

THE CHANGE

A NOVEL

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Joseph J. Valeri

CHAPTER ONE

A free read

Fifty years from now, the human body stops being something a person can count on. Without warning and without pattern, anyone past the age of fourteen may lie down at night and wake in the opposite sex, the devout and the godless, the powerful and the poor, with a sovereign indifference to every line drawn to keep the world in order. It cannot be predicted and it cannot be walled out. The world comes to call it, simply, The Change.

It falls upon an America long since remade into a fascist oligarchy, a country that outlawed science a generation ago and has raised a Church of Men to burn the “Forsaken” in public squares. The men who rule cannot say what The Change is or where it comes from, because they have spent fifty years making certain no one is permitted to know.

And beneath the fear and the fire, a quieter and far more dangerous question goes unanswered: what causes it, who will understand it first, and whether they will give the answer to the whole world, or sell it.

It begins here, on a slow brown river deep in the Amazon, with a young tribesman who drank from water running the faintest and most beautiful shade of blue.

“The Power” meets “Childhood’s End.”

CHAPTER ONE

The Blue Water

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Ucayali River Valley, Eastern Peru, May 8, 2070

Neten Pero had drunk from the Ucayali every day of his life, and the river had never once tasted of black stone.

He noticed it on the eighth morning of the rains, half a day east of his village, where the water ran fast and clear over stone worn by time. He had been walking since before light, his throat was dry, and he knelt at the bank the way his father had taught him to kneel, with one hand flat on the earth to thank it. He cupped the water. He raised it. And he stopped with his hands still at his mouth, because the river he had known for twenty-three years did not look like the river in his hands.

It carried a hue. Not the brown of churned silt, not the green of the slow pools downstream. A faint blue, the blue of a bruise under brown skin, there and not there depending on how the light fell upon it. He turned his palms and the color slid across them and was gone. He told himself it was the sky. There was no sky here; there was only the roof of the forest, a hundred feet up, and the gray light coming through it.

He drank anyway. A man does not walk half a day and refuse the river he has drunk from all his life.

The taste was wrong in a way he had no word for. Cold and bright and a little sweet, like the inside of a stone. It was not bad. It did not turn his stomach. It was simply not the taste of his river, and Neten knelt there a moment longer, turning it over, the way you turn over a word a stranger has said in your own language, but said slightly wrong.

His people, the Zipibo believed the world spoke to them through nature. The river was not simply water that happened to run downhill. It was the oldest living thing they knew, older than the village, older than the names of the dead,

and when it changed like this, it was trying to tell him something.

Typically, he would have thought hard on what the river was trying to say, but his mind was racing with what would happen the next night and he simply let it go without another thought. For the following night, Neten was to drink the sacred brew, the ceremony he had waited for his whole life, his passage into manhood. One of the most important nights in the life of one from his tribe. He pondered what the spirits would tell him and how it would change his life as he drank until he was no longer thirsty. Then he sat back on his heels and looked upstream, east, toward where the water came from.

Two years before, you could not have seen it from here. Now you could. Through a gap the loggers had torn in the green, far off and small, the white shoulders of a factory caught what little light there was, a campus of pale buildings where there had been forest, raised in a single dry season by men who arrived in trucks and left in helicopters and spoke to no one. They made batteries there. Neten had never had need of a battery, but he knew the machines in the far cities had hearts that needed feeding, and that the feeding was done here now, a half day's walk from the place his family had come to pray for nine generations. The outsiders had set their nearest building ten steps from where the river crested in the big storms. They did not know the river the way he knew it. They would learn. The river always taught the same lesson to anyone who built too close, and it need teach it only once.

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Neten could not have known it, kneeling there with the strange sweetness still on his tongue, but the river had told him the truth. Something in it had changed. Far upstream, in the warm current of the river, two things had met that had never had a reason to be in the same place before. The first had lived in this one cold reach of the Ucayali and in no other water on Earth, older than the forest and older than the people who prayed beside it, a bacterium that had not begun on Earth at all but had ridden down through dark space on a splinter of rock that struck the young planet long before the first dinosaur drew breath, and had waited in the river ever since, harmless, patient.

The second thing was something new that had never existed in nature and had never touched living water but now flowed in the Ucayali river, introduced

upstream by a yet unknown source. Where the ancient creature waited for the new, in the slack warm water drifting slowly, something was born that had no name, no precedent and no cure. And it would not stay in the river. The first to drink it would carry it out of the valley in their own blood, and from them it would pass to others, breath to breath and touch to touch, until it no longer needed the water that had made it. The river had been trying to tell him. It would be three years before anyone on Earth began to grasp what it had said, and longer still before they understood what it would cost.

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He should have felt tired. He had walked since dark and the day was already hot. Instead there was a brightness in his arms and behind his eyes, a low hum in him like the hum of the cicadas, as though he had slept a week and woken hungry for the world. He took it as a gift. A man does not feel strong the day before the ceremony and call it a curse.

Neten rose, shouldered his pack, and began the long walk home, west, down the river, away from the white buildings and toward the people who would, before the next moon was full, fall to their knees in front of him.

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He woke the next morning with a fever and did not tell anyone.

It was not a large fever. It sat behind his eyes and under his arms, a warmth that was almost pleasant, and he knew that if he spoke of it the women would keep him in the maloca with a cool cloth and a bitter tea, and there would be no ceremony, not tonight, not for him. He had waited too long. So when his mother put her wrist to his cheek out of the habit of a woman who had raised ten children, Neten smiled and said the walk had tired him, and she believed him, because he had never in his life given her a reason not to.

The maloca was already awake. It was always already awake. He was the eldest of ten, and the long house his family shared, a frame of poles, a roof of thatch and palm, one great room that held three generations and the smoke of a single fire, never truly slept. His grandfather coughed in the dark before dawn. The babies woke and were fed. His sisters argued in low voices over the grinding stone. His father had gone before light to the traps. This was the whole world

Neten had ever wanted, and he moved through it that morning slowly, doing his chores with hands that did not feel entirely like his hands, telling himself it was only the fever, telling himself it would pass.

By midday the fever had gone, but the strangeness it left behind had not. He did not feel ill. He felt as if he was sharing his body with a friend, as if, somewhere in the hours of the walk and the night, a guest had entered the house of his body and was standing very quietly in a room he could not see, waiting. He had no fear of it. The onaya taught that the night of the brew was a night of guests, ancestors, animals, the green spirits of the plants, and that the body was only ever a borrowed house. Neten believed he was being prepared.

His sister, Naami, fifteen and quick as a fish, found him by the fire in the long gold light of the afternoon and asked if he was afraid. He said no. She said she would be. He told her that the spirits are not given fear the way other people are given it, and she rolled her eyes, because she was fifteen and he was her brother and to her he was not a sacred anything, he was the boy who had taught her to fish and lost to her at it. He laughed.

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The grand maloca where the ceremony was held stood apart from the others, at the edge of the village where the forest leaned in close, and by the time the dark came down it was full of low firelight and the smell of the brew.

The onaya had cooked it for two days. Neten had watched the old man gather the parts of it the way he had gathered them his whole life, the woody coil of the caapi vine, cut and pounded soft; the small bright leaves of the chacruna, picked with a song and a thank-you, one leaf at a time, never stripped. Alone, each plant was nothing. The vine would not open the door. The leaf would not show you what was behind it. Together, cooked down through a day and a night into a thick dark liquid that smelled of earth and rot and something older, they became the medicine, the way to the world of the dead, the people called it, the vine that lets the soul climb out of the body and look back at it.

Two were to drink that night. Neten, and his friend Jakon Yoshin, who had been born in the same season as him and had wanted this as long as he had. They sat on the swept earth with their backs to the wall posts. The onaya moved between them in the firelight, an old man made of cord and shadow, and he

began to sing.

The icaros are not songs the way the outsiders mean songs. They are maps. They are the paths the onaya has walked in the spirit world, sung out loud so that the ones who drink can follow them and not be lost. His voice was thin and endless, rising and folding back on itself, and it filled the maloca to the rafters. He gave Jakon the cup first. Then he knelt in front of Neten, and in the moving light his eyes were kind and very old, and he said the words he had said to a hundred others, that the sacred drink would show him only what he was ready to see, and that whatever it showed him, it was his to carry back. Neten drank. It was bitter past bitterness. It coated the throat. He set the cup down and closed his eyes and waited for the door.

Beside him, Jakon found it first and he found it hard. The purge is part of the cleansing; the onaya teaches that the body must be emptied before the spirit can be filled, and so the violence of it is not feared but welcomed. Jakon bent forward over the wooden bowl and his whole body heaved, again and again, bringing up the brew and the day's food and, it seemed, some grief he had been carrying that had no name, sobbing between the heavens while the onaya sang harder and laid a hand on the back of his neck. This was right. This was the ceremony doing its work.

Neten did not purge.

He sat against the post with his eyes closed and his hands open on his knees, and he did not move, and the not-moving spread out from him like a stillness in water. Behind his eyes the door had opened, but not onto the path the onaya was singing. It had opened onto geometry. Lines of light, blue-white and impossibly fine, were drawing themselves across the dark, lattices, spirals, the patterns the women wove into cloth and painted onto skin, the patterns the people said were the songs made visible. They unrolled and folded and breathed. They went into him and came out of him. The guest who had stood in the unseen room all day had stepped forward at last, and it was not standing apart from Neten anymore. It was making itself at home.

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The onaya stopped singing. He had felt it the way an old fisherman feels a change in the river under the boat. He reached for Neten in the way he knew

how, not with his hands but with the part of him the medicine made large, and he could not find him. The boy was sitting right there, warm, breathing, an arm's length away in the firelight. And in the place where the onaya should have met his spirit there was no one. There was the river. There was the blue. There was a vast patterned light that answered to no name the old man carried, and it frightened him, this man who had not been frightened in the spirit world in forty years, and he leaned close and said the boy's name.

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Neten's eyes opened. He looked at the onaya and then looked through him. He drew one long breath, and a single cry came out of him, not pain, not joy, something on the far side of both. He turned his head and brought up the smallest mouthful of the brew into the bowl, and then his body went soft and he slid down the post and did not wake.

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The onaya sagged with relief. He had purged. The boy had purged after all; the cleansing had come; whatever the medicine had shown him, it had let him go. The old man did not lean down to look into the bowl, and because he did not lean down, he did not see what the firelight had hidden from him all along, that what Neten had brought up was not the dark of the brew but a thin bright thread of blue, the blue of a bruise under brown skin, there buty then gone depending on how the light fell, already sinking into the dark earth of the floor where in the morning no one would think to look.

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He woke before the others, in the gray hour before dawn, and for a moment he was perfectly happy. He had visited somewhere grand and enormous and was still half inside it. The patterns that had defined the place were fading the way a dream fades, leaving only their warmth, and he lay on the mat in the dark of the family maloca, he must have been carried home, he thought, by Jakon, by his father, and listened to the breathing of the ten people he loved most in the world, and felt that he had been given something he could not yet hold. He felt entirely himself. He had never in his life felt so entirely himself. That was the

strange part, the part he would try and fail to explain for years afterward: not that he felt wrong, but that he felt right in a body that was no longer the one he had fallen asleep in.

He sat up to stretch the night out of his back. He raised his arms. He brought his hands down to his waist, the way he did every morning, to press the ache out of his spine.

His hands found a body that was not his. He went very still. In the dark he could see almost nothing, and so he did the thing one does when sight is gone, he felt. His fingers moved up from his waist and his breath caught, because his chest had changed in the night, had grown and softened, and as his hands moved over himself in the dark it was like running them down the length of a stranger lying beside him, except there was no stranger. There was only him. There was only this, and the warmth he had woken into went slowly cold.

He told himself he was still asleep. Then he remembered the medicine. The brew was famous for it; the onaya had warned him. A man could leave his body on the rope of the vine and feel, for a while, that he had come back into a different one. He told himself he was still dreaming the long dream, that this was the two-spirit the people honored, the woman who had always lived inside him stepping out into the dark to teach him something, and that if he simply lay back down and let the dream finish, he would wake a second time into the ordinary morning, into his own chest and his own hands, and tell Naomi about it over the fire while she rolled her eyes.

It was a good thought. He almost believed it. He was lowering himself back to the mat, reaching for the dream, when his mother opened her eyes.

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She had borne ten children and buried two, and she knew the shape of her son in the dark the way she knew the shape of her own hands, and the shape on the mat was wrong. She did not scream. She made a small sound, a sound with no word in it, and pushed herself up onto one elbow, and in the first blue light coming through the smoke-hole she stared at the body where her eldest should have been.

“Neten,” she said. “Is that you. What has happened.”

He said nothing. He was still trying to climb back into the dream. If he did not answer, the morning could not be real, this was the last thought of a man who had run out of thoughts. He lay back down and turned his face away and reached, one more time, for the patterned light that was almost gone.

“Neten.” Louder. The fear in it now, breaking the surface. “Neten, what is wrong.”

And then the maloca was awake, all of it at once, his father up off the mat, his grandmother’s voice high and frightened, the babies wailing because the room was wailing, his two cousins crowding in, fifteen people in the gray dark all speaking over one another, all reaching toward him. Neten could not make out a single word. He had never seen his family like this. They were a quiet people; quiet was the whole texture of his life. He thought, dully, that it was a very strange dream, to make them so loud. He did not yet understand that the loudness was about him. That he was the strange thing in the maloca. That the body they were all staring at was his.

It was Naomi who ran. She was out the door barefoot and gone into the half-light before anyone could stop her, and she came back with the onaya, and the moment the old man stooped through the doorway the room went silent, all at once, the way the forest goes silent before the rain.

He crossed the floor slowly. He looked down at Neten for a long time. And then the onaya, who had reached into the spirit world the night before and found a river where the boy should have been, lowered himself to his knees on the swept earth, bowed his head and began to pray.

One by one, the family knelt with him. The father. The grandmother with the baby still on her hip. The cousins. Naomi last, her eyes on her brother the whole way down, not understanding, doing it because the onaya had done it. Only Neten did not kneel.

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He sat in the center of the kneeling ring of everyone he loved, in a body he did not recognize, and felt the last of the dream go out of him like heat out of a stone, and knew, finally and completely, that it was not a dream. It was his body. It had changed in the night, and there would be no second waking.

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The onaya raised his head. When he spoke, his voice shook, and Neten had never once in his life heard the old man's voice shake.

"We are honored," the onaya said, "that the spirits of our elders have come to live in one of our own. The medicine took deep root in him. So deep that the earth and the ancestors chose him, to show us what they have to say." He looked at Neten with watery eyes and a kind of terror that wore the mask of joy. "Sacred one. Tell us. What is the message you have carried back to us?"

Neten opened his mouth. Everyone in the maloca leaned toward him, his mother, his father, the old man, the whole kneeling village of his blood, waiting for the word from the ancestors, the meaning, the reason.

"I..." he said. "I don't..." His own voice was strange to him too, pitched lower in his ears than in the air, a voice heard from inside a different skull. "What happened to me?"

The onaya responded, "The body is just a vessel for the spirit, it is not the soul of the person. Your spirit has shown us your soul and done so to teach us all a lesson. That the shape a body is born in does not represent the person, the soul inside. Reverence is due to the spirit and the soul not the shape the body holding that spirit happens to have at any time."

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The onaya sent the family out so that the sacred one could be alone with the medicine man, and they went, walking backward, unwilling to turn their backs on him.

When they were alone the old man sat with Neten a long time and told him gently that he had been changed, and that he did not yet understand what The Change meant, and that this was not a thing to be hidden or undone but a thing to be carried out into the light and worn proudly. He would send runners to the other villages. The onayas of all the people would come. There would be a gathering, and prayer, and the slow work of finding out why the ancestors had done this, because the ancestors did nothing for no reason, and a sign of this size was meant to be read. He put his old hand on the side of Neten's changed face, said he was not afraid, and then rose and went out to begin sending the word, and closed the door of the maloca behind him so the sacred one could sit with his spirit in peace.

Neten crossed the room and barred the door. Then he went to the dim back corner where the light did not reach, and with his heart going hard he took off the clothes someone had dressed him in, and he looked.

What he saw he could not connect to and could not undo by looking. The chest. The waist. The hips. The hands, which were narrower; even the hands had changed. He pressed his palm flat against himself the way his mother pressed her wrist to a feverish cheek, as if there were a temperature he could take that would tell him whether this was real, and the body under his palm was warm and living, entirely a stranger's and entirely his own. The questions came without order and without answer. Whose body is this. Where is mine. Did my spirit climb out on the rope of the vine and come down into the wrong house. Has this ever happened, to anyone, in all the long memory of his people? Did the ancestors do this? Or did something else, something with no name in any icaro, something that came through the trees in the night and touched him?

A knock came at the barred door. His mother's voice, low and pleading, asking to be let in, asking only to see him. Outside, already, he could hear it beginning, feet, voices, the village waking to the news, the word sacred passing mouth to mouth in the gold morning light. By night they would come from the nearest villages. Within one moon, from the farthest. They would call him a blessing and a gift and proof of everything they had always believed, and they would be wrong about none of it and right about none of it, because the thing that had changed Neten Pero in the night was not a curse and was not a blessing.

He did not answer his mother. He could not yet be the thing they needed him to be, and he could not any longer be the thing he had been. So he dressed in the strange-fitting clothes, and he went to the low opening at the back of the maloca where the children slipped out to play, and he ducked through it and ran into the trees while the first of his people gathered at the front door to worship him.

Behind him the Ucayali went on running west out of the white buildings, patient and blue, saying to anyone who knew how to listen exactly what it had been trying to say all along.

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He did not think, yet, of the river, of the blue that was there and not there in his cupped hands. That would come later. Years later, a woman with a satellite phone and a careful, kind face would sit across from him and ask him, one quiet question at a time, what he had eaten and drunk and touched in the days before The Change, and he would reach back through everything that had happened and find, waiting at the bottom of it, a morning on a riverbank half a day east, and the sweet unexpected taste on his tongue, and a blue that was there and not there in his open hands. He did not think of the water now. There was only the body, and the cold rising in him, and the questions with no answers and no end.

KEEP READING

Neten Pero drank first. The world found out sixteen years later, and by then two people on opposite sides of the earth were racing for the cause: one to give the cure away, one to sell it by the month, forever.

New chapters, notes on the science behind the story and word of the release, first, here:

joevaleri.substack.com

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