the fire department than we have police, teachers and city hall employees combined, and they like to "strut their stuff" quite often, when they get their latest toy from the Department of Homeland Security or the Society to Prevent Global Warming. However, this siren sounded otherworldly, and it did not have the conventional "whoop" or "whine" that most mechanical or pneumatic horns have. This sound was loud, yes, but it was also wavy, and the vibrato it contained was definitely human and not a machine.

"You hear that?" I asked Vito, who was doing his perpetual routine of washing glasses and then drying them on his towel that said "Save Venice—it's Sinking!"

"Nah, I can't hear nothing over this chatter, David. It must be those dog ears of yours!" said Vito, chuckling at his own joke.

"No, listen. It's a siren wailing. Wait a minute," I said, and I actually got up from my stool and headed for the front door. Everybody in the establishment turned to look at me, as it was a rare night indeed when David J. Kaufman, Esquire, got up from his bar stool! It usually meant the Messiah was coming, or I was going to do some drunken stand-up comedy and a few songs for them. This time, it was neither, and I was poised at the

front entrance with my hand perched on the lion's head door knob from the movie *Cinema Paradiso*, that the owner, Sam Parino, bought off E-Bay.

As I opened the wooden door, I turned to my assembled Easter Egg Rolling folk, who were working on Easter Egg Nog Hangovers, and said, "Listen! Do you all hear that?"

Maureen Flaherty, bless her, came over to stand beside me, and she had the cutest expression on her pixie-like face, and with her turned-up Irish nose twitching, she said, "It sounds like someone's calling the cows home," and that's when the women started nodding in agreement.

Ed Walsh, the town's mayor, pushed his brawny way through the crowd and to the door. He stuck his cigar-mouthed red head out the door as if he, alone, had real ears. "It sounds like it's coming from the *Half Moon*." He was, of course, referring to our hamlet's recreation of the Dutch (actually he was a British) Explorer, American Native slaughterer, and land buyer-upper, Hendrick Hudson's 1609 sailing ship, which was docked down on the river at King Marine.

This is the strange part: the sirens only affected the men. The women simply yawned and played with their hair, while we men began to fantasize about a naked songstress. Yes, and it was the same naked woman we all dreamed at once. We compared her description, and each of us had the same vision of her. She had long, red hair and she was completely nude, sitting on a rock out in the river. The brown nipples on her breasts were firmly jutting out, perky in the cold wind, and the water was sloshing between her thighs, foaming in and out, rhythmically, and we all described being pulled into those thighs, until we became lost inside her womb, seemingly forever, inside her moist darkness.



Texting

Bill first met Zonica Brown at a college party. It was one of the tons of parties held by USD students at one of the off-campus condos owned by some alumnus big shot, and Bill liked going to these parties because they always had the best food and the best conversation.

As usual, Bill was being ignored, as he was in “full text mode,” slipping in and out of circles of people like a Dickens gutter snipe, wearing his black jeans, black turtle neck, black Dr. Marten’s boots, and black watch cap, with his ever-present black Lenny Kravitz aviator glasses. He was like a reincarnated Marcel Marceau, entertaining the children of the wealthy.

Bill would get notified about the party by his cell phone, and he could pick-and-choose whichever party he wanted to attend, as he had become a minor celebrity because of his political stand and his vow of silence, and many students—especially the college crowd—thought he was pretty cool for doing what he was doing. They thought it was especially awesome that he was standing up to his English professor father, as most of these students thought that English teachers were relics from the Dark Ages of three-channel TV and one telephone per household. Professor Crowley was detested by the current undergrads, and his students’ comments on RateYourProfessor.com were filled with warnings about his antiquated attitudes toward literature and toward his students, so most of the students totally sympathized with Bill Jr. and his plight.

However, they also understood that Bill was a “ticking bomb,” as they knew many students like him who had ultimately crashed and burned, getting into heavy drugs, slipping into deep depression, and sometimes committing suicide. Therefore, the college students kept a wary distance from Bill, allowing him to eat at their parties, but keeping him away from the drugs and booze, and they would “plug in” to chat with him by text to get a few laughs or they would watch him do one of his political pantomimes, all the

while, deep in their hearts, knowing this kid could freak out totally and explode.

This concludes the sampler of *The Mayan Magician and Other Stories*. You can purchase the [paperback](#) and [Kindle version](#) of the book now at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).