Wanderjahr| apprenticeship of a modern nomad

Adam K. French

The University of Montana

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WANDERJAHR
Apprenticeship of a Modern Nomad

by

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presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Chairperson

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Wanderjahr: Apprenticeship of a Modern Nomad

Chairperson: Phil Condon

*Wanderjahr* is a work of creative non-fiction that brings together stories from a year of travel and research in Latin America. The ten chapters included here, a book-in-progress, weave together first-person narration of the journey with exposition about a variety of conservation and ecotourism endeavors as well as personal reflection on the world in which the narrator has been raised. Overarching themes of the work include the social and environmental impacts of global tourism, reflection on the meaning of the words "wild" and "wilderness," and ruminations about modern "nomadism" and what it means to be "placed" in an increasingly mobile and changing world.
We shall not cease from exploration.
And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

-- T.S. Eliot
Acknowledgements

I owe special thanks to the Thomas J. Watson Foundation for their generous support of the *wanderjahr* from which these stories come. While the Foundation is in no way responsible for the details of my journey, without the freedom and opportunity afforded by the Watson Fellowship this work would not have been possible. I am also grateful for the support of the Doris Duke Conservation Fellowship, which allowed me to revisit the Andes and several of the most poignant lessons of my initial *wanderjahr*.

At the University of Montana, I am indebted to all of my professors, colleagues, and friends who, through honest criticism and sound advice, have helped me develop these stories, their meanings, and my growing understanding of the world which they are about. I thank Annick Smith and Bill Kittredge for encouraging me to keep writing and for providing a tough audience when I most needed one. And special thanks to my advisors Phil Condon and Tom Roy who always offered patient advice, critical insights, and thoughtful questions during my time in the Environmental Studies program.

Abroad, I am grateful to everyone who shared in these adventures and helped me along the way. They are, after all, the lifeblood of these stories. I would also like to say a special thanks to my family who, since the very beginning, has helped foster in me a love of travel and discovery, without which I would never have undertaken the journeys which have led to this work. And, finally, a very special thanks to Kathy Marieb whose patience and love has been my brightest ray of sun during this writing.
Preface

***

The final destination of any journey is not, after all, the last item on the agenda, but rather some understanding, however simple or provisional, of what one has seen.

--Pico Iyer, Video Night in Kathmandu

***

Recently, I was sitting at my favorite bar in Missoula, Montana, (my home when I’m not traveling) discussing our scary winter road conditions with a group of friends. Somehow, the subject carried us south, well beyond the onset of winter, to a narrow, winding one-laner that pitches off the high plateau above La Paz, Bolivia, into the green chaos of the Amazon basin. Guidebooks often label this route the “most dangerous road in the world,” and having survived it several years ago, I’m hesitant to dismiss their claim. Coincidentally, among the five of us at the table, all but one had heard of the road’s grim reputation, and two of us had actually traveled it. Sitting there, I tried to picture a group of swarthy Bolivians, frothing mugs of fresh chicha in hand, ruminating over Glacier National Park’s frighteningly exposed Going-to-the-Sun Road.

Looking back, our conversation that evening seems indicative of the breadth of geographic knowledge and experience that so many of us in the “First World” currently enjoy. Never before has there been such global mobility or access. Journeys that were logistical nightmares rife with risk and uncertainty several decades ago are now mere vacations, the domain of intrepid honeymooners and endurance cyclists. These days, we can island hop through the South Pacific, ski outer-Mongolia, track jaguars through the Amazon, and climb ash-belching volcanoes in Ecuador just for fun. Global adventure
travel has turned into a coming of age for our youth and a denial of it for our elders. Tourism is growing at a breakneck pace throughout the world, and in many countries it has become the single most important source of GNP. While this jaunting about the world fosters important cultural exchange, it catalyzes other changes as well, often as much in the travelers as in the places we explore.

The book *Wanderjahr*, of which this thesis is a part, is, in the sense Iyer suggests, the “final destination” of a journey I had the privilege to take several years ago. The story is my attempt to sort some understanding out of the changes and exchanges I experienced during a year spent following, and at times trying to avoid, the kinks and bends of the Gringo Trail, that amorphous route connecting Latin America’s most celebrated tourist hotspots. The goal of the narrative is to shed light on some of the promises and pitfalls of global travel, both for the traveler as well as for the globe.

*Wanderjahr* is the story of a young traveler, gifted with the trip of his life, who faces the challenges of a year abroad while struggling to figure out who he is and where he belongs. By no means expert commentary, *Wanderjahr* is full of conjecture as it offers observations and poses questions that arise from the complex, often troubling, and sometimes hilarious interactions between local peoples and landscapes and hordes of globetrotting gringos. As the journey carries me over thousands of miles from the urban underbelly of San José, Costa Rica, to the “most dangerous road in the world” and beyond, I learn and relearn the fundamental lessons of wandering foreign lands.

The thesis that follows here tells only part of the story of *Wanderjahr*. The work-in-progress includes a brief prologue, followed by seven chapters from my early travels in Costa Rica and three later chapters from Ecuador and Chile. I began writing the story
chronologically but found certain chapters came easily while others needed more time to percolate, thus the jumping about in the narrative. As it stands, the following chapters introduce many of the themes that will be developed as the narrative is expanded. After "House of Wind," the final chapter included in the thesis, the story follows my return north through the Andes as I make my way back towards the States, gradually coming to terms with the strong pull of family and "home" and the realization that, no matter how strong our "nomadic" tendencies may be, we all come from somewhere.
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Prologue:
The Making of a Modern Nomad

***

Wanderjahr: a year of travel before settling down to one’s vocation: originally a custom of European journeymen.
—Webster’s

***

My earliest memory is of a rocky cove dappled by sun and dotted with lazing sea lions. The place is shadowy, like a dreamscape. Yet when I described it to my mother a few years ago in an effort to place it in my past, she recognized the scene immediately from a trip we took to Baja, Mexico, at the end of my second year. There could be earlier snippets of memory that have melded into later ones, but I like to believe that the experiences I have traveling have long possessed a special power over me.

My father jokes that I am descended from a long line of gypsies, his excuse for the fact that our family is most content while on the road or, at least, when there is some journey building on the horizon. I feel lucky to have been raised with travel. In my first decade, my parents patched together work to support annual migrations between the growing season on our homestead in the Ozarks and wintering grounds on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Later, after my father had returned to teaching, we took long summer trips in the lake country and boundary waters of Minnesota and eventually explored the big sky country of the American West. Even if wanderlust wasn’t encoded in my genes, those early voyages insured that I’d always love to travel.

It wasn’t until college that I first went abroad. Just as deep winter was settling on my junior year in the cornfield country of the Midwest, I fled south to study ecology and
Spanish in Ecuador. At the end of that semester, I felt savvy enough to explore Colombia and Perú for a month on my own. South America felt like a world apart. Nothing I’d experienced at home could have prepared me for the steaming, screaming fecundity of the Amazon or its stark contrast to the bone-clean austerity of the Andes. In those mountains, life seemed an art in drawing blood from stone.

Before that first trip south, I had little sense of the ocean of wealth and opportunity that separated my reality from most of the third world’s, to use that over-simple term. The journey offered a new context in which to see myself and my country, and I realized that my very presence in Latin America was indicative of a luxury far beyond the reach of most people who I encountered there. Yet, like many travelers, I was hooked on the visceral experiences of this “other world,” and I excused myself the privilege of being there because I had so much to learn. Well before I’d cleared customs on my way home, I realized that I would have to return.

The Watson Fellowship—a philanthropic gamble of sorts—provided the means for that return just over a year later. The grant had been established to fund wanderjahrs for a handful of college graduates, supporting a full year of travel and research anywhere in the world outside the U.S. The grant came with only a couple of stipulations: leave home for the entire year without returning and undertake an independent and self-directed project, free of formal academic institutions. Rather than a year of travel before settling down—as the dictionary suggested of a proper wanderjahr—the opportunity struck me as an apprenticeship for a modern nomad, a veritable post doc in peregrination.

I proposed an analysis of conservation efforts in Latin America, hoping to spend a year in the field researching different strategies, particularly those tied to nature and
adventure tourism. To accomplish this I’d need to do a fair amount of adventuring myself—traveling between a continent’s worth of far-flung parks, exploring everything from Caribbean beaches to Andean summits along the way. Somehow, the Foundation went for it. Luckily, my sponsors weren’t overly concerned with enforcing an itinerary or having me produce immediate, tangible results. All they required were brief quarterly reports, about a page of summary for every month I spent abroad. Beyond that, the trip was mine to make of what I could.

I was twenty-one when I got the grant, fresh out of college, bold beyond common sense, and a little too self-righteous, though I, of course, had trouble seeing it. I had always been a driven student, but, after eighteen years of continuous schooling, I longed to undertake something exquisitely real. Like Edward Abbey, my chief literary hero at the time, I fancied myself a loner and a bit of a misanthrope who could easily leave behind friends and family for a year of wandering distant lands and charting the expanses of my drifting mind.

Even before the Watson, my approach to living had loosely embraced the pseudo-Taoist philosophy that, in the end, “the journey is the destination,” and the closest thing I had to a spiritual guide was Serendipity. Thus it made sense to set off on my *wanderjahr* having done little in the way of planning. I had a list of places in mind and, like a true nomad, planned to move with the seasons. But I also packed a willingness to scrap the itinerary and follow my journey should the two diverge. My approach fostered freedom: I would buy one-way plane tickets as I went and take only what I could carry on my back. It was romantic and some might say irresponsible, considering the investment of my sponsors.
The truth was I felt little in the way of expectations from anyone but myself. I knew long before I set out that the trip was only partly about conservation strategies and the state of nature in Latin America. It was also about my state of mind and, as the fellowship suggested, my growth as a "global citizen," whatever that might prove to be. Bottom line, I had a ticket to travel the world, and, no matter what, it was certain to be an adventure.
Adrift

***

We might imagine a journey with no destination, nothing but the act of going, and with never an arrival. But I think we would always hope to find something or someone, however unexpected and unprepared for. Seen from a distance or taken part in, all journeys may be the same and we arrive exactly where we are.

--John Haines, Moments and Journeys

***

"Then you’re sure you won’t be home for Christmas," my grandmother asked again, hoping something had changed in the hour since breakfast. It had always been a family tradition to spend Christmas here at her house in Florida.

"I can’t Gramma, it’s the rules of the fellowship," I answered softly. I still wasn’t sure what country I’d be in at Christmas.

"Well that’s silly," she said, her shoulders drooping as she turned from the room with a tiny huff. I knew how much this detail meant to her and wished, in a way, that I could somehow sneak home. She was 89, and I wasn’t sure how many more holidays we’d have together. Other than Christmas, however, I was amazed at how accepting she had been of my plan.

I had booked a cheap flight to Costa Rica from Miami and decided to stop over in Tampa to spend a few days with my grandmother before departing. She’d taken a surprising interest in my journey, drilling me on logistics and insisting we shop for every odd and end I might need, as though I were off to some exotic land where toothpaste and batteries were yet to be discovered. My sense was that the trip was going to expand her horizons as well as my own, even though I’d soon be flying off the southern end of the
T.V. weather maps where she liked to track my wanderings. I hoped at her age, I’d still be so open-minded; really, I hoped I’d still be traveling.

I finished the final inventory of my backpack, wedging in a ziplock of homemade cookies. I’d gotten the biggest, burliest backpack I could find and it was already stuffed. With plans to visit most every ecosystem on the South American continent—from Caribbean beaches to Andean summits—I had everything from crampons to a snorkel packed. On top of all that, I had a small library of field guides and pleasure reading as well as a walkman and an eclectic mix of music to keep me sane on the long bus rides.

As I lugged the behemoth out to the foyer, I scanned the family photos that covered the walls of my grandmother’s house. My personal evolution was well-documented, from the chubby baby with the flaming curls to the closely-cropped junior-high jock, to my current incarnation with the big red beard and bird’s nest ‘fro—at least I’d spared Gramma those six months of ratty dreadlocks.

There I was, around two years old, with my young mother back on Got Rocks Farm, the six acres of ridgetop bedrock my parents had homesteaded in the Ozarks during the seventies. As the firstborn son of a stay-at-home mom, I had grown up close to her, and I hated that she would worry about me too much during the coming year. She lacked experience abroad, and, in her eyes, I was embarking into a great unknown. It was the same with the mountaineering my brother and I had become increasingly wrapped up in these recent years. Every time we set off for the mountains, she would fret and wonder until we were back safely in the nest. Hiking was fine, as was road-tripping around the States, these she could relate to, but scaling cliffs and third-world travel proved outside her comfort zone.
In another photo from only a year and a half before, I'm posed with my dad and younger brother Brian just before I left the country for Ecuador on the trip that, in many ways, changed the direction of my life. My father had done more than anyone to bring out the gypsy in me. Since before I could walk he had been herding our family around the U.S., sharing his favorite places and discovering new ones with us. Yet, while an avid traveler on his home turf, he lacked zeal for exploring the developing world—"if I want dysentery, I'll go to a Chinese buffet," he would typically say. Brian was simply envious, wishing he could come along instead of facing his senior year in a backwater high school. Under other circumstances I would have welcomed his company, but this was to be my great solo adventure, or so I kept telling myself.

I heard pea gravel crunching in the driveway and the honk of the airport cab. After five months of anticipation, departure was upon me.

"Love you Gramma. I'll keep in touch," I promised, hugging her small frame gently while we both tried unsuccessfully to avoid tearing up.

The lay-over in Miami felt eternal as I watched the cumulonimbus columns billow in the one-hundred percent humidity of late-summer Florida. Last time around, I had endured a cancelled flight here on my way home from Ecuador thanks to the afternoon thunderstorms. I wasn't eager to spend the first night of my Wanderjahr in the Miami airport, no matter how fitting it might be. "Cool your jets," I kept telling myself; soon enough I would be operating on hora Latina, or Latin time, where being impatient was the most maddening curse. I wondered how much waiting I would do during the coming year, days worth of waiting. Until then, it had been easy to envision the year ahead ornate
with adventure. But now that it was underway, the mundane details of traveling were rushing back. The length of the endeavor weighed on my mind, an incipient doubt gnawed at my confidence. Cutting loose from the familiar was harder than I’d imagined. I tried to distract myself by reading The Grapes of Wrath, then by people-watching, and finally by doing sets of push-ups in the departure lounge. None of it worked, so I thought I might remind myself of exactly what I was setting off to do. I pulled out the smudged copy of the proposal that had landed me the fellowship.

“The Future of Latin America’s Ecological Treasures: A Comparative Study of Conservation Strategies,” went the long-winded title. It began with a quote I’d borrowed from David Rains Wallace’s book The Quetzal and the Macaw to put the project in context: “If history continues, the growth of park systems will be more important than wars... power will reside with societies that have conserved their resources, not with those that have spent them.” While this seemed a touch Pollyannaish in our brave new world of corporate superpowers and capitalist colonialism, it was apt for the introduction to a book that detailed the formation of Costa Rica’s national park system, and it quite literally provided a power quote for my proposal. I also saw an underlying hope in the idea, as did the biologist Peter Raven, who had said Costa Rica’s parks were “one of the great accomplishments of the human race over the last thirty years.”

This “great accomplishment,” which conserves around a quarter of the small, tropical country in a network of parks, preserves, and buffer zones, was going to provide the comparative model for my research project. My idea was to study the national park system in Costa Rica along with a few private conservation initiatives such as the heralded Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve, noting their critical successes and failures
and comparing their officially stated missions with what I observed happening in the field. I also planned to critique the booming ecotourism industry these protected lands had helped spawn, as it was increasingly upheld as a model for sustainable development in countries with a bounty of natural attractions. Eventually, I would take my model south, using it to reflect on efforts in other countries with their own blend of ecosystems, cultures, politics, and problems. In academic speak, it was a groundtruthing project, a close-up look at the reality of conservation in a slice of the developing world.

The project fit my interests and academic background perfectly, but it hadn’t come to me immediately in such a succinct form. My brainstorming had begun in the realm of childhood fantasy. When I was learning to read, I had spent hours poring over my parents’ collection of National Geographics, especially one that featured a section on the Amazon. Inside it, a series of time-lapse photos depicted a monstrous anaconda strangling and eventually swallowing a sizable goat kid. I was riveted by snakes when I was five; I would gaze for hours at pythons and cobras in my Zoobooks, and I shared the woods and pastures where I grew up in northwest Arkansas with a variety of less exotic species. When I was just half its size, my father had killed a six-foot copperhead that was residing in our chicken house, and it was at once the most beautiful and terrifying thing I’d seen. My family’s canoe trips in the Florida Everglades best explained my complimentary fondness for swamps. I could remember gliding along overgrown canals, peering out over the gunwales, amazed at how the splayed trunks of the cypress grew straight out of the murk and worried by the glazed eyes attached to toothy snouts that stared from just above the waterline. The confluence of these childhood fascinations led me to a dream of floating the Amazon, and although I’d left both snakes and swamps by
the wayside as I'd grown up, part of me still longed to explore South America's great rusty artery.

I knew from more recent experience, however, that it would be hard to endure much time in the jungle. During my semester in Ecuador, I spent a week at a remote research station located on the Rio Tiputini, one of the Amazon's myriad tributaries. The trip had been a primer to primary rainforest, complete with monkey and macaw sightings, intimidating entomofauna, and daily baths in the piranha-ridden river. At the end of our stay, I came away with a couple of overarching impressions: one, the rainforest is a spectacular ecosystem, diverse, mysterious, and primeval; two, it is a sweltering hellhole, buggy, fungal, and oppressive.

By the time I applied for the Watson, I had also made several sojourns to the Rockies and was addicted to exploring mountains. If I was going to spend a year abroad, I didn't want to be sequestered in the malarial lowlands the entire time, especially with the spine of the Andes looming on the western horizon. It made sense to stay in Latin America where I already had a few connections and could speak Spanish, a common thread that wove together lands and cultures over many thousands of miles. All that I lacked was a link between the continent's superlative landscapes: from the driest desert to the largest rainforest to the longest mountains on the planet. Serendipitously, I was reading Wallace's *The Quetzal and the Macaw* at the time, and the importance of national park systems was fresh in my mind.

With the proliferation of parks and preserves in the late twentieth century, it didn't take long to string together a compelling itinerary. I planned to begin with the seascapes of Costa Rica and Colombia and then wind south along the peaks of the Andes,
through the Atacama Desert and the mythic lands of Patagonia, all the way to the end of the road in Tierra del Fuego. Then I would return north, finishing my quest in the tropics by embarking in Peruvian jungle and following eroded Andean soils down the length of the Amazon to its broad, red mouth.

The bilingual boarding call finally cut through the hum and chatter of the busy airport, jarring me from my thoughts. I hurried onto the plane taking my seat two rows from the back. The air in the cabin felt heavy and stale, matching the humidity outside. The upholstery of my seat had the lingering stench of tobacco which reminded that the airline permitted smoking. This oddity, I guessed, also explained the rock-bottom price I’d gotten on the one-way ticket. I considered going for the oxygen mask when a wizened fellow who already reeked like an ashtray plopped down into the seat beside me.

I nodded a hello while flipping through my tapes. I chose a brooding Coltrane number and plugged into my walkman, hoping to avoid the usual runway banter. The flight, at just under three hours, seemed too short for the distance it would carry me from my quotidian concerns. When I deplaned, I would greet an unfamiliar land where I knew no one and had only a rudimentary and rusty grasp of the language. Despite all my intrepid-traveler talk of the past months, my nerves were playing up.

“Mind if I smoke,” my neighbor asked as soon as the plane leveled out.

I mumbled consent over the murmur of my headphones. The Florida Keys were already petering out into the Gulf of Mexico, the last vestiges of home disappearing. Assuming things went as planned, I wouldn’t see my country again for exactly a year.
One day at a time, I thought, feeling jittery and a little nauseous from the second-hand smoke.

"Going surfing?" the Ashtray asked, plenty loudly to cut through the frenetic sax.

"No," I said, after staring at him for a second and ceremoniously removing my headphones, "I'm going for work, well, research."

"Hmmf," he said.

"How about you, you going surfing," I asked, actually curious if the old chimney might ride waves.

"Hell no. I'd drown for sure, don't even swim," he said in a gravelly voice that reminded me of my Gramma's driveway. "What do you research anyway?"

"I'm studying conservation strategies, like national parks and nature reserves."

"Hmmf, good place for it; damn fine beaches that's for sure," he said.

"So I've heard."

He leaned in a bit closer, as if to share a secret, "Damn fine chicas too, and they love Americans." The way he said it, exhaling the dregs of his drag into my face, reminded me of what I'd read about Costa Rica's legal prostitution enterprise, how one could watch lonely gringos in downtown San José trolling for tropical flesh.

"So I've heard," I said again.

"That's what I'm researching," he laughed. "You gonna find you a girlfriend down there?"

"Maybe," I said, wishing the conversation would end. My mind drifted to my girlfriend Lucy, now living somewhere in Boston. She was an ex really, since we'd parted ways over geographical differences two months earlier. We'd kept in touch during
the summer but never really discussed where we stood. Although my mind was working hard to enforce our separation, my heart fought it. We'd talked of rendezvousing somewhere in the southern hemisphere, but my aloof approach to the trip kept things indefinite. Thinking of her so far away, probably already with someone else, made me feel hollow and edgy.

I looked to the window for distraction and in the distance saw a green fringe that I figured was Cuba. I wondered if I might end up on the forbidden isle before this trip was over. Unofficially, of course, as my sponsors would never allow it if I asked their permission. They had already axed Colombia from my itinerary because of the U.S. State Department's advisories over recent kidnappings and "increased rebel insurgence." I argued from experience that I would be fine, but the Foundation would have none of it.

According to the mainstream media, which I tended to distrust completely, Colombia was no longer the paradise of friendly folks and gorgeous landscapes I had experienced with a fellow American student just over a year before. Now it was a war zone, under attack by narco-traffickers. Even on that first trip, we'd been warned profusely about the imminent danger for Americans, and most people suggested we steer clear of the country. A few worriers even recommended sewing Canadian patches onto our backpacks. Instead, we stuck by the States and were shown nothing but kindness from the Colombian people. From our surreptitious observations of the dance halls in Cali (the Salsa capital of the world) to our nervous wanderings around downtown Medellín (the cartel capital of the world) under the pale glow of a full moon, we found everyone from machine gun-toting MP's to a Puerto Rican cocaine smuggler to be affable and considerate.
That had been one of my greatest adventures, with the vibrancy of the Colombian landscapes and people offering a sharp contrast to the muted hues and reserved culture of the Ecuadorian highlands. I had learned several important lessons on that trip: simply being American is not a sufficient crime to make most people hate you, timidity is no virtue for an explorer, and if you are in search of vivid experience, it is best to find things out for yourself. But then again, we hadn’t crossed paths with any rebels and I’d had total freedom to take whatever risks I could justify, without the worry of screwing up the best job I could imagine. Despite my urge to ignore the rules and chase after illicit fun, on this trip I planned to comport myself in a manner consistent with my continued funding.

The tired stewardess finally reached us at the end of her long run with the beverage cart, and the Ashtray and I both ordered gin and tonics. He remarked that his drink was stiff and shortly passed out. I took advantage of his nap to breathe deeply for awhile, flipping through the lodging section of the guidebook and mouthing Spanish phrases I thought might help me find a place to stay.

Though I perused them to no end, I hated relying on guidebooks, the veritable roadmaps to the Gringo Trail. Everyone who follows their advice too closely risks miring themselves in the same deep rut, touring the wonder right out of the world’s most fascinating places in an effort to check them off in their dog-eared guides. Yet much of this journey, at least as I’d envisioned it, would carry me along this well-beaten path. I wanted to make the march as a participant observer, taking stock of the damage and perhaps recovering some of the trampled wonder in the process. And for as much as I liked to hide behind my project, elevating my motivations above those of the fleecy, zip-
away-panted throngs, I had to remember that I wanted to see all the same classic sights that they did. In the eyes of the locals I'd be just another plodding gringo, guidebook in hand.

For more than an hour, I tanked complimentary drinks as we cruised above a clean blue slate dotted by occasional sandy cays. Eventually, a long strip of coastline appeared to the west. I looked at my map and figured we were contouring the Mosquito Coast. A sprawling settlement at the mouth of a twisting river had to be Bluefields, Nicaragua, the Caribbean port from where English and Dutch buccaneers pirated the plunder of the Spaniards during the 16th and 17th centuries.

I wondered if I might make it to Nicaragua, perhaps even as far as Bluefields, where I'd read there was tourism development budding in the wake of Hurricane Joan, which had leveled the area in 1988. Nicaragua wasn't officially in my proposal, but I didn't see why it would be off-limits, especially if I didn't ask, and I certainly had plenty of time. In many ways, this utter freedom was my most dizzying challenge. Even though I'd gone out of my way to avoid a well-laid plan, if I'd had one I would have felt less adrift.

We turned inland, and through building clouds, I watched the deep greens of the Atlantic coastal plain rise onto the mountainous backbone of the Central American isthmus. Costa Rica, at just over 51,000 square kilometers in area, is about the same size as West Virginia or Tasmania. Yet its steep elevation gradient—the highest point in the country is an extinguished volcano that rises to almost 13,000 feet—coupled with its location in the tropics, creates a rich array of life zones. The country is home to approximately five percent of all the known species on Earth. This includes more
butterflies than are found in the whole of Africa, and, in terms of species per unit area, about six times the number of birds and mammals that are found in the entire U.S.

We would soon land in the capital city of San José, set idyllically in a lush valley separating two mountain ranges. The broad highland plain where the city lies, called the Meseta Central or central plateau, is home to more than half of the country’s nearly four million residents and its fertile volcanic soils produce a world-renowned coffee crop. From the plane, a patchwork of cleared fields and shiny-leafed coffee plantations covered the hillsides as far as I could see, reminding me that despite the lauded national park system, deforestation was still rampant in the country. One widely reported statistic stated that in 1950, seventy-five percent of the country was covered in virgin forest, but by 1990, only twenty-three percent remained intact. Until the end of the 20th century, when the country began to pay residents to leave forests intact, Costa Rica faced the most rapid deforestation rate in the western hemisphere, reportedly nine times that of Brazil’s rainforests.

Thunderheads bruised the western horizon as we made our final descent towards the sprawl of San José. Beside me the Ashtray coughed into his fist while fingerling an unlit cigarette in his other hand. I put my headphones away, straightened my collar, and took a deep breath as the wheels hit tarmac.

The moment I stepped outside the airport, the heavy skies opened in torrential greeting.
“Welcome to Costa Rica,” the cabdriver said, as I shivered in the seat next to him with my soaked dress shirt stuck to my skin. “It will rain every afternoon for the next two months.”

*Remember that,* I thought as I tried to pick a hostel from the “bottom end” section of the guidebook. With my ample funding, I could have upgraded a category, but I was curious what I could endure. As a self-styled climbing bum, I was hardly afraid of dirtbagging. When it came to paying for a place to sleep, I preferred to pitch a tent. When that wasn’t an option, I would often sleep in the car or wherever else opportuned itself. I certainly wasn’t going to blow a lot of money on fancy motels. After all, as travel writer Tim Cahill points out, “a tight budget is the mother of adventure.”

“Do you know the Tica Linda?” I asked the driver. *Tica,* or *tico* in the masculine form, is popular slang for a Costa Rican and *linda* means beautiful, so literally I’d asked for the beautiful Costa Rican woman. Thinking of Ashtray, I hoped the driver didn’t misunderstand my request and drop me at some brothel.

“Sí,” he said, “by the Esmerelda downtown, mariachi.”

“Hmm,” I nodded in that subtle, affirming way that comes reflexively when you’re unsure what the hell someone is talking about but you don’t want it to show. This habit had spiced up my experiences more than once in the Spanish-speaking world. My mind flashed to a culinary misadventure I’d had my second week in Ecuador when I’d missed the sarcasm in my host family’s recommendation of a traditional dish. It turned out to be potato and sheep-intestine soup, and the highlight of the meal had been sprinkling fried cow’s blood into the wriggling slop.
The rain began to slow and the streets got busier with pedestrians and vendors as we came into downtown. Looking around, I was surprised by all the new SUV’s and the modern buildings—were it not for the billboards in Spanish, I could still be in Tampa. The same ubiquitous icons that defined my culture for much of the world were here in force: golden arches, Pizza Hut, and Coca-Cola.

I’d been looking for a Wal-Mart on the way into the city, knowing that this harbinger of global capitalism had its tentacles well into Central America. I had heard of their invasion firsthand from my father, who as a professor at a small university in Arkansas had taught a number of promising students from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. These exchange students had been recruited as Walton Scholars, sponsored by the Wal-Mart fortune, to be trained as the upper-level managers for the plague of discount mega-stores infesting their countries.

When the scholarship program began, the students were free to study whatever they wanted. A few majored in sociology under my father and left with intentions quite distant from facilitating a consumer empire. In response, the administration began restricting the students to the business division, keeping them aligned with the goals of the program and out of the reach of subversive lectures.

I thought of my own fellowship, set up in honor of IBM’s founder Thomas J. Watson, and wondered what agenda might lay beneath the generous philanthropy I was enjoying. To inspire global citizenship and self-reliance, provide for self-discovery and personal growth, and build bridges of cultural understanding, these were the goals the foundation emphasized for their fellowship. Given the circumstances, I felt it would be hard to fail their expectations.
“Tica Linda,” the driver said pulling to the curb in front of La Esmerelda, a kitschy looking mariachi club.

“Where?” I asked, seeing no sign of the hostel.

“Ring the buzzer,” he said, pointing to a heavy metal door right beside the club. Looking at the busy street scene replete with shady characters and incessant honking, I second-guessed my choice. *Mother of adventure,* I repeated to myself like a mantra.

“Let me see if there’s a room.” I stepped out into the drizzle and rang the bell, nervously eyeing the driver to make sure he didn’t take off with my backpack. I hated being paranoid, but big cities put me on-guard. I rang the bell again and heard heavy footsteps. A lock turned and the door swung wide, putting me eye-to-eye with the scowling face of a pugilist, definitely not my idea of *linda.*

“Tica Linda?” I asked doubtfully, glancing over my shoulder again at the taxi.

“No, I’m from Peru,” the stout, frowning woman said in such an unflinching way that I missed the joke entirely and was preparing to retreat to the cab. Then she let a small grin slip and motioned me inside with a beefy forearm. Looking down the dark hallway behind her, I wasn’t so glad I had found the place.

The interior was even dimmer than I expected, with the only light cast by the stormy sky through an outdoor patio. I asked for a single room, and the woman, whose name I understood as Marfa, showed me to a rectangular cell just wider than the narrow bed it contained. There was a small lamp on a table at the end of the bed, which barely lit the cubicle, illuminating walls covered in scribbled graffiti. *Welcome to hell, enjoy your stay!* was the first message I noticed scrawled near the head of the bed. I dropped my
bag, shaking the walls, which were thin partitioning inside a huge colonial room. *What could I expect for six dollars a night?*

I thought about taking a walk around the city to get oriented; perhaps I'd find somewhere nicer to stay tomorrow. Then I listened to the rain pounding on the metal roof and felt hopeless. Under the weight of the gin and tonics, I decided on a nap instead. Stretching out on the sagging mattress, I turned on my headphones, and closed my eyes. Here it was day one, three-hundred and sixty-four left to go. The intrepid adventurer was alone just as he had planned it, and all I really wanted to do was talk to somebody I knew.
"Buenos días," I said to Marfa, as I staggered out into the bright light of morning from the confines of my windowless cell. She was already up working at the large sink in the patio, furiously wringing out a mountain of laundry. That, at least, explains the size of her forearms, I thought, as she strangled the last drops of water out of a pink bed sheet.

In the foyer of the hostel, I studied a city map that hung across from a scenic blowup of the Grand Teton. Seeing that craggy peak soaring above a meadow of blooming purple lupine was odd here but comforting. Less than two weeks before, my brother and I had stood together on the rocky summit of the Grand surrounded by clean mountain air and the wide-open spaces of northwestern Wyoming. Now, according to the city map, I was in the very heart of downtown San José, just a block from the National Theatre and the Plaza de la Cultura, surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people and a small tropical country.

Moments later, I sat down in an open-air café facing the plaza and ordered black coffee and banana pancakes from a frizzy-haired waitress who never really looked at me. At a quarter past seven, the city was just waking up. Several custodians in generic, white uniforms pushed brooms around the plaza, chasing after a flock of shitting pigeons in some kind of weird urban symbiosis. A group of school girls in navy blazers and plaid skirts scuttled past, giggling their way to the bus stop. Soon, vendors began their rounds, hawking everything from Swiss watches to Cuban cigars.

Thinking of the crossword, I asked a lanky black man carrying a shoulder bag bulging with the world's news if he had a copy of the New York Times. He asked where
I was from as he fished out the paper. The concept of Arkansas furrowed his brow like it does to most people. His name was Abrâm, close enough to Adám to remark about, and he sat down at my table though I hadn’t invited him. While I drank my coffee, he rubbed his lightly stubbled jaw and told me how he had fled his home in Rwanda three years before, making his way to Costa Rica from Panama after a long ocean voyage. He was working here until he could get a Canadian Visa, which he said was the final step before getting into the U.S. He desperately wanted to live in America. He said, matter-of-factly, that he had good connections here and quietly offered to find me anything I might desire: drugs, women, girls, boys. I told him I was happy with the paper, and he vanished into the gathering numbers in the plaza.

After finishing up my leisurely breakfast, I strolled around the city, looking for nothing in particular. I didn’t have much to do really, aside from getting fuel for my backpacking stove and choosing where to visit first. I’d decided to wait at least a week to begin my interviews with the park service and tourism concessionaires, hopeful that my comprehension would move beyond an exercise in attentive nodding.

As often happens to me in cities, especially when just getting oriented, I wandered around aimlessly stringing together small acts of consumption. I bought a topographic map of the country from a newsstand near the Parque Central, bitter espresso from the café in the National Theatre, and some of the best pineapple I’d ever tasted from a bald man with a blue cart welded to the front of a bicycle. I even bought a sleek pack of John Player Specials, a fine English smoke that cost a third of what they would have in the States. I hadn’t really enjoyed cigarettes since Ecuador, but they went with the city life, and I figured they might help me blend in with the Costa Ricans, who seemed to
approach smoking as a national pastime. Yet looking around it was obvious, cigarette or no, that I blended in about as much as an orangutan would have.

By mid-afternoon, I was beginning to feel savvier. I'd already found a hardware store with *bencina blanca*, as white gas is locally known, and my tongue was remembering how to roll with the language. The Tica Linda was too depressing to hang out in, so I chose a vacant bench in the Plaza and stretched out to do some reading. No sooner had I reclined with my book then a policeman loomed over me tapping my feet with his polished nightstick. I stared at him for a second, wondering what he wanted—his cleanly-shaven, round jaw and pursed lips, a ridiculously tasseled green uniform and cop cap, a chrome gym whistle hanging from his neck, and an outdated single-action revolver holstered at his side.

"Get your feet down," he commanded, informing me of my crime. I swung them to the ground, and he grunted and walked off in the direction of a couple engaged in some heavy petting across the way. Looking around I saw another officer in the same silly regalia, watching over the scene from beside the Theatre. Plaza pigs, protecting the public good from horizontal lounging and other acts of gross indecency. I wished the pigeons upon them.

At least these two seemed less menacing than the junior storm troopers I'd noticed in the pedestrian mall earlier. In black fatigues and jackboots, lurking next to their offroad motorbikes, they looked fresh out of the High School of the Americas. I'm sure they would have had neat, menacing mustaches if they could have grown them. The submachine guns they swung heedlessly around the busy street lent them a more adult air, however, and I observed them briefly from a storefront nearby, curious to see if the
safety was engaged on their weapons. Their hands fluttered too near their triggers for me to tell, and I gave them a very wide berth.

The police presence was surprising, considering the guidebook’s assertion that peace-loving Costa Ricans pride themselves on having more teachers than soldiers or policemen. Officially, they hadn’t had any soldiers since 1949 when the country had declared itself neutral and completely disbanded their armed forces. But the police still maintained a military capacity, especially given their historically volatile relations with Nicaragua, and I wondered if they were on-guard for a remnant force of Contras to parachute into the capital that week.

Sitting legally, feet planted firmly on the ground in front of me with my head in my book, I was caught off-guard by the afternoon’s cloudburst. As I scrambled for shelter, a beautiful thing happened across the Plaza and in the surrounding streets. Like a spring bloom, a field of paraguas, or umbrellas, popped open in near unison, flooding the scene with myriad shades and patterns. These were people accustomed to rain, and I wished I had my camera along to capture their sea of moving color washing over the drab and dirty hues of the cityscape. As I sloshed back to the hostel, I remembered how many insistent paraguas vendors I’d smugly waved away that morning. They, along with everyone else, had to be laughing at me now.

That first day in San José quickly blurred into several more, and looking back, it’s hard to fathom what created the gravity that held me in the city. In general, I dislike bustling, crowded places, or, at least, prefer to be elsewhere. San José wasn’t even charming as cities go, but I still felt a little aimless, struggling with one of the biggest
transitions I'd ever faced. I was caught in an easy routine and its inertia carried me: pancakes and coffee, people-watching and wandering, smoking cigarettes and drinking. Here in the dingy city, booze was cheap and legal, and provided a legitimate reason to loiter in places other than my cell. Why I hadn’t changed hostels by then was another mystery. The Tica Linda was noisy and cramped, and whenever I lingered in the lobby I was subjected to the monotonous travelers’ persiflage—*You went where? I was there too? Did you see the sloth? Weren’t the mudpots amazing!* More than anything, I think I liked Marfa, as she had taken a sort of motherly interest in helping me get settled.

I soon began hanging out in establishments that catered to locals. I badly wanted to differentiate myself from the rest of the foreigners, and I deluded myself that eating and getting drunk in the same places the Ticos did somehow brought me closer to them. By mid-afternoon each day, I began cultivating a buzz in one dive or another. Besides keeping me nearer the moment, the drinking had the benefit of putting me in a gregarious mood. Generally, I liked people, especially strangers, better when I was a little drunk.

I’d stumbled across a bar near the central market that had a relaxed, if not exactly cozy, ambience. Its cement floors, rickety tables and uneven wooden stools neatly showcased the mostly naked women advertising liquor and auto parts in glossy posters on the unpainted walls. I usually got a curious look from the waitress when I walked in, which made me like the place even more. My third day in the city, I wandered in an hour before dark and ordered a bottle of Imperial, which seemed to be the national beer of choice. I broke out my new journal, a slender book with an artsy cover and silky paper that a friend had hand-made me specifically for the trip, and set out to record what had really stuck with me so far. I wrote about the vendors who worked the same streets
each day hoping to sell enough penny candy and soda pop to make ends meet, and the hustlers who pressed against me in the busy market trying to insert grubby fingers into my pockets—every traveler I talked with seemed to have a story of picked pockets or a pilfered bag. I described the scruffy Canadian panhandler who’d followed me around the pedestrian mall begging change for a Whopper. He finally left me alone when I explained how my childhood tradition of post-soccer Burger King had been cut off after my mother got wind that the franchise bought much of its beef from pastures chopped out of tropical rain forest. Although other kids had teased me about my parents being hippies, I hadn’t darkened Burger King’s door since. Only recently, however, had I realized how much of that decimated jungle lies in the Pacific lowlands of Costa Rica, Latin America’s leading exporter of beef.

I also noted some of the ironies in which this city seemed so rich. By mid-morning noxious smog hung in the streets of the “green” country’s capital. I’d heard the country called the land of “the happy medium,” yet conspicuous consumption seemed just as prevalent here as in the States. Wealth was flaunted in the fancy dress and sharp cars of the well-off, and chic boutiques sold designer sportswear at first-world prices. As usual, have-nots served the haves, and my place in the hierarchy was clear enough. Travel, after all, seemed the most frivolous of luxuries.

In the 90’s tourism had taken over as Costa Rica’s single largest revenue-earner, but many critics argued that the bulk of the profits escaped to foreign investors. Unpredictable crashes in global markets for export crops like coffee and bananas and the country’s leading role in the ecotourism boom had made serving visitors more dependable work than traditional agriculture. I’d read that fourteen percent of the labor
force was involved in the tourism sector, and this percentage failed to take in the hawkers like Abrám and the rest of the street economy. I couldn’t know how they felt, but I’d certainly be embittered if I’d gone from having a fruit farm in paradise to pedaling plantation-grown pineapple around a dingy city.

Guidebook authors maintained that the Ticos were the friendliest people in the world, and, while I doubted these writers had ever been to Canada, I had to agree that most Ticos I’d encountered were buena gente, or good folk. Still, I occasionally felt undertones of contempt, subtle but barbed. I’d read that the guiding principle behind social interactions in the country was quedar bien, which means to remain in good standing and avoid outright conflict, at least on the surface of things. The feigned niceties that resulted from the philosophy quickly got under my skin. Instead of the usual de nada, or “it’s nothing,” to say “you’re welcome,” Ticos often said con mucho gusto, or “with great pleasure.” Pleasure is a potent word, and this phrase rubbed me wrong when it was half-snarled by someone who’d acted patently annoyed at refilling a cup of coffee.

I couldn’t blame the locals though. Tourists have a way of being a pain in the ass, especially those who expect all the comforts of home. The irony is we set out convinced that we want change, an escape from our quotidian lives. Then we arrive abroad and realize we don’t like differences, that we’d feel more comfortable if things were like they are at home. We lose sight of what we were after in the first place and bitch and moan in insidious, petty efforts to homogenize the world.

The Latin American approach to time is a perfect example. Most everyone who seriously considers traveling in Latin America has heard about the slower pace of life down south, the mañana syndrome, which Peter Matthiessen described in his travelogue
The Cloud Forest as, "that eternal procrastination so foreign to us brisk northerners." We need to expect buses to be hours late, to know that people often show up long after a set meeting time if at all, and to realize that simple tasks are not always approached with efficacy in mind. Yet, we fuss and worry, consult our watches feverishly, show up punctually, and demand explanations for delays. We want things to be predictable and tidy, and, when they aren't, we complain a lot and make big scenes. Then people call us gringo and mean it to be nasty.

Taking a break from my rant, I looked up from my journal and ordered more beer, liking the ease with which the light Imperial went down. I lit a cigarette and surveyed the restaurant, which was quickly filling up with Ticos, probably just off work. Being the only gringo in the place, I was drawing looks and my eyes sometimes met theirs as our glances crossed. What did they think of me? Most were drinking in small groups, mixing shots of some clear liquor in between beers. Part of me wanted one of the tables to wave me over, to ask me what I was doing there, make fun of my beard, something. Yet when I thought about all the gringos they must see in their streets each day, I couldn’t imagine they’d have much interest in the details of one, even if he had shown up unexpectedly in their favorite bar. Still they were staring, thinking something, and sometimes I feared they only saw me as a big pile of dollars.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, a tanned and pudgy American I’d noticed around the Tica Linda came in and sat near me at the bar, offering to buy me a beer. His name was Max and he was a surfer from southern California who’d been coming to Costa Rica for the last fifteen years. He still couldn’t speak Spanish worth a shit, he said, but he knew the surf breaks. He was here this time to stay for awhile, fed up with working
his life away in a dead-end service job in Orange County. Despite his ratty attire and lack of language skills, he appeared to be a regular here, and once I begin chatting with him, I noted the waitress seemed less suspicious of me.

Max was traveling to the Pacific coast in a day or so, to a beach called Playa Hermosa where he said the waves were excellent and the scene laid back. I told him about my project and how I dreamed of learning to surf. He said there was lots of beach tourism to research in the area and invited me to come along, offering to give me some pointers and even loan me his board if I wanted to try surfing out. I had planned on leaving the city alone the next morning for a coastal park in the north, but I wondered if it wouldn't be wiser to start out with someone who knew his way around. I could learn the ropes of escaping the city—the bus stations were notoriously dodgy, I'd read—and get some coaching in the waves. Our crossing paths in the bar certainly seemed serendipitous.

Max ordered us a round of guaro shots, which turned out to be the clear liquor I'd seen the other tables quaffing. It was distilled from sugar cane, smelled a little like paint-thinner, and went straight to the synapses. I liked it immediately. A couple of Ticos sat down beside me and ordered Imperials. The one closest to me mumbled something to his friend about my cigarettes that were sitting out on the bar. I wondered, a bit self-conscious after my journal ranting, if their fancy packaging made me a high-brow in their eyes.

"Want one," I asked, surprising them it seemed with the Spanish. Sure, takers all around. It felt good to share. We lit the smokes up together, almost ceremoniously.
"Strong," the close one said, a bony-faced man with a long scar across his cheek, "but tasty." His friend coughed a bit and then let the cigarette smolder in the ashtray. I started asking them about the weather and the city, hungry to bond somehow, but soon we were discussing the fact that I looked like Alexi Lylas or some such soccer star. This resemblance had come up often in Ecuador as well. Soccer, I'd learned and forgotten, was an even surer bet than the weather for spurring conversation in Latin America. The problem was I didn't follow it and could care less who was vying for the World Cup. I went back to nodding sincerely, and ordered a round of guaro for all of us.

"Pura vida," the bony-faced man said by way of thanks. This phrase translated literally into “pure life,” but it seemed to connote something more like “groovy” and was, according to the guidebook, a kind of national motto. This was the first time I'd heard it used genuinely in conversation, and I dug it. I said it back to him, wanting to work it into my vocabulary. The Ticos glanced at each other and cracked up. No, no, no; it wasn't "poo-rah vee-da" but "pura vida." There was some subtle pronunciation difference I was missing. I tried it several more times, despite their continued laughter. Max tried next, and they howled hysterically.

After another beer, Max suggested we move on to a slightly hipper scene a few blocks away. By then, it was well past dark and I was well past drunk, but I agreed to a nightcap. I had vowed to leave town the next day but figured there was no real reason to hurry, maybe I could still catch an afternoon bus or maybe I'd go with Max after all. I had 361 days left to work with, what was one more hang-over in the greater scheme of things. "Pura vida," I practiced as we walked. I was learning all the time.
A thin veil of smoke, backlit with neon, hung over the dance floor of the club. Only a few couples were up dancing to the familiar reggae beats when we walked in. We found seats at the bar facing the action and ordered beers. The dynamics were interesting, lots of gringos, many sporting the “surfer-dude uniform” (surf trunks and a faded t-shirt), and a few Costa Ricans, mostly women. Watching the mingling and flirting, I felt a little lonely, the booze feeding a wave of melancholy. I thought about Lucy, wondering how she was. I doubted she thought of me much with her new life and busy schedule, and this made my stomach twist up. I hated the idea of being forgotten, especially before I had forgotten her.

Max suddenly jumped up from his chair and told me he had to go talk to a friend. I watched him cross the room and shake hands with a black guy in baggy, white pants, who made me think of Abrám the newspaper tout. They disappeared together towards the back of the club. I was curious, but I focused on my drink and returned to people-watching. Glancing around the bar, I kept thinking one Tica in particular was staring at me. With the dumb confidence that liquor inspires, my gaze kept wandering back to her. Finally, our eyes met and we both smiled and then quickly looked away. The next time I looked, she was nowhere to be seen.

“Can I sit,” a soft voice asked a few minutes later, as someone pushed in beside me.

“Sure,” I said, since there was still no sign of Max. It wasn’t until she asked for a light that I realized it was the same girl I’d been eyeing. I felt my heartbeat quicken as my mind reeled for something to talk about. She was olive-skinned and petite with dark eyes and black hair that hung straight down onto her small but shapely breasts. Her
English was worse than my Spanish, but we both wanted to practice it seemed, so we communicated in a mix of the two with lots of gestures and subtle brushes against one another.

Rosa was from a suburb of San José, studying business at the University of Costa Rica. When I told her why I was there, she said she had been visiting national parks since she was a kid and could show me some good spots to study. I ordered cocktails for us at her request, even though rum was the last thing I needed. We were clearly hitting it off, and I enjoyed connecting with a local, feeling, for the first time in my trip, like a participant in the culture instead of an observer.

At some point during our second drink, I noticed Max was back at the bar, a few seats down from us. He grinned when I glanced at him but didn’t interrupt our conversation. Shortly after that, Rosa excused herself for the bathroom, leaving me to dwell on a gentle kiss on the cheek.

I could hardly believe my luck as I watched her move towards the back of the club. I really liked Rosa; it had been a long time since I’d even considered liking someone else. Thinking of Lucy again, I felt a touch of sadness but knew I needed to move on.

“Nice catch, man!” Max had slid in beside me.

“She caught me really,” I said.

“You going to make a night of it?”

“I doubt it,” I said, “seems a little too fast for a Latin girl, don’t you think.” Max just stared at me for a second, looking dumbfounded.

“You know she’s hooking, right,” he finally asked.
“No,” I said, “I don’t think so.”

“I’d bet on it, man,” he said, “I’ve seen her in here before.”

“She’s a student,” I argued, “she lives with her family.”

“So. It’s legal here, easy money, lots of people work night jobs,” he shrugged.

I sat there stunned, mulling it over in my inebriated mind. I felt flushed, sweating all of a sudden, and was probably red with embarrassment. I didn’t want to believe Max, but the more I thought about it, the more sense it all made. Rosa had been surprisingly forward, but her interest had never seemed feigned. I felt like a jackass and wondered if the locals in the bar were having a laugh at me. For a moment, I was tempted to see where it would all lead, but even as drunk as I was, the thought of paying for sex disgusted me.

I lit another cigarette for my nerves and felt my lungs complain about the evening’s bombardment. I would have to start calling myself Ashtray. Picturing the old lecher helped; it put things into a clearer perspective. I wondered if she would have hit on him in the same way. Stubbing out the smoke, I decided to take off before Rosa returned. I leaned over to say bye to Max, but before I could get a word out he sabotaged my plans.

“You like blow?” he asked, barely loud enough to hear.

I nodded reflexively, despite the hundreds of times I’d convinced myself I was done with the drug.

I averted my eyes as we passed Rosa on our way to the bathroom. Max locked the door, assuring me people did this all the time. He pulled the porcelain top off the
toilet, wiping it down with the front of his shirt, and produced a tiny plastic bag from his pocket.

"Got a bill," he asked.

I began rolling a crisp Costa Rican note into a straw while someone knocked impatiently at the locked door. In the back of my mind, I knew everything was spiraling out of control, but I felt detached, as though I were watching the scene in a movie.

"You're up," Max said, stepping back from the sink. I stared down at the lines of powder fading in and out of the porcelain. I took a deep breath, already feeling the rush.

"Pura vida," I said, handing him the bill, thinking it sounded just right.
Travelin’ Light

***

Travelin’ light is the only way to fly.

--J.J. Cale

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As I held the lumpy pillow over my ears, chemically charged synapses ricocheted around my numbed brain, reminding me that mariachi had been developed during the Inquisition as a means of psychological torture. Repeatedly, I would drift right up to the edge of dream, while next door in the Esmerelda some sinister trio in black masks heated up their wicked implements. Before long, the walls around me would begin to tremble as the band galloped towards crescendo in the musical equivalent of something like Apocalypse Now. I would nod off only to wake again seconds later mouthing, “the horror, the horror.”

I was out of bed early, only a few hours after the mariachi bands had crept back to whatever hell had spawned them. I felt despicable. I went for my usual breakfast, where the frizzy-haired waitress now smiled and brought my coffee without me asking. As I ate, I ran back over the night before. Max, in his accidental way, had saved me from certain embarrassment with Rosa. We’d done all his cocaine in public bathrooms and dark alleyways, somehow avoiding the eyes of locals who I thought had every right to view us contemptuously as the reason soul-sucking drugs were permeating their culture. I’d even found my way back to the hostel in the middle of the night on foot through several miles of strange city. I vaguely remembered refusing a ride from a car full of Ticos as I left the bar, and I would later count my blessings when I heard the story of a German clubber who accepted a similar offer and ended up being robbed and left naked
on a stretch of road outside the city. Yes, I was lucky to have fared so well; the risks I’d taken could have landed me doing research on local drug penalties or something worse. It was clearly time for a change, and by afternoon I planned to be free of the city, no matter what. I longed to feel the ocean, to cleanse myself in it and start again.

Eager to simplify my load, I divided my gear and stashed the bulk of it in a cubby in the attic of the Tica Linda. In San Jose, the temperatures supposedly always hovered at or above seventy degrees, and the beach would be even warmer. I certainly wouldn’t need a down parka, long underwear, ice axes, or mountain boots. I selected a couple of short-sleeve shirts, a light sweatshirt, some shorts, and a pair of khakis and stuffed them along with my remaining camping gear into my cavernous pack and cinched it down svelte. The precious cargo (camera and binoculars) and the few items I might want at hand on the bus (raincoat, music, and books) I packed in my orange Kelty rucksack.

The Kelty was an old friend I’d always associated with exotic travel. I’d had it since I was kid; a gift from the mysterious Gary Woolen, the first real globe-trotting adventurer I’d known. Gary had befriended my parents back in Tallahassee, before they were married, when my father was a sociology professor at Florida State and my mom was his star pupil. Gary had been drafted and done a tour in Vietnam as a Green Beret medic but had come home a pacifist and a protester. I was four or five when Gary came to live with us on our farm in the Ozarks, in a twelve foot aluminum camper he parked up on the hillside. It was odd to have him around at first, but he won me over quickly; he’d tell fantastic stories and we’d wrestle and take walks around the oak-hickory forests that surrounded our hilltop. He was tall and gaunt with a John Muir beard, and lived exclusively on oats, split-peas, and rice, or so it seemed to me. I remember the five
gallon pails of them he kept in his tiny trailer, where his gangly frame always seemed slightly bent over.

Gary had helped my family tend our several gardens as well as build our concrete cistern and the root cellar that doubled as a fallout shelter back in the tense years of the Cold War. When he wasn’t working, he would often meditate or study geometry, both of which I found exceedingly weird as a child. He was obsessed with the pyramids of Egypt and would sketch out intricate drawings of them on graph paper. He left abruptly one day after an argument with my dad, abandoning the trailer and most of his things.

After no word for months, we finally received a letter postmarked from Egypt, where he was reportedly snooping around the pyramids. Supposedly he’d found a secret entrance into the Great Pyramid and spent a night alone in the Pharaoh’s tomb. Although I still occasionally wonder about the story, deep-down I believe he slept fitfully in that breathless chamber. When I was young, this was the grandest adventure I’d heard of, real-life Indiana Jones material. Looking back, I’m sure Gary’s footloose approach to life watered the seeds of a wanderlust already taking root in my fertile imagination. He would have approved of this trip I thought, as I admired my newly streamlined load. I hummed the old J.J. Cale lyric about “travelin’ light” as I went to round up Max for our trip to the beach.

Max’s preparations amounted to pulling his surfboard from the rafters of the storage room and stuffing it, along with several pairs of shorts and a few grubby t-shirts, into his board bag. Implements of hygiene were not apparent. I laughed at myself for thinking my load was simple.
“Cuidado con los tiburones,” Marfa called out as we walked down the dim
hallway, warning us, in her motherly way, to watch out for sharks. Only later would I
learn she was referring slangily to pickpockets rather than marine carnivores.

Laden with our conspicuous baggage, we walked as briskly as we could through
the bustling downtown streets to the Coca Cola Terminal, as everyone seemed to refer to
the central bus station. Looking around the terminal, which amounted to a fenced-off
gravel parking lot, I couldn’t see any kind of clear connection to the soft drink, just a line
of buses in varying degrees of dilapidation and some bored-looking vendors all hawking
the same tepid drinks, stale snacks, and cigarettes. A few passengers sat along the curb
baking in the sun, and we walked over to wait with them. Since my Spanish was a bit
sharper, I left my bags with Max and set off to locate our bus. It didn’t take long to find a
vintage Bluebird bound for the coast, and we only had a half-hour to wait.

I wandered back over to Max, who was reclined against our luggage staring
skyward in what was either deep reverie or peaceful slumber; it was impossible to tell
which beneath his dark shades. Thinking I’d kill our wait reading, I went for my book,
but the little orange Kelty was hiding. I looked around, made sure I wasn’t wearing it,
then looked around again, annoyed that Max was probably sitting on it. He wasn’t
though, and I tried to convince myself that I’d left it at the Tica Linda but clearly
remembered setting it on the curb only moments before. A nervous sweat began to
trickle in my armpits, and I had the vague feeling I might be sick.

“Where’s my pack?” I asked.

“Huh,” Max said, suddenly jolted from his daydream.
I ran around the terminal frantically, jumping on parked buses and searching the isles, checking the luggage racks and beneath the legs of seated passengers. The locals observed my rude antics with bemused faces and soft whispers. I felt like they were all in on it somehow. I was so furious I might have strangled the thief if I’d found him, and when I didn’t, I wanted to strangle Max.

“You said you’d watch the bags,” I said, several more times than necessary.

He shrugged and stared at the ground, and finally offered me a smoke. I don’t know what more I expected of him. I could tell he felt bad, but I also got the sense that as soon as I dropped it, he would forget, like a T.V. switching channels. He still had his surfboard. He hadn’t lost half the equipment he needed for his year-long research project on day five. His special journal wasn’t going to get tossed into some dumpster because it carried no value in the market stalls that resold piles of “second-hand” optics and electronics. He wasn’t going to get soaked every afternoon because he’d donated his spiffy new raincoat to someone who almost certainly already had a fucking umbrella.

It didn’t take long for the adrenaline to wear off, and soon I became morose, shifting the brunt of the blame to myself, where it belonged. I had thought that Max, with all his experience here, would help me avoid this very situation, but the thieves were pros and two sleep-deprived gringos were an easy mark. I never should have set my bags down, especially the small one, nor entrusted anyone else to look after them. Most of all, I should have known better than to confuse my trip with someone else’s. Out of a bit of loneliness and uncertainty, I’d forsaken my intentions for easy companionship.

At least I hadn’t lost my passport or credit cards; they were still tucked safely in my concealed pouch along with my cash. Really, I hadn’t lost anything essential, though
my rare jazz recordings were irreplaceable here. I wondered what the thief would think if he plugged into a cacophonous Miles Davis or Charlie Mingus number. I prayed it would irrevocably tweak the bastard's salsa step. I imagined all manner of ghastly karmic retribution, and then got to wondering what I'd done to deserve this, thinking back to all the baseball cards I'd lifted as a kid. Worst of all, as I sat on the curb with my other pack lashed to my leg and a hangover now wailing in earnest at my temples, that same damn J.J. Cale lyric kept popping into my head. Yes indeed, I was traveling light, but this was hardly what I'd had in mind.

Playa Hermosa, or the Beautiful Beach, was not quite the Eden I had imagined either. My first inclination after losing my pack was to part ways with Max immediately; perhaps I'd linger around the market and try to buy back my things. But since leaving the city was my first priority, I opted to carry on with our plan as it was well into motion. More than anything else, I felt I now really needed to soak my head in the ocean.

After sleeping away most of the winding, two-hour descent from the central plateau to the coast, we got off the bus in front of a line of weathered shacks, and made our way past a few lazing mongrels and into a gaggle of curious children. Max knew the grubbiest of the kids and asked him if his mother was around. He scampered on barefeet into a nearby house and was soon chased back out by a large woman in a colorful sundress with graying streaks in her black hair and kind brown eyes. Beside her clapboard home was a squat cement bunker, which served as a rental cabin. She ushered us into its unfinished interior, where we found two thin beds and an oscillating fan. She said she would bring another fan to keep the mosquitoes away. Despite my vision of a
quaint beachfront cabana—at least I could hear the surf pounding in the distance—I agreed to stay. Max said he had some friends who owned a resort a quarter-mile down the beach where we could hang out without sacrificing the thirty bucks a night. I asked Max if he wanted to go check out the surf before dark, but in the minute we’d been there, he’d commandeered the fan, stripped off his shirt, and beached himself on one of the beds.

I tried to cut straight to the ocean behind the house but the way was blocked by a putrescent lagoon fed by the house’s drainfield and emptied by high tides. I followed the road south instead and cut through the tidy grounds of what I assumed was Max’s friend’s place—a picture of the beachfront cabana I had envisioned.

Once on the beach, the waves that greeted me were as big as any I’d ever seen. Heavy green rollers crested one after another and pounded down rhythmically, churning up sand and foam as they dissipated into a loud, slurping outwash. “Pacific” was not a word that jumped to mind to describe this ocean. Stepping knee-deep into the gritty froth, I felt the riptide tugging against me, and decided on a walk instead of a swim.

The beach stretched away to the south out of sight and was strewn with flotsam washed up by the tide. The debris was mostly driftwood and plastic bottles with a lonely shoe cast here and there. A flock of bellicose gulls bickered over the fish carcasses that lent a pungent rot to the salty air. There was a line of houses tucked amongst palms back near the road. Most of these were humble dwellings, boxy and weather-beaten, but there were a couple of newly painted, two-story affairs, complete with elevated decks and peripheral cabins. I imagined they marked what gringo money could buy. Farther back, a coastal range draped in the rich green of the tropics climbed towards the dimming sky.
Opposite the mountains, the sun was sinking into a sliver of open sky between the watery horizon and a ceiling of purple thunderheads. A pumpkin glow from the retiring sun washed over the whole scene.

Standing there watching the sun drop into the sea, I felt a heady lightness, some inexplicable connection to all that beauty—the kind of sensation that causes goosebumps even though you’re perfectly warm. I took it as a sign that I was finally on the right path. Despite the poor decisions and bitter lessons of the last long day, I felt more content than I had since arriving to Costa Rica, all the booze and drugs included. I’d been struggling with my transition, groping along in the city, substituting chemicals and random companions for the simple satisfaction I should have known I would only find out there, right here, on my own.
Where the Wild Things Are

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There are pockets of wilderness left...but it is nearly gone. Unless we can radically transform modern civilization, the wilderness and its people will be but a memory ... and the wild will become completely abstract.

—Jack Turner, The Abstract Wild

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As the rickety bus pulled away from Playa Hermosa, the Virgin Mary on the dashboard began dancing to the beat of the bumpy road, and I waved a final goodbye to Max through the open door of the bunker. He was still supine, basking in the whir of the oscillating breeze. He’d been ensconced there since we arrived, though, in all fairness, he had gotten up a couple of times to check the surf and walk to the bar. I had come to feel a bit sorry for him and hoped he’d find his way out of the languor that booze and the electric fan failed to hold at bay. Still, I hadn’t been able to bring myself to invite him along on my search for a wilder slice of the Pacific coast, and thus I was off to run the gauntlet of public transportation alone, feeling better-off for it.

My destination was Santa Rosa National Park, one of the country’s flagship nature preserves. The park was located on the Santa Elena Peninsula in the far northwest corner of the country, just shy of the Nicaraguan border. Historically, Santa Rosa had been a sprawling hacienda, the heart of a cattle ranch that once occupied many thousands of acres. Due to its proximity to Nicaragua, the site had hosted several battles for Costa Rican sovereignty over the years and had been designated a historical monument even before the national park system was created in 1969.
The most significant, and dare I say absurdly motivated, border skirmish occurred in 1856 when William Walker, a gringo in the worst sense of the word, led an army of U.S. filibusters south from Nicaragua. Driven by Manifest Destiny and supported by the southern Confederacy, he intended to conquer the emerging Central American nations and subjugate their populations to his slave-hungry sponsors. Having already taken Nicaragua, Walker’s forces reached Santa Rosa only to be caught off-guard by a hastily assembled civilian militia. Around nine thousand Costa Ricans set aside their longstanding class and political divisions and came together to repel the filibusters, an event that is still upheld as a cornerstone of national pride.

In the 1930’s, to the dismay of Costa Rican patriots, the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza managed to acquire Santa Rosa, and in 1955 he rubbed salt in their wounds by using the land to help stage another invasion from the north, which was again repulsed by a civilian uprising. In 1966, Costa Rica finally expropriated the property and made a monument of it, and, after the national park system was established several years later, Santa Rosa formally became one of the country’s two initial protected areas.

Even after becoming a park, Santa Rosa remained a tumultuous setting. During the late seventies, when Costa Rica’s relations with the long-enduring Somoza regime were again turning toward conflict, the national security minister created a police post within the park. Besides keeping an eye on the border, the post served as a training ground for insurgent Sandinistas fighting to overthrow Somoza. Any peace the preserve had harbored was shattered as troops moved in and trees and fences became artillery targets, leading the park director to seek help from the central government. The fact that
the higher-ups ordered the police and the Sandinistas to leave says a great deal about
Costa Rica’s commitment to both peace and nature preservation.

During the following decade, a ranch adjoining the northern border of Santa Rosa, which had long been desired as an addition to the park, would make international headlines in the same conflict when it was revealed to be the site of Oliver North’s top-secret airstrip. From this remote hacienda, truckloads of arms and supplies were smuggled across the border to the Nicaraguan Contras in an effort to aid their defeat of the Sandinistas—some of whom must have been trained only a few kilometers to the south in Santa Rosa.

While I found this colorful history intriguing, it was the park’s setting that really drew me. It was a fortunate coincidence that, in addition to its rich history, Santa Rosa happened to protect one of Central America’s last remnants of dry deciduous forest—a tropical ecosystem teetering on the brink of extinction as a result of cattle ranching. The park also contained jaguar and monkey habitat and the nesting beaches of endangered green, leatherback, and olive ridley sea turtles. I planned to base myself in a campground on the fringe of one of these beaches, near the site where many thousands of olive ridleys congregated annually in mass-nesting phenomena known as arribadas. There were only six beaches in the world where these laying events were known to take place, and I hoped to time my visit to catch one in action.

I hoped to be there by nightfall, though the journey would require at least a couple of bus transfers as well as a long walk. The rattletrap I was on puttered slowly along the outskirts of the beach tourism hub of Jacó and then cut inland past fields still steaming off the previous evening’s rain. Before long we were back on the coast, and I could make
out the port of Puntarenas to the north through a haze of building humidity. We rolled
across a dirty river mouth and out onto the narrow spit of sand that thrusts the city of
Puntarenas into the Gulf of Nicoya. This sandbar is just over half a kilometer wide at its
broadest point, and, were it not for the sheltering bulk of the Nicoya Peninsula to the
west, it along with the city of 100,000 would have been washed away long ago by the
Pacific’s might.

Puntarenas had been the major port for the entire country before a railway finally
linked the farms of the central plateau with the Caribbean Sea in the late 19th century.
The cargo, mostly coffee at that time, had to be hauled by oxcart down the steep, rutted
tracks of the Pacific slope and then freighted all the way around Cape Horn en route to
European markets—several months of hard work for a pleasure beverage that was well
on its way to becoming a global habit and the second-most traded commodity in the
world behind petroleum.

The Puntarenas bus terminal squatted directly across the street from the ocean,
and after learning I had an hour to kill before my ride north, I bought a cup of fresh guava
nectar and wandered over to sit on the littered shore. Slumped against my pack, I stared
out over the brown waves, roiled from the influx of the river and, according to the
guidebook, heavily polluted by local industry. The waves were a fraction of the size they
had been at Hermosa, and, had it not been for the oily stench to the water, I’d have taken
a dip to escape the sultry heat already coursing sweat down my back.

The ride north to Liberia, the capital and only major city of the frontier province
of Guanacaste, passed in a blur of somnolent nods and sweltering sun. The landscape,
while still tinged with the fresh growth of the wet-season, faded into more open and arid
ranch land where herds of hump-backed Brahmas chewed their cuds contentedly beneath the shade of solitary fig trees. I imagined the area still cloaked in a thick forest the size of the lonesome figs and felt guilty for all those Whoppers I’d eaten as a kid.

Liberia was heavy on heat and light on charm, a tropical version of highway towns like Tucumcari or Truth or Consequences in New Mexico. Wishing I had a sunhat, I wandered the empty streets in the middle of the afternoon siesta, eventually finding a small corner grocery that an old, shuffling woman opened up for me when I knocked lightly on the iron bars that blocked the entrance. This was my last chance for supplies, so I bought enough sundries to carry me through my camping trip: bags of oats, beans, and rice, jars of peanut butter and guava jelly, a dozen stale bread rolls, a few bananas and oranges, packets of salt and cumin, and, most importantly, a pound of pre-ground, dark-roasted coffee.

Next I found a soda stand off the central plaza for a sandwich and a beer. I considered a second icy Imperial to dull the heat, but given the late hour and the ominous thunderheads looming in the west, I kept moving, hankering as I was for a night under the stars instead of in another breathless room. Later I would question the decision, but at the moment, I was happy to board a bus bound for Nicaragua, instructing the driver to drop me at the turnoff for Santa Rosa.

The ride north revealed the forested flanks of the continental divide to the east and the massive billows of a darkening storm in the west. It was sprinkling lightly when the bus dropped me beside the Panamerican Highway, leaving me alone in a sea of ranchland. Just as I began walking the seven sweaty kilometers to the park headquarters, a pickup jammed with Ticos materialized and gestured for me to jump in the back. Out
here in the country, I didn’t think twice about their intentions, and we soon pulled up beside the Casona, the original hacienda building where the defense against the filibusters had been staged. I’d read it was now a museum full of battle relics and a bat colony.

I registered with the park staff in their adjoining headquarters and asked a storm of questions right up until quitting time. By the time I left their office, pockets bulging with maps and informational pamphlets, it was too late to walk the twelve kilometers down to the coast. Sleeping under the stars seemed like a damp proposition, so I pitched my tent in an empty campground nearby, finding a patch of cleared ground beneath an enormous Guanacaste tree. This was the same troublesome species I’d always known as the Ear Tree. The name had come from the thousands of ear-shaped seed pods that the giant specimen in my grandmother’s backyard in Tampa always dropped onto her roof, just in time for me to sweep off each year at Christmas.

My timing with camp was impeccable; just as I finished staking out my shelter, I was forced into it by a pelting rain. It poured steadily for the next fourteen hours, and halfway through the night, I found myself stranded on a small island in the middle of my tent—luckily I had pitched it on a mound—with at least an inch of water puddled in the corners, slowly creeping towards me. Twice before morning I used my camp mug as a bailer and still awoke to a soggy sleeping bag.

This was not the first time I had spent a damp night in that particular tent. The cheery yellow creation was a cutting edge, single-wall design that consisted of an outer layer of high-tech “waterproof” fabric laminated to a breathable membrane, much like a Gore-tex jacket. Thus it had no rain fly which made it extremely light, perfect for a solo traveler. The catalog pitched it as “a bombproof shelter for today’s most-discerning
backpackers,” which must have massaged my ego just right. This smug endorsement coupled with its astonishing price convinced me it would easily weather the wide-array of meteorological abuses I was sure to encounter between the Tropics and Tierra del Fuego.

Yet the first storm I endured in it, just a month before heading abroad, made me question its integrity. After that all-night Alaskan soaker, my brother and I christened it the Yellow Submarine, based on its vibrant color and bent for submersion. Still wanting to believe in my superlative sense of discernment, I blamed the leaks on a poor seam-sealing job and re-treated it judiciously after it had dried out. Unfortunately, we were blessed with good weather for the rest of the trip, so I forgot the warning and set off on my Wanderjahr with the Yellow Sub as my only shelter. Now, deep in the midst of the tropical wet season, propped on my side to avoid rolling over into an encroaching puddle, all I could discern was that I should have returned the appropriately colored lemon when I had the chance.

By mid-morning of the following day, the sun was blazing and most of the puddles from the spate were already dried up. Steam rose from the remnant thickets that were green islands dotting the cow pastures the park staff had assured me were returning to forest. After brewing a pan of high-test coffee and filtering it through my least dirty t-shirt, I jotted down a reminder to buy a strainer and spread my gear out in the sun to dry. I stretched out in a potent sunbeam, stiff from a night of contorted sleep, and feasted on banana-oat mush. By the time I had cleaned up breakfast, my bedding and tent were dried crisp. I repacked quickly, eager to get moving.

Just as I was leaving camp, a school bus pulled up at the Casona and disgorged about a dozen people. Even from fifty yards away, I pegged them as young Americans
by their sportswear. As they milled about the bus unpacking their gear, I worried that we were all headed for the same campground on the beach. With my dreams of quiet solitude crumbling around me, I wandered over to investigate.

They were, as I had assumed, American college students studying tropical ecology in Costa Rica, just as I had done in Ecuador. They seemed strangely stand-offish as I stumbled into their midst. Based on my own group experience, I guessed they had adopted a tight-knit herd mentality from spending far too much time together. Their teaching assistant however, a gregarious graduate student named Andy, seemed relieved to have someone new to talk to for a few minutes. He informed me that their plan was to set up a base camp where I'd slept the night before and then undertake transect surveys of plant diversity in the restoration plots nearby.

After I described my research project to him, Andy volunteered his jaded view of Costa Rican conservation. He thought that while a few of the national parks were sufficiently staffed and endowed to be effective, the majority languished without the necessary personnel or funding for adequate upkeep. He added that private efforts like the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve offered more-secure financial support, but that they were often too small and isolated to adequately protect biodiversity.

These were common critiques in the conservation world of late, and I wasn’t particularly surprised to hear them levied at the current poster child of park systems. In the eighties, Costa Rica had gone through a severe recession and national parks were one obvious place to cut corners in non-essential government spending. Even without the stresses of recession, there were plenty of examples of optimistic programs that had been
launched—often by first-world organizations with great intentions but scant on-the-ground experience—only to fizzle out as seed money and initial motivations dwindled.

Andy’s other concern, the issue of effective reserve size, was another popular debate among conservation biologists that centered on island biogeography and its themes of habitat isolation and connectivity. Increasingly, experts argued that small, fragmented preserves, while useful for conserving remnants of picturesque scenery, did little to protect biodiversity because the gene pools that needed to mingle to insure healthy populations were separated from one another by “disturbed” areas, like islands cut off by expanses of sea. Also, on these “islands,” creatures such as large carnivores that required wide ranges—in Costa Rica the jaguar was a good example—didn’t have the space they needed to roam freely, making them far more likely to wander into trouble on neighboring lands, the unwelcoming ocean of human occupation.

The issue of sufficient habitat was especially difficult in tiny countries like Costa Rica where the human population was growing rapidly and arable land was increasingly precious. Every hectare that was strictly preserved was taken out of “productive” use, at least in terms of farming, running cattle, or cutting timber. Thus the scientist’s “disturbance” was often the local population’s bread and butter, leading to serious conflicts over land use. And therein lay the promise of ecotourism; were it to be made lucrative for locals, it could offer both a source of livelihood for residents and some degree of protection for nature.

Andy and I agreed to continue our discussion when he brought the group down to the beach on a dayhike later that week, and I set off for Playa Naranjo in the midday heat. The trail to the coast was a narrow 4WD track that could be negotiated by careful drivers.
during the dry season but was supposedly impassable in the rainy months. The descent led through the Canyon del Tigre, or Valley of the Tiger, dropping sharply from the dry savanna into thick forests that ran out to the coast. As I passed into the mottled shade of the forest border I wondered if the canyon’s namesake—not a true tiger but a jaguar—might be prowling around somewhere nearby. The park was home to all manner of cats: jaguars, ocelots, margays, and jaguarundis, and just the thought of seeing any one of them in the wild sent a slight current tingling along my spine. Thinking back to Andy’s comment, I hoped Santa Rosa was sizable enough to support their stealthy movements, as I imagined that if Costa Rican ranchers were anything like their counterparts in the U.S., most of the park’s neighbors would prefer to tack the felines’ beautiful spotted hides to their barns rather than suffer them near their precious herds of thick-skulled ungulates.

After several steep, rocky miles, the two-lane track leveled out and struck for the coast. Here, the night’s rain had filled the ruts and, in places, the track became a swamp. At first, I went to great ends to skirt the edges of these puddles, but after awhile, with my mind lost in the din of birds and insects, I would just plod through them in my sandals.

Glancing around, I kept thinking that in another couple months this deciduous forest would change face completely, dropping its leaves in the incessant heat and blast-furnace winds of the dry season. But at that point, it looked like nothing so much as a rainforest. I could see all around me what David Rains Wallace had described as “a sense of impenetrability, not so much because underbrush is dense but because the sheer, interwoven biomass discourages notions of forward motion, progress.” I had the feeling this was no place to go wandering off-trail alone, not only because of the tangled biomass but for the various species of poisonous snakes that might be lurking within it, from
delicate eyelash vipers to the thick fer-de-lances, or terciopelos, that the park staff had so vehemently warned me about. Then there were the boa constrictors, coral snakes, and even a species of tropical rattlesnake with a nastier bite than its North American cousins—one early herpetologist working in Honduras described victims of the rattler’s bite suffering blindness, paralysis, and suffocation. Yes, I’d be sticking to the trail, despite the muddy water, which in places was creeping up towards my knees.

Around half-way to the beach, I stumbled into a leafy cathedral of old-growth trees that cast a dusky pall over the forest floor. Off to the southeast a throaty moan was gradually increasing in volume and pace, adding an eerie edge to the dark forest. As the sound grew louder I recognized it from the jungle in Ecuador as the rhythmic calls of howler monkeys. The odd noise echoed beneath the thick canopy and a spooky chorus reverberated around me. Soon branches were crashing nearby; the monkeys, I realized, were coming to investigate.

I saw the first one, a black shape the size of a toddler, swinging effortlessly through the treetops just as I reached an especially putrid mud puddle. The air was dank and the trees towered around me as I forged knee-deep into the muck, disconcerted by the howls. I felt like I was in an episode of *Wild America* as the troop convened above me. Scanning the canopy, I could see six of them, and they were now barking more than howling in an impressive display of what I assumed was aggression. A small, quiet one was perched on a lower branch, glaring menacingly at me with an all-too-human expression, a look that remains permanently etched in my memory. I saw an intense hatred in its stare, as though it blamed me for the atrocities its kin had suffered at the hands of my species. As I stumbled along clumsily, trying to keep an eye on all of the
monkeys at once, something in the puddle brushed against my leg and I jerked reflexively, nearly losing my footing and falling backwards into the mire. I realized then just how edgy I was, truly scared silly by a troop of leaf-eaters and some muddy water. I pulled myself together and finished the ford, leaving behind the monkey howls as I broke from that primeval forest back into shafts of warm sunlight.

I passed the last leg of the walk utterly distracted, dwelling on my experience with the monkeys. I had only seen primates outside the zoo one other time, while walking a trail alone in the Ecuadorian Amazon. That time, a mixed troop of howler, squirrel, and spider monkeys more than a hundred strong had paraded through the trees overhead, totally oblivious to me. Both then and this time, I felt witness to something ancient and powerful, as though I had gotten a look at a world that had yet to be civilized. I’d felt a similar emotion, though I’d been far more scared, earlier that summer on the East Fork of the Toklat River near Polychrome Pass in Alaska, when my brother and I watched a sow grizzly and her yearling cub barrel across a mile of tundra, beelining straight for us. Terrified but fascinated, we sprinted up a hillside and watched with binoculars as the pair paced back and forth on the periphery of our camp for what felt like an eternity. Looking back, the least they could have done was maul the Yellow Sub before lumbering away.

I felt lucky but also slightly unsettled to experience these creatures acting naturally on their own ground, without the slightest deference to me and my humanity. It served as a clear reminder that there are still places where we are no more than monkeys when it comes to claiming turf or staking our spot in the food chain, a window into a distant past of coexistence rather than dominance. Such experience, I thought, was the “gross contact” Jack Turner describes in his book The Abstract Wild, where he argues
that connection to the wild is vital for a healthy relationship to our world but increasingly endangered in our over-civilized cultures. In his words, without this contact “we forget the reciprocity between the wild in nature and the wild in us, between knowledge of the wild and knowledge of the self…” This forgotten connection leads us to believe that, at root, we are other than animal, and, as such, we fight to subdue rather than embrace the wild elements we encounter both within ourselves and the world around us. I liked to think that the best conservation efforts worked against this tendency, as did exploring true wilderness on its own terms, putting oneself back in the food chain, so to speak. A central goal of my trip was to identify and visit places where wild nature remained to an extent that true contact, in Turner’s sense, could still occur. My gut told me I’d found just such a place here in Santa Rosa.

I could hear the crashing of the surf as I waded across the mangrove estuary that ebbed and flowed behind Playa Naranjo. As I wandered into the dirt parking area adjacent to the campground, I was shocked to see a Suzuki Sidekick (the diminutive Japanese 4X4 that is the favorite rent-a-car for legions of vacationing surfers) draped with towels and surf trunks. I had figured there was a slim chance someone else might walk in, but I’d never imagined anyone would attempt to pilot a vehicle through that swamp of a road, much less make it all the way here.

The car, it turned out, had been hired by a group of four very-stoned Venezuelans, who were as surprised by me and my backpack as I was by them and their jeepette.

“I can’t believe you walked all the way down here?” their ring leader, a jovial fellow named Franco, said in rapid-fire Spanish.
"I can't believe you drove!" I answered, as Franco passed me a smoldering joint and sauntered off to fetch me a warm beer from their camp. Their hospitality snapped me far from my wild ruminations, but I was hot and tired and happy to receive the welcome.

"How deep were the puddles?" asked a short, shiny-eyed member of the group, whose name I forget but glowing countenance I can still picture.

I indicated the depth of the puddles and they all laughed hysterically; one of them snapping his index finger against the middle one to make a loud popping sound for exclamation. Apparently, the park service had tried to discourage them from driving in, informing them of the coming storm and warning them if they got stuck they would have to wait for the dry season to tow out the vehicle. But the Venezuelans were expecting perfect tubular waves big enough to drive a truck through to accompany the storm swell, and they had kamikazied the Suzuki down in a mad rush despite the warning, puncturing one of their tires in the process. Unfortunately, the surf had been blown into chaotic slop by strong onshore winds, and they'd spent most of their time huddled beneath a tarp watching it pour. Now they were waiting for waves as well as the reemergence of the road, while already running short on basic provisions. They appeared to have a healthy supply of beer and pot at least; though, under the circumstances, I might have traded some of it for another spare tire.

"At least we bought insurance," Franco said, and we all laughed and toasted our warm beers, even though there had to be a clause in the policy that forbade driving through swamps.
“And there are plenty of lizards to eat,” the shiny-eyed one said, pointing to a nearby tree from where a ctenosaur watched us intently. These large prehistoric-looking lizards with whip tails are a cousin of the iguana and roam throughout Central America. Whether shiny-eyes knew it or not, they’re becoming scarce in some parts of their range because their reptilian flesh is a highly sought-after protein source, as well as a cure for impotence.

The Venezuelans invited me to camp with them, but I wanted to be closer to the ocean for the breeze. I also wanted some space around me, which there was no shortage of since we were the only people in the whole campground. I took the last site before the beach, pitching my tent in a grove of stunted trees beside a well-weathered picnic table.

After eating a bland dinner of rice and beans, I added hot sauce to the note for the coffee strainer and followed a foot path through the red mangroves bordering the estuary to the park guard’s tiny shack. By the look of it, the structure was an old squatter’s homestead. Before the park was established, when this was all still part of Somoza’s ranch, there had been around forty families who squatted in the area surrounding Playa Naranjo. They had all been relocated in 1970, at the expense of the government, and were even paid fairly for their land improvements, again attesting to a certain humanity in Costa Rican politics. In similar cases around the world, indigenous peoples and settlers alike had been displaced forcefully, and often with little recourse, as land acquisition for conservation purposes ate up their traditional spaces.

No one was on duty at the guard shack, but I found the spigot that provided the only non-brackish water in the vicinity. After topping off my bottles, I continued along the estuary, watching a green heron spear fish among the roots of the mangroves across
the inlet. The mouth of the estuary, where the Rio Salada met the sea, was wide and the current ran swift with the ebbing tide, causing a heavy wave to break just off shore. Beyond this wave, a giant block of dark stone, perched with pelicans and streaked in guano, impressive in its solitary perseverance, loomed ominously above the surf zone. This was the infamous Peña Bruja or Witches Rock, an ancient remnant of some distinct tectonic mass, which had become a landmark in surfing culture for its powerful ambience and the hollow tubes that crash in front of it when the conditions are just right. By the look of it, things were currently awry in the wave machine; big mushy piles of froth were dumping over at random ("closing out" as surfers say), offering little in the way of a sustained ride. Franco and his friends bobbed patiently outside the surf zone a bit farther down the beach, but I don’t think their set ever came in.

I herded a flock of sandpipers along the beach as the sun crept below the horizon, firing up the belly of cloud rolling in from the ocean. Later, as I sat at the table writing in my journal, I saw flashes in the west and heard distant thunder and prayed we wouldn’t have another storm like the night before, both for my own sake with the Yellow Sub and for the Venezuelans with their doomed Suzuki.

The following day I walked several miles of foot-scourching beach to a small lagoon where I cowered in the muddy shade of the mangroves for a picnic with the crabs. While I ate, a flock of vultures moved into a skeletal snag nearby and watched me intently, making me wonder what they were plotting. On my way back down the beach, several of these birds picked at the remains of a scavenged sea turtle nest, leaving dozens of crushed eggs and yolky stains on the sand.
Later that afternoon, as the tide ebbed, I tried to wash the salt, sand, and sweat off of me with a quick dip in the estuary. As I was dripping dry, a uniformed park ranger approached along the trail, taking me by surprise—back home I never saw rangers out in the parks. After a friendly greeting, he informed me rather sternly of the size of the crocodile that he routinely watched swimming around near the mouth of the river. It sounded enormous. Then he told me about the sharks that came upriver to prey on the rich estuarine life. There were apparently a lot of them. The overwhelming sense I got from his comments was that swimming in the estuary was a terrible idea. When I told him as much, he seemed satisfied and continued on his way, despite my interest in extending the conversation.

That night the moon would be full, and I planned to wander the beach under her light in hopes of spotting olive ridley turtles coming ashore to lay their clutches of eggs. Although a restricted beach just to the north was best known for the *arribadas*, the mass nestings where tens of thousands of turtles might come ashore at once, I figured I had a good chance of seeing at least a solitary mother here on Naranjo.

For dinner I cooked more rice and beans with a heavy dose of cumin beneath yet another fiery Pacific sunset. Afterwards, I had a social beer with the Venezuelans, who were becoming disgruntled at the waves, and then sat at my rickety table and read in the gathering twilight, waiting for nightfall and the moonrise. I had saved a small roll-your-own cigarette of the low-grade marijuana Max and I had scored at Hermosa for just such an occasion. I took a few puffs, savoring the hay-like flavor and sending good vibes out to Max, who I pictured sleeping fitfully in front of the fan.
Just as the mellow mood was settling in, I bobbled the slim cigarette and it dropped through a crack in the table. Flipping on my headlamp, I leaned down to retrieve it, but as I was reaching for the roach my headlamp beam skirted something moving on the underside of the table. I focused in on the scurrying shape and nearly fell off the bench when I realized it was a fat, black scorpion, evil-looking as anything I'd ever seen. I was off the table in a heartbeat, though the arachnid was so wretchedly fascinating I had to watch it for awhile before moving my things to a table nearby, the underside of which I thoroughly inspected. Before leaving on my walk, I pest-proofed my camp, carefully suspending my stuff sack full of food from a high branch to keep it away from the coati mundis. I'd seen a clan of these raccoon relatives, not quite so ring-tailed but just as pesky as their cousins, poking around the periphery of the campground earlier in the day, and I was in no mood to share my measly fare with them.

By the time I left camp, the moon had crept over the ridge to the east and a spectral light fell through the trees, casting toothy shadows across the beach. The whooshing foam from the surf and the light-colored sand gathered up and amplified the orb’s pale glow, lighting up the scene like a ghost of day. Farther out on the ocean, the crests of the rolling swells flashed like turning crystals before vanishing into the deep troughs of the waves.

I scanned the beach for tell-tale flipper tracks as I walked along just below the tide line, enjoying the squish of damp sand between my toes. I was glad I didn’t need my headlamp to see, since I’d read any hint of artificial light would likely send the wary mothers back into the ocean. Once they had dug their nests and begun laying, however, light and even human presence wouldn’t disturb them from their task. The olive ridley
and the closely related Kemp’s ridley are the smallest species of sea turtle and the only ones that are known for the bizarre phenomenon of the *arribada*. It was hard for me to picture two-hundred, much less twenty-thousand, turtles congregating on this beach, competing for space above the tide line to deposit their hundreds of thousands of eggs. Despite their impressive numbers in the *arribadas*, the turtles are severely threatened and their populations appear to be steadily declining throughout their range.

I had walked only a few hundred yards from the campground when I saw my first olive ridley flippering up the beach to the edge of the sand. I watched her choose a suitable spot, rapidly dig a nest with her hind flippers, and reposition herself over it in a lumbering three-point turn. Once she seemed settled, I cut inland to approach her from behind and found a comfortable place to sit and observe. I watched from about twenty feet away for a few minutes, but soon curiosity got the best of me and I crept closer. Before long I was right beside her, and she remained totally oblivious to me, concentrating, I imagined, on her life’s grandest task. The eggs dropped out in rapid succession; I counted twenty-eight before focusing instead on sketching her in my journal.

An average-sized ridley clutch contains around one-hundred eggs, but only a small percentage of these will ever reach adulthood. As I’d seen evidence of the day before, nests are frequently scavenged by vultures, rodents, and coyotes as well as by humans who consider the eggs a delicacy with aphrodisiac qualities. I felt sorry for and slightly disgusted by people who needed to eat the eggs of an endangered reptile to get turned-on, and I was lucky to avoid being offered one in Costa Rica, where they are a popular bar snack and harvesting them is still legal in places. After a fifty-day incubation
period, the eggs that have survived will hatch and the fubsy little reptiles—yes, I know it’s a stretch to call a reptile fubsy, but these things are cute—are genetically programmed to dig their way to the surface and head straight for the sea. At this stage, they are completely defenseless and easily confused and many are predated as they cross the beach or by sharks, fish, and even other turtles as they make their initial swim through the tidal zone.

As I watched the laying spectacle in the bright moonlight, I again felt as though I was living out one of the episodes of some nature program I’d seen as a child. And yet while watching quietly, I began to feel strangely voyeuristic, worrying (against informed scientific opinion) that my presence might be disturbing to the reptilian mother who otherwise would have found solitude on this remote stretch of beach. I always felt a little obtrusive observing wildlife in close quarters, and I’d never had any interest in what I judged to be the invasive techniques of wildlife biology. My joy came not from snaring, prodding, measuring, or tagging wildlife, but in observing, preferably unnoticed, their free and graceful interactions with the world around them. Thus it was that while I was fascinated watching this beautiful creature live out its natural history, I felt too much like an intruder to linger with her for long. Instead I continued my walk down the beach, noting another ridley along the way and walking much farther than I intended. Eventually, the beach disappeared into a rocky headland, on the edge of which I sat for a time, finishing my illicit smoke and relishing a lonesome solitude that washed over me in the crashing song and gentle mists of the breaking waves.

When I finally straggled back into camp exhausted, I was greeted by tattered bits of my food strewn about the ground beneath where I’d hung it. The coatis had been more
determined than I had expected. They’d managed to gnaw completely through the cord that suspended the stuff sack, sending it to the ground where they could pillage it at will. They’d devoured the bread and fruit and strewn the oatmeal, rice, and beans across the ground. The peanut butter and jelly they couldn’t get into, and they’d thoughtfully left the coffee alone. I gathered up the scraps and took them into the tent with me, where I soon passed out and dreamed of swimming through green water on the back of a giant turtle.

Unwilling to let my time in the field be cut too short by vermin, I survived for the next two days on strong coffee, peanut butter and jelly by the spoonful, and some scraps I scrounged from the American students during their fieldtrip to the coast. I planned it well, waiting until they were halfway through lunch to show them the giant scorpion on the bottom of my old table. It was still there looking tremendously nasty and, as I hoped, worked to either distract or dull the appetites of several students from whom I scavenged partial lunches. Another bonus of their visit was that Andy invited me to accompany them to a national park across the Panamerican Highway from Santa Rosa called Rincon de la Vieja, which showcased an active volcano along with the dwarf forest, fumaroles, and mudpots that dotted its flanks. Since transportation to and from Rincon was infrequent and expensive, I decided to tag along for the trip the following day and then celebrate in Liberia that evening with some kind of massive feast.

In order to catch the group before they departed from park headquarters, I left Naranjo at the crack of dawn. The timing demanded that I ford the estuary at the peak of high tide. The moon was still high and first light was just drifting down through the canopy when I pulled off my shirt and lifted my pack over my head to wade the chilly
water that licked at my armpits halfway across. The whole time I nervously watched for movement along the banks, dwelling on the size of the crocodile the guardaparque had warned me about.

The morning's walk back to the Casona was oddly still and silent, especially after everything I'd experienced on the way in. There were no monkeys, only a little birdsong, and I never felt the slightest shiver of being watched from the brush. It was as though a spell had broken, and when I finally came back into sight of the park buildings and the group's yellow school bus, I felt I'd awoken from some vivid dream, returning from the land where the wild things are.
"What’s with the lightning?" David asked, as bright flashes lit up the belly of low clouds floating over us.

"At least nothing’s buzzing," I said, wondering if we ought to descend from the large metal scaffolding where we were illegally bivouacked. The tower had been built in the Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve to provide birders with views of the forest canopy. We were supposed to be sleeping in the bunkhouse back at the entrance to the reserve, but we’d found the stuffy little shack bunk indeed. Just after dusk, we’d deserted our quarters and snuck back to the forbidden aerie. The storm had brewed up only moments after we’d laid out our bedding. The clouds racing over us flickered like a strobe, but, since we’d heard no thunder, we stayed put, enjoying the pyrotechnics. Before long, stars were out above us again as the front pushed off to the east.

"Damn, check this out!" David said sometime later, yanking me back from the early stages of sleep. On the distant eastern horizon, a fiery ember burned intensely against the blackness. The sight was disorienting at first, too bright for me to place.

"Wow, it’s Arenal," I suddenly realized, remembering reading about the volcano in the reserve’s brochure. Mesmerized by a phenomenon neither of us had seen before, we took turns staring at the sight with a pair of cheap binoculars. For as long as we could watch, lava geysered into the night sky and ran brilliant orange down the flanks of the mountain.

We awoke at dawn to birdsong and heavy dew. After stashing our soggy sleeping bags, we brewed coffee in the tower as Arenal sat placidly in the distance, a child’s
perfect rendering of a volcanic cone. It felt like the morning after an acid trip, with the rational mind struggling to puzzle out the truth in the evening’s surreal sights.

I’d met David only a few days before at the hostel where I was staying in the village of Santa Elena, just south of the reserve. Initially, I’d pegged him as one more loud-mouth gringo blustering about extreme sports to starry-eyed Israeli girls. But later that evening, when I’d overheard him describing Duke Ellington’s *Money Jungle*, which happened to be some of my favorite jazz, I decided I should investigate. As soon as we began chatting, it was obvious we saw eye-to-eye on more than music.

David was wiry and fit, with an unruly shock of sandy hair and a primate gait. Indeed, if I were an orangutan, he was a chimpanzee; and we soon bonded over the fact that we both considered ourselves closer akin to monkeys than to many of our tame and flaccid countrymen. He had grown up in Marietta, Georgia, a boom suburb of Atlanta, and, in his eyes, the epicenter of what he called “drone society.” He had watched his childhood haunts along the Chattahoochee River bulldozed into parking lots and built-over by cul-de-sac communities with names like Riversound and Oak Haven. Although he despised the box-store world that had sprung up around him, his family lived on their own cul-de-sac and he attended worship with the founder of Home Depot.

David had come to Costa Rica to escape the drones for awhile, learn Spanish, and pick up surfing. As an avid kayaker his love for moving water already bordered on devotional, and he was given to discussing the “flow” in spiritual terms, which jived well with my lay Taoism. He was looking for the right companion with whom to go surfing, and coincidentally, I had plans to spend the next month moving south along the Pacific en
route to Corcovado National Park on the Osa Peninsula. He also hoped to visit the Osa, and, since I'd admitted my interest in surfing, he suggested we team up, buy surfboards, and play in the waves as we made our way south together.

Although David already felt like an old friend, I remained supremely skeptical. After my lesson with Max, I had vowed to avoid hooking up with strangers, and, apart from a few lonely days, I had enjoyed the first month of my trip alone. I preferred traveling solo. With no one to include in my plans, I had freedom of movement and all the time and mental space needed to read and write. I had been keeping a running journal and working my way through both Crime and Punishment and a book of selected Nietzsche. I had likely been ruminating too much upon the latter's heady maxims: “To live alone, one must be an animal or a god—says Aristotle. There is yet a third case:” adds Nietzsche, “one must be both—a philosopher.” Although far from a nihilist, I liked to think of myself as a philosopher, and wasn’t opposed to considering the ramifications of being animal or god. I must admit I was also taken with his bleak views of human nature and society:

The practices demanded in polite society: careful avoidance of the ridiculous, the offensive, the presumptuous, the suppression of one’s virtues as well as one’s strongest inclinations, self-adaptation, self-deprecation, submission to orders of rank—all this is to be found as social morality in a crude form everywhere, even in the depths of the animal world—and only at this depth do we see the purpose of all these amiable precautions: one wishes to elude one’s pursuers and be favored in the pursuit of one’s prey.

Suffice to say that between Max and the combined intellectual gloom of Raskolnikoff and Friedrich, I was hardly seeking companionship. Weary of David’s enthusiasm, I suggested we explore the nearby cloud forest together before making any longer-term plans. And so we found ourselves perched in the observation tower enjoying
the aroma from steaming mugs of Costa Rican coffee, both feeling our paths had come
together by more than simple chance.

The following weekend, after David had wrapped up his Spanish classes, we set
off for the interior of the Monteverde Preserve. My hope was to escape the parades of
Skywalkers that had left us feeling crowded and bitter. The Skywalk, which I’d toured
earlier in the week, was a cable-suspended boardwalk that offered bird’s-eye views of a
diversity of branches and not much else as it wound along fifty feet above the forest
floor. Apparently, it was the new rage in extreme sightseeing. I found it made for
interesting sociological observation at least. I spent a half-hour watching a stream of
safari-outfitted adventurers. They appeared quite titillated by their daring as they teetered
along the perfectly-level platform as wide as a city sidewalk. “Are you sure we don’t
need a rope,” one timid soul had asked.

In a fit of synecdoche, the Skywalk had come to represent the easy and gimmicky
side of ecotourism that preferred a thrill for the tourist over any kind of real
conservation or appreciation of nature. The more time I spent in Costa Rica, the more I
slipped into the ugly habit of ridiculing the touring hordes as they were guided dutifully
from one photo opportunity to the next. I might have been less bitter had I not been privy
to their obnoxious serve-me antics with the locals and had my one Quetzal sighting not
been ruined by a herd’s careless tromping. My fellow Americans were usually the worst,
unless there were Israelis in the mix. I even began to feel a smug satisfaction whenever
locals mistook me for a European or Brazilian. David harbored all these same
sentiments, and our combined cynicism demanded we get off the beaten path.
So was our plan when we hiked east off the Continental Divide into the Caribbean watershed and the valley of the Rio Peñas Blancas, or River of White Stones. The route would take us away from the Preserve’s entrance and the so-called Triangulo, or Triangle, of popular interpretive trails that circled around near the headquarters. Almost all of the Preserve’s visitors were concentrated on the trails of the Triangle: lone bounders like me, young parents toting their babes in backpacks, tour groups shuffling along noisily in matching galoshes behind omniscient guides, and, my personal favorite, the desperate-eyed solitaires with big optics and bird calls squawking out the cry of the elusive Quetzal.

Thankfully, a different world awoke on the far side of the divide. The rumbling song of howler monkeys echoed through the canopy. Colorful birds and butterflies flitted around us. The trees were festooned with scarlet bromeliads, long beards of moss, and spidery orchids—of the 2,500 species of plants found in the reserve, 420 of them were orchids. The mood in these woods felt festive, as though nymphs might dart through a sunbeam at any second.

By mid-afternoon, the phenomenon for which cloud forest is named was in full-swing. Heavy clouds from the Pacific sailed into the range as low fog, their watery burdens gently condensing on the trees and epiphytes as they lightened themselves for the climb over the spine of the isthmus. Robbed of their substance, the clouds dissipated above us as we descended from the divide into as pristine a watershed as I’d ever seen. Deep greens smothered the hills up to the dwarf forests of the ridgetops, and rivulets of crystal meandered lazily beneath the trail.
At a bend in the path, one of these quebradas, or creeks, tumbled a few feet onto bony bedrock, cutting a smooth, shallow pool too inviting to pass by. We dropped our packs and took turns splashing the cold water on our faces and over our shoulders.

“This is exactly what I’ve been looking for,” David said, his eyes gleaming, “agua pura.” He emptied the dregs of his water bottle and stuck it beneath the pour over. Once full, he raised the bottle to his mouth and took a long drink.

“Bold,” I said, remembering all-too-well the bout of giardia I’d gotten from a mountain stream in Ecuador. I’d failed to realize how high the cattle there roamed.

“Best water I’ve ever had,” he said, before downing the rest of the bottle and refilling it. As we descended, we discussed what might pollute the water here. Within the reserve, there were no livestock to worry about and people would be concentrated on the trails. Perhaps a dead animal was rotting somewhere upstream, but this seemed unlikely. At the next creek crossing, I stopped and filled my bottle and drank greedily. It was, I agreed, some of the best water I’d ever tasted.

There had always been something special for me in being able to drink straight out of a stream. Good, clean water was one of the Earth’s most precious gifts. As a boy, I had drunk from creeks, springs, and even the roadside ditches all over the hills where I grew up. I had never been instructed otherwise, and somehow I never got sick from the practice. Not until high school did I begin to use iodine when hiking, and, even later, I began to carry a water filter on longer excursions. After the giardia I’d become over-careful, and as we descended into the thickening forest of the Peñas Blancas Valley, I prayed its watershed was as pristine as it appeared.
Our lodgings that night were a deserted farmhouse marked on the map as Los Alemanes, or “the Germans.” My hunch was that the previous owners, those who had hacked the plot out of the forest and planted the bananas that now sagged under their ripening burdens, were of German descent. They had chosen their site well. It was set on a large flat high above where the Rio Peñas Blancas coursed a rocky groove through the heart of the Preserve. I felt blessed, just as I had at Naranjo in Santa Rosa, to be able to soak up the magic of the idyllic homestead for even a single night.

As I dumped the contents of my pack onto the dusty bunk of the one-room shack, I wondered what had become of the settlers. They must have been bought out by the Preserve as it grew. I pictured an elderly couple watching sitcoms in a cookie-cutter condo in a San Jose suburb. Though unfounded, it was a depressing image. I figured the conservationist’s money and momentum had driven the settlers out, but what had brought them out here in the first place? Was it wild beauty and solitude or simply unclaimed resources, raw land to be put to use? In the defunct kitchen I looked at snapshots pinned-up of a fat fer-de-lance, coiled to strike. A sign next to the photos said something like “cuidado, we live here too!” There would certainly be trade-offs to inhabiting such a place.

There was an interesting story behind the first large influx of settlers to Monteverde. A group of Alabama Quakers had come in the early 1950’s, several of whom had just finished jail sentences for resisting the Draft. They were drawn to Costa Rica’s peaceful democracy and the prospects of cheap land. In total, eleven families immigrated and bought around 1500 hectares on which they started a dairy farm and cheese factory. They also created a sizeable watershed preserve. Prior to the Quakers’
arrival only a few Costa Rican families had settled in the remote region, but as access into the mountains improved, others soon followed. By the early 70’s, the sound of chainsaws had become as common as birdsong as trails, farms, and pastures were cut further into the forests.

Then came George Powell, a graduate student from the U.S. who was studying understory birds in the area in 1972. Realizing his study sites were rapidly disappearing, he approached local residents and several scientific organizations with the idea of founding a reserve. The Tropical Science Center agreed with the idea, and soon a fledgling Monteverde Preserve was created. Initially, the conservationists’ strategy was to buy up land at the three primary access points to the forest, thereby slowing the influx of settlers into the interior of the range and accomplishing as much as possible with their scant resources. The Peñas Blancas trail David and I had followed to Los Alemanes was the most developed access with which they had had to attend initially, and it had required more than a decade to secure.

Once preservation efforts had begun in the region, an unforeseen momentum carried them. Large, international groups like the World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy offered critical assistance in the early phases of the project. Then, in order to insure the Preserve wouldn’t become isolated, a separate group called the Monteverde Conservation League formed and raised enough money to buy up much of the Peñas Blancas Valley. Next, another independent researcher started the Children’s Rainforest Project, which worked with Scandinavian schoolchildren to raise funds for further land acquisition, and the community of Santa Elena came together to buy up land for its own adjoining preserve.
In less than two decades, these efforts resulted in many thousands of acres of preserved forest and the birth of one of the world’s first wildly successful ecotourism projects, all at the hands of the private-sector. For a time, there had been talk of making Monteverde part of the Costa Rican national park system, but many of those involved in the Preserve’s founding felt it was better off remaining a private effort. After the financial setbacks to the park system in the 80’s and the continued prosperity of the Preserve, it seemed this opinion had proven out.

Monteverde’s spectacular setting and grassroots success couldn’t escape the eye of the international media. The exposure only drew more attention to the area. The Preserve’s entry statistics record the boom. The number of visitors jumped from around 7,000 in 1983 to a level hovering near 50,000 annually from 1992 to 1997. Although this wave of ecotourists, most of them U.S. or Europeans, provided essential revenue—before the mid-80’s the Preserve operated in the face of annual financial losses—they also began to take a toll on the ecosystem in the classic love-it-to-death scenario. I had first heard of Monteverde, in fact, through a case study detailing the negative impacts of unmitigated nature tourism. As more people visited the reserve, the diverse fauna, particularly the rich birdlife for which it was renown, fled farther into the forests while many of the trails became muddy, eroding wallows in the wet season. A concerted effort to curb these impacts was undertaken, and David and I were two of only 120 visitors permitted to enter the Preserve each day.

From my perspective, especially the one afforded by the deck of the Alemanes refuge as we watched the sun dip behind the continental divide, the reserve was in splendid shape. All the trails I’d walked were holding up, visitors were briefed at the
entrance on “leave no trace” protocol, and the forests and rivers seemed intact and clean. Although the popular trails of the Triangulo had felt overrun at times, there was no comparison to what would have resulted had settlers continued with their chainsaws and cattle. It was indeed a model to be replicated.

“I wonder what the Quakers think of it all,” David asked, challenging my tidy conclusion, “there must be people who’d rather be out here tending farms than serving super gringos in town.”

“Good point,” I said, realizing I’d been thinking only in terms of what was good for nature and, of course, my enjoyment of it as a visitor. I realized it was a little strange that most of the impetus for conservation had come from foreigners who wanted to study the place.

“Yeah, I’m glad nobody bought my parents’ farm out from under them to make an Ozark Preserve,” I said, as night settled over the abandoned homestead.

The following morning, I found myself feeling sheepish as I explored the Rio Peñas Blancas in nothing but a pair of sandals. I knew it was a bad idea to bring only cotton pants on the trip, but my nylon trunks had disappeared from the clothesline at the hostel a few days prior. At least I felt certain there was nobody around but David, and he didn’t give a damn if I was naked. This way, I was also perfectly suited for wading the emerald pools that stretched down the riverbed. Still some deep-rooted anxiety, no-doubt closely tied to the ancient urge that spawned loin cloths, gnawed at me as we drifted along with the flow of the river, farther from civilization and my pants with every step.
It had been David's idea to take to the river instead of the trail. This way we had better views down the valley and could enjoy the stream's movements as we went. I could see David imagining himself in a kayak, piecing together the cleanest line through the rocks. He moved smoothly and confidently along the slippery terrain. I, on the other hand, was in a state of perpetual stumble trying to keep up while being distracted by everything from water snakes to mountain toucans.

We dropped with the river until reaching a small waterfall and the narrow pinch of a smooth-walled gorge. To proceed would require a bit of a leap as we followed the plunge of the Peñas Blancas over the cascade and into the uncertain territory of the defile. Peering down the sluice, I remembered an essay by Edward Abbey in which he takes a shortcut down a slot canyon in Arizona and ends up trapped between a cliff and the overhanging drops he'd carelessly descended. In the end, he clambers his way back up just before a thunderstorm breaks and a flash flood rages through the canyon.

"Should we see what's down there?" I wondered aloud, considering the stories I might have to tell.

"Not without a rope," David replied. I took another look at the drop and had to admit that traveling with someone slightly less impulsive might have its perks.

"Do you think anyone's ever been down there," I asked.

"I doubt many Ticos hike rivers," David said, "but I bet curiosity has gotten the best of somebody."

I liked imagining a place no one had ever seen or set foot. Untouched, or at least rarely visited places, had a powerful allure for me. This was part of the reason mountain climbing had such appeal, and the idea of finding "wild" settings was an inspiration in
my travels. Nature tourism, especially its adventurous side, tended to capitalize on a romantic notion of exploring far-flung and hard-to-reach spots. Yet most of the tourists I’d observed, the skywalking set at least, seemed satisfied with a distant glimpse of such places, whether it was from the tour bus that crossed Denali National Park in Alaska or canopy tower that looked out over this forest.

The way I looked at it, this kind of distant pseudo-experience of the “wild” by the crowds was better for maintaining the integrity of the wilderness and its inhabitants. Taking the example at hand, if most visitors to Monteverde could be satisfied with a dayhike within the *Triangulo*, than the Peñas Blancas valley wouldn’t need a new backpackers’ hostel or an improved trail down which guides could lead parades of visitors. I realized our presence in the valley was anathema to this idea in some ways, but we were doing our best to have as little impact as possible. We were drinking the water from the streams after all. I figured the “wild” needed its human witnesses and participants, those to speak on its behalf and share its gifts from their experiences with it. I had myself convinced that was my charge. Glancing over at David who was ferreting around at the edge of the river, looking for some other way into the mystery of the gorge, I felt he would be the perfect partner to share the task.
High summer in Arkansas, with its infernal heat and soup-thick air, is a time of resigned endurance for everyone but the flies. Drought summers were always the most trying: in addition to the swelter, we had to keep a careful check on our water use to make sure the cistern never went dry. Occasionally, when things got desperate, we would call Ansel Waterson who would drive his tanker truck up the hill and pump a thousand gallons into the cistern to get us through the end of August.

Without air conditioning or the luxury of frivolous showers, our greatest reprieve was to pile into the car and head down the dust-choked roads to one of the local swimming holes. There was Gum Hollow and Leigh Creek and the Rope Hole, with its tattered swing looped over a high tree branch, but my favorite spot was the shaded pool cut into the rocky bank beneath Woolsey Bridge. Its cooling waters provided the simplest joy on stifling days. Then bulldozers came one spring and rearranged the creek’s channel for a few loads of gravel, turning our pool into a muddy wallow in the process. After that I felt, probably for the first time in my life, the sad rage of losing something sacred.

While thirsty summers taught me the worth of good water, it was on our family canoe trips to the Buffalo River that I began to experience its magic. Draining the heart of the Ozark Plateau, the Buffalo is a jade ribbon that bends lazily through forests of oak, sycamore, and gum beneath towering bluffs of streaked limestone. There is some whitewater along the river’s length but nothing beyond the capacity of an open canoe. More than rapids, however, I think of the Buffalo’s long pools where I learned to swim.
and paddle and play the current and where huge gar and bass would drift beneath me along the bottom.

Though I had no idea at the time, I was lucky to know the river at all. In the early seventies, a few years before I was born, the river was slated for damming, as most of the other streams in the southeast already had been. Luckily, the Buffalo had many stewards, and, in 1972, with the dam looming, U.S. Congress bowed to the protests of a well-organized minority, and, in a precedent-setting decision, designated the Buffalo National River. With the decision, the U.S. gained its first “wild and scenic” waterway through legislation that would protect it in perpetuity from development and damnation. As one of the last free-flowing rivers in our country, I will always be thankful to have grown up with its waters.

Perhaps it was my history with the Buffalo that made me take note of the Pacuare River even before I left for Costa Rica. In 1986, in similar unprecedented fashion, the Costa Rican government had declared the Pacuare a protected zone and the first “wild and scenic” river in all of Central America. While the country’s reliance on hydroelectric power had already led to the damming of most of their major waterways, the Pacuare remained free. Its watershed, still cloaked in virgin rainforest, was home to some of the last indigenous communities in the country as well as an uncatalogued wealth of biodiversity. The river was also upheld as the most scenic stretch of commercial whitewater in the country, drawing thousands of rafters and kayakers from around the world each year.
Protecting the river for these values seemed like the obvious step towards sustainable management, yet somehow the national electricity agency, owned by the same government that had declared the river a protected zone, was still plotting to dam the Pacuare. The entire scenario seemed ludicrous, but the feasibility studies and site exploration continued apace. Local conservation groups, along with the rafting companies that depended on the Pacuare’s free-flowing character to attract business, were left fighting to save a river that, supposedly, had already been spared.

The Pacuare conflict, frustrating as it was, fit perfectly into my research, and before I could embark on any surf odyssey with David, I felt obliged to visit the river. As a boater, David was well aware of the Pacuare’s whitewater; in fact, he was considering working there as a safety kayaker for a rafting outfit later in his trip. Not only was he keen to accompany me for some reconnaissance, but through paddling connections back home he had a contact in the nearby whitewater hub of Turrialba who could help us out. Hailing from the southeast U.S., he was also familiar with the tolls dams take on rivers. Many of the rivers he paddled regularly at home were dam-controlled, and he felt the soul of these rivers had been caged, trapped behind the concrete and steel. Through his vivid stories and contagious passion for flowing water, I began to understand why he viewed rivers as living things and dams as the death of them.

Ray McLain had long been a professional paddler and Olympic trainer for the U.S. canoe team, and, after retiring, he had expatriated from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to the year-round whitewater scene of Turrialba. Reflecting on my memory of the industrial skyline and paper-mill stench of Green Bay, I could hardly blame him for the change of
scenery. He was puttering around in his screened porch, surrounded by a variety of boating accoutrements, when we knocked on his door. Expecting our visit, he waved us inside and settled us down with a cup of tea.

Ray was older than I’d imagined but tall and sturdily built. He was bald on top and white around the temples, with a serious face but quick smile and hearty, if infrequent, laugh. He told us the story of how he’d fallen in love with Turrialba and Costa Rica and shared his plans of expanding his business, which provided whitewater tours and boat rentals as well as instruction. He seemed most passionate, however, about sharing his knowledge of paddling with the local kids and training them to work as river guides. “It’s their backyard,” he said, “they ought to be able to take advantage of it.”

While he knew the basics of the Pacuare controversy, he suggested I talk with his friend Lee who had lived here for years and owned a local rafting business. He also insisted that to get a true sense of the Pacuare’s worth I would have to get myself down a stretch of it. I wasn’t going to argue.

After a brief visit—Ray seemed a man of few words—we took a room and wandered around the quiet streets of Turrialba. Although the guidebook reported there was little here in the way of entertainment, the central plaza had to be the nexus for the entire province’s romantic affairs, including those of the stray dogs. Tico couples, young and old, could be found there at all hours of the day in various stages of embrace. The highlight of the town, however, was a street corner bakery with the most glorious silver-dollar pancakes. If you had the time, the baker would griddle them up fresh while you watched.
Ray made things happen for us. He arranged an interview with Lee the following evening, and the next day we would take a trip down the Pacuare with Lee’s rafting outfit. It would be a small trip, only David and I and two family friends of Lee’s from the States. David even worked it out so he could paddle one of the safety kayaks instead of being stuck in the group raft.

We spent the next morning at the municipal swimming pool with Ray and several children from a local family he seemed to have adopted. They made an interesting picture on the edge of the pool, a gaggle of dark-haired and deeply tanned Costa Rican youngsters darting around the ambling, white-haired Grandpa Ray. The affection between them was touching, and his example added some much-needed optimism to the opinion I’d been formulating of American expatriates.

The younger kids splashed about in the shallow end of the pool while their older sister worked determinedly on her Eskimo roll with one of Lee’s raft guides, a chiseled American college student named Danny. She sat in the kayak, with an over-serious expression pinned on by her nose plugs, as Danny smiled at her and then flipped her upside down. She would then struggle at coordinating the paddle stroke and her hip snap, popping herself mostly out of the water and gasping for breath before rolling back down. After a few attempts, Danny turned her over and explained the intricacies of what had gone wrong while she sucked in air and stared lovingly at him. Danny would later tell us how difficult it was to evade this young girl’s amour. Apparently, the Canadian who Danny had replaced had managed to sire one, if not two, children by local mothers during his stint in town the previous season.
When she was finished practicing, I talked briefly with the girl. She had plans to work as a raft guide and eventually hoped to compete as a freestyle kayaker. She made a point to tell me she felt lucky to have the opportunities she did. Living in a place where people from around the world came to paddle whitewater, her pursuits made perfect sense. Although a new highway had diverted much of the tourist traffic bound for the Caribbean away from Turrialba, the growing popularity in river-running insured a lucrative whitewater industry for the town, assuming they could manage to save their rivers.

I met Lee Poundstone, whose name rather fits him, at a little bar in the center of Turrialba, which he'd assured me offered the best salchichas in town. Lee was a grey-haired fireplug, a California transplant who had married a local Tica and gone into the rafting business. The first thing I noticed about him was that he exhibited an animal intensity when it came to salchichas. To my undiscerning eye, salchichas are deep-fried hunks of pork fat—low-end impostors are slices of hot dog. In an especially foul coupling, they are usually cooked crisp and dipped in mayonnaise. No sooner had I met Lee than he ordered us both a round of this delicacy. Unfortunately, I found the platter of glistening gristle slobbered in off-white sauce rather an affront to my sensibilities and knew immediately I wouldn't be able to choke them down. I was afraid that my refusal of the offering might have gotten me off on the wrong foot with Lee, but I soon realized he would happily handle my portion as well.

As he speared the horrid morsels with a toothpick, I set in with my questions. Lee's opinion was that the national power agency, El Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), wouldn't stop with their plans until they'd dammed every river in
Costa Rica, preferably more than once. Bottom line, their goal was to generate power. They could care less about anything else. He thought their single-mindedness was at least partly a result of political pressure from development agencies and international lenders like the World Bank, who pushed loans for new projects that would barely generate enough revenue to pay the interest on their previous loans to the country. It seemed like a vicious cycle designed to keep developing countries in a stranglehold of debt with ever-increasing principal.

Worse yet, most of the energy from a dam on the Pacuare would end up as surplus anyway. In a few periods of peak demand it might save the country from buying a bit of power from its neighbors. Not only was the energy mostly unnecessary, but longevity estimates indicated a productive lifespan of around fifty years for the dam. And that, it seemed, was the best-case scenario. As it was, logging in the river’s headwaters was already causing increasing siltation that would shorten the dam’s life. On top of this problem, early site preparation for the dam had been halted once by seismic disturbances. It seemed obvious something besides efficient energy production was at stake.

“They’re persistent though,” Lee said, gesticulating with a charred salchicha, “if we don’t get the politicians behind us, the dam is gonna’ come sooner or later.”

We left town early the next morning for the raft put-in below the small community of Tres Equis. Lee drove the van while David and I shared our sweet little pancakes with the rest of the group. Besides us, there were two brothers, Ryan and Brian, from Sacramento. They were a kind of yin and yang pair, with quirks that complimented each other well. Ryan, the older one, was outspoken and socially awkward, while Brian,
who seemed plenty thoughtful, was terribly shy. Danny, who we’d met at the pool, had come along to steer the raft, and an Argentine kayaker whose name I never caught would stay behind us with David in case something went wrong.

On the way out of town, we crossed the bridge over the boiling rapids of the Rio Reventazón, Turrialba’s other showcase river, which boasted even fiercer whitewater than the Pacuare. The Reventazón had already been dammed once near its headwaters, and the ICE had further plans to build another dam on the river just downstream of Turrialba. In what seemed to be an absurd plan, particularly in this seismically active area, water would be directed from the Reventazón through a six mile tunnel to a power generating facility that would be built at the proposed dam on the Pacuare. It was hard to fathom just how much land, not to mention how many people and other living creatures, the combined projects would impact.

At the put-in, while Lee, David, and the Argentine readied the boats, Danny handed the brothers and I our matching helmets and life jackets and gave us the safety spiel. Despite my canoeing experience, I’d never been through any Class IV whitewater nor had I ever rafted, so I actually paid attention to his straightforward directions. We would paddle when told to and stay in the boat, if possible, through the rapids. If we came out of the raft, we were to keep our feet in front of us to absorb any impacts and watch for a throw line from David or the Argentine. Finally, under no circumstances was it permissible to drown.

It struck me that we looked like hopeless dorks setting off in our matching regalia, but the swirl and tumble of the river soon pushed such pithy concerns far out of mind. Dense walls of old growth loomed around us as we rolled through a series of small, rocky
drops. It was a cloudy day but the air was warm and the river inviting. In a stretch of flatwater, I bailed out of the raft and bobbed along with the current until Danny called me back for our first big rapid. We paddled hard and took on plenty of water, but Danny knew the line well and showed us just enough of the boat-eating hole to whet our appetite for what lay ahead. I watched David’s surprise as the hole reached out and grabbed him. He vanished into the froth for a couple of seconds before his boat came out upside down. When he rolled upright, he was still wearing a big grin.

“Was that a class IV?” I asked.

“Barely a three,” Danny said, keeping us humble.

I’d never been on a river with such huge volume before and its power was intimidating; there were holes where one could disappear for good. Watching David and the Argentine whooping it up in their tiny boats made me wish I were a kayaker. The rafting was fun and the setting beautiful, but I didn’t enjoy being just a passenger. Sure we had to paddle occasionally, but without Danny at the helm the three of us would still have been recirculating in that initial rapid. Although I generally shunned the use of guides whenever possible, this trip was a worthy exception. There was no way I could have explored the river on my own, and I would have hated to miss the opportunity, especially considering it might not exist for much longer.

At some point the jungle opened up, and we passed several agricultural plots that came down right to the river’s edge. Danny explained that there were still a number of subsistence farmers inhabiting the area, some of them Cabécar Indians. The dam would inundate their farms, displacing them and changing their lives absolutely. I supposed that
in a country where most of the indigenous population had been wiped out centuries ago, the welfare of the scattered few who remained was a low priority.

We rounded a sharp bend to the sight of rocky walls rearing up on each side, constricting the river to half its previous width. Suddenly, the holes behind rapids got bigger and we took on lots more water as we crashed along. Danny remained perfectly cool until an audible roar ahead of us had him up scouting the frothing horizon line.

"Huacas rapid ahead boys, all forward, paddle hard now," he barked, as he swung the raft hard to the right. I dug my feet in the best I could and pulled with the paddle for all I was worth. The rapid was a big shelf drop, but the river was high enough that we shot right over it and slammed into the hole below. The impact ejected Ryan into the air like a Jack-in-the-box. Luckily he landed just beyond the vortex of the rapid, and we were able to retrieve him, despite our laughter.

Just after the rapid, we passed beneath the feathery mane of Huacas Falls as it arced over the lip of the cliff more than a hundred feet above us. I'd seen several postcards of this spectacle back in Turrialba, but the delicate beauty of the falls couldn't be captured by a photo. Its magic was in its movement, in the water's dance between liquid and mist far above the river.

We didn't get much time to enjoy the falls, as Lower Huacas, the biggest rapid on the run, was lurking just downstream. Danny set us up well, and we slammed along missing the biggest holes. I heard David howling and looked back to see him punching though the standing waves; I'd totally forgotten the kayakers were back there, I'd been so caught up in the task at hand.
We pulled into a sandy beach for lunch, and the guides unpacked a spread of deli sandwiches, cheese and crackers, vegetables, fresh fruit, and cookies. “Welcome to the float and bloat,” Danny said, unfurling a checkered tablecloth.

While we all lounged about digesting, I dug my journal out of the drybag and made some notes. I read back over a quote I’d written down several months before when this trip down the Pacuare was only an idea. The excerpt came from an essay by David Quammen about the Futaleufu River in Chile, another pristine river that faced the same threat as the Pacuare:

Rivers can die too. Rivers are animate, in their way. They move. They breathe...To drown a river beneath its own impounded water, by damming, is to kill what it was and to settle for something else. When the damming happens without good reason—simply because electricity is a product and products can be sold—then it’s a tragedy of diminishment for the whole planet, a loss of one more wild thing, leaving earth just a little tamer and simpler and uglier than before.

I looked back up the canyon we had just descended, guarded on both sides by a jungle brimming with more life than I could imagine, and pictured it all drowned. The entire stretch of river we had traveled would be inundated—the reservoir would easily reach back to Tres Equis. I tried to envision the forest rotting in situ beneath the weight of many cubic tons of suffocating water. I saw affluent Ticos from San José driving jetskis in circles, leaving rainbow oil slicks on Lake Pacuare’s lifeless surface.

The dam would bring the loss of not one, but millions of wild things. It would trap and drown the soul of a living river. It would disturb the natural cycles in ecosystems stretching from the river’s mountainous headwaters to the brackish canals that emptied into the Caribbean. It would bring destruction to the simple ways of the people who lived in this valley, people who would never need the electricity the dam would generate. It would make the dreams of the young girl in the kayak at the pool in Turrialba harder to
achieve. Indeed, the earth would be a little tamer, simpler, and uglier once this stretch of the Pacuare was gone. Thinking these thoughts, I could feel a touch of the same bitter anger that had welled up in me years ago when I saw that bulldozers had scraped away my swimming hole beneath Woolsey Bridge. Damming the Pacuare was all too clearly a sacrifice of something sacred.

The final leg of the trip was mellow. There were a few rapids but nothing like those upstream. Tongues of young basalt slipped down the banks at odd intervals, and green-winged parakeets squawked at us from the ancient trees. The last real rapid came at the narrow entrance to Dos Montañas Gorge, the site of the proposed dam. Here the rocky shoulders of two mountains pushed together, once creating a formidable wall that the river had slowly eaten away in its infinite determination.

Posts of steel rebar protruded from the wall of the gorge, left as a reminder of the engineers’ plans. Seeing these, I felt a sinking feeling that the battle was already lost, that, just as Lee had said, sooner or later the dam would come. I wanted to be optimistic, to think that the conservationists might secure the political clout they needed to halt the project, but, in all honesty, I found more solace in another quote I’d glanced over in my journal, this one from Ed Abbey’s book *Down the River*: “Not even a plateau could stop the river. Their dams will go down like dominoes. And another river will be reborn.”
Of the hundreds of beaches that fringe Costa Rica, the long crescent of sand at Jacó was at the heart of the country's surfing culture. It was not that Jacó had the greatest waves or the best scenery, but it was the closest beach to San José and offered a sprawling tourism infrastructure with plenty of nightlife. David and I started our journey to the Osa Peninsula there because our first order of business was finding boards, and we’d heard Jacó was the place where the old beaters that weren’t worth the baggage fees at the airport came to rest.

Upon arrival, we took a room, stowed our packs, and immediately made the rounds of the surf shops. The most promising selection of learner boards was at the *Mother of Fear*, run by a friendly but impatient American woman whose overbearing countenance might have lent the shop its moniker. After a protracted haggling effort, David came away with a nicked-up, off-yellow Rusty, and I had a delaminating but shapely Stewart bay board and a new pair of trunks.

Thus armed, the apprenticeship of Russ and Stew began. To call us clueless would have been kind, and the Mother, recognizing our hopelessness, conjured up her young mulatto assistant to get us out of her hair.

“Jimmy, get out here,” she commanded to the back of the shop, “these guys need help.” A ruffled Jimmy emerged disgruntled. He might have been fourteen, and something in the way he was sizing us up made it obvious that he was a very good surfer and a bit impatient himself. I bumbled around with the Stewart, uncertain how best to handle the nine-feet of delicate fiberglass. Jimmy snatched it from me with disdain and
plopped it to the ground for outfitting. I watched his every movement, eager to learn the ropes. David, already familiar with the basic concepts of surfing, was better prepared to do some posturing. Displaying his budding knowledge, he asked Jimmy if one couldn’t take a pinch of sand and work it into the wax layer for a little added traction. Jimmy looked up from waxing the Stewart with a puzzled expression that lent a snarl to his lip.

“No mon, no sand. Put your foot on it!”

So went our first and only formal surfing lesson. More logical people might have headed straight for one of the nearby surfing academies for pointers from some local machismo stud or a leathery California transplant, but we took our boards and found a deserted section of beach at the far end of town where we had plenty of space to flounder. Although we lacked experience with the surf, we were at least strong swimmers—had we not been, we probably would have drowned. As it was, we fought our way through the heavy shore break with only a minor trouncing and, once outside, straddled our steeds like pros, wondering what happened next.

That first morning we spent hours bobbing in the warm ocean swells. We watched buzzards riding thermals above the coastal hills and paddled doggedly after huge rolling waves we had no idea how to catch. I found the motion of the swells mesmerizing, and the anticipation of what might arrive with each new set was rich with possibility. In the end, all I caught that day was a wicked sunburn and a terrible case of surfing fever, and I hadn’t even begun to put my foot on it.
Two weeks—the longest I'd spend in a single place during my entire trip—passed in a saltwater-clouded blur as we got schooled daily by the ocean. The wave conditions for learning were mostly abysmal, but we didn't care. We were simply putting in our time, confident that it would pay off eventually. Each day, we would awaken around dawn, slide into our salt-crusty surf trunks, toke a hearty bowl, and head out with just our boards for the five-minute stroll to the beach. After a couple of hours of being tossed around by the ocean, we would emerge polished, with sore shoulders and saltwater dripping from our sinuses, already anticipating the afternoon's return.

During that time, our world was reduced to a few basic elements: surf, smoke, food, and sleep. This simple life was enchanting. Days raced by and dates lost significance—somehow I even overlooked my twenty-second birthday. We were playing hard, and it was exhausting. In between surf sessions we would return to the lockbox—as David had dubbed our little cement room—make coffee, eat heaping piles of food, and nap. Neither of us had expected surfing to be so hard or so rewarding.

Whenever we were in the water, I felt perfectly content, but during our downtime, I began to feel a nagging guilt over neglecting my project. David would help me dismiss my concern by reminding me that I was, after all, studying one of the most highly developed tourism sectors in the country. This was true; I'd been able to experience the surfing culture first-hand, but I wasn't sure how much I could conclude from it.

Like tourists in general, surfers were a mixed bag. It was easy enough to critique the party-focused groups that caught cheap flights from southern California, rented Suzukis, and joyrode over the local landscapes and culture in pursuit of sex, drugs, and the perfect wave. Costa Rica seemed to be their home away from home. But for each of
these traveling circuses, there were others for whom surfing was simply a way of life or a means to experiencing a place and its subtleties. When talking to such people, the day’s waves seemed inconsequential in comparison to the village they’d stayed in or the local fisherman who had ferried them to the break. David and I fit somewhere in between. We were, after all, focused primarily on learning the sport, but our interests in the place and its people ran deeper. We were simply too exhausted most of the time to do much exploring or mingling, and we certainly weren’t out partying. These distinctions seemed fairly bogus anyway. We were all here spending our money in the local economy, trying to have a good time, and probably wreaking more cultural change than we were aware of in the process. The gracious Ticos seemed to receive everyone with open arms, even though our presence was fraught with thorny issues.

Just as I’d found in San José at the outset of my trip, theft was rampant in Jacó and the surrounding beaches. Nothing could be left unattended, not for a second. David and I had both lost pairs of sandals from the beach, snatched while we were in the surf, and shorts and towels had a way of disappearing if left hanging out to dry. It made one terribly distrustful. We’d taken to closing everything up in the lockbox, even when we were nearby, and, when we went surfing, we would walk barefoot to the beach with nothing but our boards. Once there, one of us would stand guard while the other surreptitiously buried the room key at an easily identifiable spot in the sand. It was disheartening to see stealing so prevalent in the culture, and I blamed it on the blatant inequities between us tourists and our hosts. I could see how easy it would be to convince yourself to take something from someone who obviously had everything he could need in spades, especially when the victim could turn around and buy a
replacement with little sacrifice. I was convinced that theft of such magnitude had only arisen with the tourism boom, but the question I was left with was whether Ticos frequently stole from each other as well, or if the behavior was reserved for gringos?

In addition to theft becoming a growth industry, drugs seemed to be taking a significant toll on communities that made their living from tourism. In towns like Jacó where there were lots of buzz-hungry surfers, supply kept pace with demand and a variety of substances flooded the market. If one wanted to take the risks of being set up and could invest an hour or two in trolling the streets around the discotecas, it was easy enough to procure marijuana or cocaine and likely other offerings as well. If the issue had been as simple as tourists having a good time to the lucrative benefit of local entrepreneurs, I wouldn’t have had any issue with the drug trade—especially considering my contributions to it. The obvious problem was that many of the pushers, or at least runners, were adolescents that ended up using as much as they were selling, enabled to do so by their foreign clientele.

The first guy I had bought pot from in Costa Rica, for example, was probably no more than sixteen. He was the oldest son in the family Max and I had rented the room from in Hermosa. At the time, I’d thought little of it; all he’d done was deliver a parcel wrapped in brown paper. While staying in Jacó, however, I bumped into him often. He remembered me, and we’d talk whenever our paths crossed. He always had something for sale, whether it was drugs, a watch, or a pair of sunglasses. In the relatively short span of time I observed him, his look became edgier and his personality more aggressive. By the end of my time in Jacó, I would try to avoid contact if I saw him in time, since he was often talking far too loudly about cocaine. I hated seeing the changes in him; I’d
watched the same things happen to close friends and had undergone some of it myself. The process was insidious and hard to escape, especially when your major source of income was picking up baggies for tourists who hardly noticed if you skimmed a bit off the top. I could still picture the boy’s mother and felt guilty even for the little bit of weed he’d procured for us.

At the end of our second week as surfers, we left Jacó to begin the journey south towards the Osa. We hauled our gear out to the edge of town, proudly encumbered with our enormous boards, and hailed the local bus service bound for Quepos, the next town to the south and the gateway to Manuel Antonio National Park. As we passed Playa Hermosa, I reflected back over more than two months of travel; I felt I had come a long way from the uncertainty and foolishness of that first week. Although I had already long overstayed the month and a half I’d planned to be in Costa Rica, I felt I was on the proper path, carried along by the flow. With more than nine months still remaining in my Wanderjahr, I felt I was still at the beginning of things, and, honestly, I was happy to see the time fly.

Quepos was a dismal little port, surrounded by barren and ugly plantations of spiky oil palms that had replaced bananas as the region’s major commercial crop. The town was a center for sportfishing, especially for sailfish, and many of the tourist shops displayed posters advertising charters at unbelievably high rates. It seemed crazy to think that some people would spend what I’d lived on for the last month for a day of chasing fish.
Rather than staying in Quepos, we changed buses and continued the last few kilometers to the village of Manuel Antonio at the entrance to the national park. The road carried us inland over a series of hills perched high above the ocean where at least a dozen luxury hotels vied for the best views and the wealthiest visitors. Given the setting, we were surprised to find a room we could afford. It was another boxy cement affair, and an overpriced one at that, despite the low-season discount. Staying in the park would have been a nice option had camping not been banned because of overuse. David had also begun to feel ill on the trip south, as though the flu were setting in, and he was happy to have a bed to climb into. I left him to sleep, heading over to have a look at the national park.

The park was named after a conquistador who was killed in a skirmish nearby and buried somewhere in the area. It is both the smallest park in the country and one of the most visited. Its white sand beaches had long been a favorite local hangout, despite the fact that they had been in private hands since the late 1930’s. This was an unusual situation given that Costa Rican law declares all beaches public property, but then there are always loopholes where enough money is involved. This particular parcel had ended up as United Fruit property after a government-endorsed land swap, and the company eventually sold it to foreign investors who were looking to capitalize on the area’s scenic potential. The developers’ plans were to build a mega-resort, complete with a wharf and a fleet of cabins, and, in the early 70’s, they restricted all public access to the area and began construction. The locals, however, were loath to accept their favorite beaches being fenced off, and they repeatedly sabotaged the exclosures. Country-wide publicity soon followed, and suddenly the locals themselves were demanding the area be made into
a park—an unprecedented development in a country where conservation measures were just beginning.

The developers stood their ground despite the protests. They threatened the community with legal action and began felling trees and moving in truckloads of construction materials. Some even charge that they purposefully dumped herbicide into the local mangrove estuary to make it less desirable as a protected area. The landowners’ stubborn refusal to compromise in this land of peaceful alternatives must have angered the Legislative Assembly almost as much as the locals, for they passed an injunction against the development and, by late-1972, had established by law Manuel Antonio National Recreation Park. Buying back the land at a cost of $700,000 would require several more years and a special government bond, but the popular park had proven itself worth every penny.

I paid my six dollar entrance fee at the park kiosk and wandered down to the first of several beaches. It was picture-perfect and swarming with a mix of local and foreign tourists sunbathing and splashing about in the shore break. There was one young woman out with a surfboard, and I sat for a few minutes watching for something I could ride amongst the tiny green rollers. Leaving the beach, I continued into the forest on an interpretive trail, passing a number of signs imploring visitors to avoid littering and feeding the wildlife. The signs seemed of little import, however, since not a hundred yards later I surprised a family of Ticos pitching Cheese-its at a troop of white-faced capuchins.

I was amazed by the abundance of wildlife I saw on the short walk. Mostly it was monkeys, which I saw so frequently that they began to take on the feel of an amusement
park attraction. Watching these inquisitive creatures who were probably eyeing me for snack foods, I thought about how different they acted from the aggressive howlers in Santa Rosa that had raised the hair on my neck with their wild antics. It seemed there must be some acculturation going on here in Manuel Antonio.

My most exotic sighting on the walk, however, came in the form of a small gray shape lumbering through the underbrush beside the trail. At first I thought it was some strange, shaggy dog, but then it hopped up onto the trunk of a *Cecropia* tree and climbed effortlessly up into its canopy with the aid of its claw-like appendages. I was ecstatic, I’d been hoping to see a sloth on every foray I’d made in the country but had yet to get lucky. Even better, once the creature paused and looked down on me, I realized it was a mother with a perfect miniature nuzzled against her breast, the very definition of fubsy. The pair looked straight out of science fiction with the mother’s dreadlocked coat hanging off her in dire need of a shampoo. I’d later read that these scruffy beasts host a variety of insects including sloth moths, beetles, and mites. Unbelievably, a single sloth can tote around as many as nine-hundred beetles, a veritable metropolis of coleopterans.

It is commonly believed that sloths pass their entire lives in the treetops without ever touching the ground, but patient science proves otherwise. They do live, feed, and reproduce in the upper canopy, but as I had seen firsthand, they also occasionally descend to the forest floor. Why, is the obvious question, and the answer is simple though not exactly intuitive. The answer is that, like most animals, sloths won’t shit where they eat. Instead, after accumulating urine and feces for as long as a week, they sally down to earth full, whereupon they dig a depression with their stubby tails, defecate in it, urinate on top, scratch some leaves around like a dog, and quickly head back up into the canopy where
they’re once again safe from terrestrial predators. Why they do this belongs in the realm of quantum spookiness with all those other unanswered scientific queries. One theory suggests it fertilizes the trees upon which they feed, but as sloth ecologist G.G. Montgomery suggests “this hypothesis badly wants testing.”

When I arrived back at the room, David was sleeping soundly in the dark room beside the tattered copy of Crime and Punishment I’d passed off to him. I hated to think what his fever dreams might be like. I quietly fished out my journal and walked down to a restaurant that overlooked the ocean for happy hour.

I took a seat at the bar and before long had caught the attention of an old Tico who was milling about the place. For the sake of company, I offered to buy him a beer. He had lived outside Quepos all his life, so I took advantage of the opportunity to talk with a local about the uproar that had surrounded the national park formation.

“They were too rich, wanted everything their way,” he said of the foreign developers, “wouldn’t even let the kids watch the sunset on the beach.”

“Were the communists involved?” I asked him. I’d read that a history of communist leanings in the area had helped trigger the rebellion. He scoffed, almost spitting out a mouthful of beer.

“It was our beach, the people’s beach. Communism didn’t matter.”

“Was there really a bombing,” I asked, wondering if I was pushing my luck.

“Yes, but only a little one, for the gate. Nobody was hurt.”

I told him how happy I was that the park had been saved, how beautiful it was to see the forest and all the wildlife.

“It was all like that before,” he said, with a broad sweep of his hand.
The following day David had recovered enough to travel, and we continued south along muddy roads past miles of oil palm to the beach at Dominical. Although the community remained off the beaten path, the roads on all sides were gradually being improved and there was evidence that the town was becoming an ever-more popular stop on the surfing circuit. The town’s main street featured a couple of cheap hostels, an open air cantina with several big screen T.V.’s, and not much else. The long, unprotected beach was littered with driftwood and flotsam and had a remote feel to it. Even from shore, the waves, colored a pale green from all the sand that swirled within them, looked thick and scary.

David still wasn’t feeling well enough to surf, so I paddled out by myself. My timing was off on my first attempt, and I couldn’t get past the shore break. This was a first for me, and I should have taken it as a warning instead of a challenge. Finally, I fought my way outside the towering green walls, feeling smaller and more vulnerable without David beside me. At first, I floated far outside the breakers, watching brown pelicans glide around me and staying alert for the huge sets that might still catch me inside. Although David and I had often discussed the fact that the ocean was one of the last true wildernesses, it rarely ever felt threatening to me. Here it was different. I began to dwell on sharks, imagining shadows moving beneath me.

I knew the fear was in my mind, but I still wanted out of the water. The problem was that I didn’t want to face the surf zone again, but given the sweep of open beach, I had no choice. My plan was to wait out the next big set and then paddle like hell for shore, maybe catching a ride in on a smaller wave or the dissipating foam pile of a bigger
one. I let the next set roll through, and then paddled hard into the danger zone. Glancing over my shoulder, I could see another set was already on the way. The first wave in it looked big, and I hesitated, considering trying to get back outside. In the second I paused, the wave began to jack up. I was right at the peak, if only I could catch it. At the last second, rather than pulling out, I paddled hard onto the shoulder of the wave, kicking for all I was worth. I felt the monster roll underneath me and then the stomach-churning acceleration as it caught me. As soon as I began to drop down the face, I popped up into a crouch and realized the full folly of my decision. I was on a wave at least twice my height, the biggest I’d ever tried to catch, but it was a close-out. I was pitched end-over-end into the maw of the crushing water. Pinned down by its churning wash, I lost any sense of where the surface was. My air disappeared but the wave still held me. Reflexively, I relaxed and tried to avoid gasping, which would have filled my lungs with water, the first step in drowning. When the ocean’s grip finally loosened, I fought hard for the light. I hit the surface with my lungs burning and had just enough time to suck in some air and saltwater before the next wave in the set pummeled me. I was still shaking when I dragged myself onto shore. “So much for putting your foot on it,” I thought.

That evening, as David had dinner with an American girl he’d met while I was out trying to drown, I slipped into a dark funk. Part of my mood stemmed from a feeling that I had barely gotten anywhere with the surfing. The throttling I’d gotten earlier had rubbed my nose in the fact that while I might be improving slowly, I had a long way to go before I’d be comfortable in those kinds of conditions. I was used to being good at things immediately, and these waves were crushing my ego.
The root of my melancholy, however, was more likely a feeling of loneliness and homesickness that had been slowly building for some time. Autumn had always been my favorite time of year back home, a period I looked forward to for the changing colors in the hills and the celebration of my birthday and the harvest with friends and family. In recent years in Minnesota, it also brought the crisp weather and first snows of the season that enhanced the joy of nesting and sharing warmth with a lover. Although there was absolutely nothing in the landscape of the Pacific coast to trigger such nostalgia, I knew what I was missing at home and it made me long for it.

Fleeing such thoughts, I decided to have a couple of beers, but my mood got worse while I sat in the cantina full of gringos, watching sports highlights and eavesdropping on the local surf squad as they relived their best rides of the day. My glum expression must have attracted the old sop that lit on the stool next to me and began recounting how his life had been all wrong since losing his wife two years before. I tried to listen sympathetically as he drank his whiskeys and rubbed his moistening eyes, but it proved too much for me.

I left the bar and most of a beer and tried to call home, but there was no answer. Next, I called Lucy, who I hadn’t talked to in almost a month. When she picked up, I tried to sound confident and happy. She told me she’d been doing great, working a lot and saving for a ticket to come and see me after the New Year. It struck me as a long time from then. She’d also been hanging out with one of my best friends on the weekends, which only served to make me jealous. Most of all, I needed to feel like she missed me as much as I missed her, but when I hung up, I didn’t think she did.
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“Best oatmeal in the tropics.”

“I’m serious. I had a trekking trip come up last minute. Yossi’s on as head guide, but we still need a cook. It’s all I’ve got for now.”

Cooking was hardly what I’d had in mind when I went to see my friend Jean Brown, a British expatriate and well-seasoned adventurer who operates one of the oldest and best-known guiding agencies in Ecuador. My hope was to get an insider’s look at Ecuador’s mountain tourism industry by working one of the agency’s climbing trips as an assistant guide. A fringe benefit would be learning the ropes on one of the country’s biggest mountains. To the credit of the agency, however, their policy is to employ Ecuadorians whenever they can. Thus all their climbing trips were already well-staffed with local mountaineers. Swallowing my pride, I conceded that cooking for a group of gringo trekkers would provide some valuable insights, and at least I’d be acclimatizing in the meantime.
I knew Yossi Brain’s name from the trekking and climbing guidebooks he’d written to the Bolivian Andes. According to Jean he was also quite an alpinist, and the opportunity to work with him was part of the reason I took the cooking job. I didn’t meet Yossi until the morning we left Quito to pick up the clients. He staggered into the office, looking like a slightly hung-over Nordic prince. He was much younger than I expected, probably in his early thirties, and well over six feet tall. He had a blond pony tail draped over one shoulder, was clean-shaven, and sported a bracelet of Bolivian silver on one wrist and a little silver stud through one of his nostrils. His bearpaw hand swallowed mine as we shook. His grasp was overfirm, as those of climbers often are.

The sun shone brilliantly as Jean’s business partner, another David, threaded the oversized Landcruiser through Quito’s narrow backstreets. David and Yossi were both Brits as well, and I felt out of the loop as they discussed their soccer allegiances and the social intricacies of the local expat community. As they chatted, I turned my attention to the scenery, and at a high point on the outskirts of the city, we were greeted by the volcanoes Cotopaxi and Antisana swelling from the rolling brown hills. The glaciers crowning these proud humps glimmered in the morning light, and a wave of excitement shuttered through me as I imagined climbing in that extraterrestrial world.

From the vantage point, I imagined the route we would follow between the mountains over the course of the next three days. We would begin with a steep climb up to our first camp for sunset views of Cotopaxi. The next day would bring a descent through high grasslands to a second camp in a grove of stunted forest alongside an alpine lake. On the final day we would hike all morning beneath Antisana’s snow-fluted grace, arriving at our pickup site by noon. The route was known as the Condor Trek for the
prevalence of the namesake birds along it, and it was rumored to be one of the finest mountain tours in Ecuador.

I felt a bit odd taking clients on a walk I had never done before, but then I was just the cook. Yossi, at least, had hiked the route some years earlier but admitted to having little memory of it. While we could follow the route with the topographic maps we’d brought along, finding the best spots to camp and find water could be a trick. Jean, however, had assured us that the muledriver she’d arranged to accompany us with the packstock had done the trip many times. We would simply defer the routefinding duties to him.

The only hitch in our planning was that David thought the menu for the trip was terribly inadequate. Jean and I had agreed on meals that would be quick to cook and easy to digest at elevations above 12,000 feet. Oatmeal breakfasts, cheese and crackers and light snacks for lunch, and hot dinners of instant soup and pasta. David thought the clients would be unhappy without more protein and fat, despite the fact that such heavy fare often strains the stomach at higher elevations. I thought we had plenty of sustenance and trusted that Jean was working from a long-trusted menu. I was certain she would have stood up to David over it, but she was in Quito, and I was disinclined to argue with my peeved boss who seemed set on a resupply.

“So Yossi, how did you end up in Bolivia,” I asked, eager to steer the subject away from the menu.

“Big mountains and it’s cheap. I figured I ought to be dead anyway, might as well move to Bolivia,” he said laughing.
After a bit more probing, I got the rest of the story out of him. He and his partners had fallen almost three-thousand feet down one of the classic routes in the French Alps. Rather than giving up climbing as a result, as saner people might have done, he had embraced it. He sacrificed his budding career in journalism in London for a life among distant mountains, moving to the Andes to work as a mountain guide and write guidebooks. He showed not the slightest hint of regret, and, as an aspiring mountaineer, I saw in him a boldness and commitment to idolize.

Our banter jumped between the cheapest beers in Quito, proper ice climbing technique, and Ecuador’s economic troubles as we rocketed south along the Panamerican Highway. Amidst a checkerboard of agricultural plots, I noticed several enormous greenhouses looking out of place amongst the scattered earthen-block structures. These, David informed me, grew roses and other decorative flowers that would eventually be packed in refrigerated trucks, rushed to the airport in Quito, and flown north in special planes to satisfy the U.S.’s bouquet needs. Cut flowers had become an important export for the country, and this valley, with its proximity to the capital, was at the heart of the strange business.

We had to pick up the clients at an upscale bed and breakfast that had previously been home to a prosperous local family whose hacienda had once stretched unbroken from Quito more than 100 kilometers south to the city of Ambato. The enormous landholding had long since been divided by property reform and the family had moved elsewhere, but their old manse had remained a country retreat for the wealthy. We left the highway just south of the town of Lasso and followed an avenue lined with the largest
eucalyptus trees I’d ever seen to the well-preserved estate house. We’d barely parked before our clients were out the door to meet us.

It was obvious that the group had been thrown together for the trip by the agency. I couldn’t imagine them traveling together otherwise. Dirk was a fit forty-something with a stylish goatee and just enough pretentiousness to match the ski town he was from in Colorado. James and Ed were friends; they both worked as physicians in Seattle and looked like aged REI models in their bright parkas and hiking gaiters. Martha, the only woman in the mix, was a rosy-faced grad student from New England who clutched her paperback novel like a security blanket.

As we backtracked north up the highway, David chatted up the clients, somehow turning the food resupply in Machachi into a bonus stop on the itinerary. We pulled into the middle of the dusty burg, drawing curious stares from the deeply creased and sun-leathered faces of the locals. We all piled out, and I was dispensed to buy a bigger cooking pot while David went in search of something to bulk up our cuisine.

I found a cheap aluminum olla covered in a decade’s worth of dust in a hardware store and hurried back to the car. The clients were already back in the jeep, apparently unimpressed by the photogenic offerings of the village. Just as they were getting restless, David came plodding up the street with several grease-streaked, brown paper bags.

“Hope you guys like fried chicken. It’s the local specialty,” he said, pushing the foul bags towards me. The sound of a fly buzzing around the cab overshadowed any murmurs of excitement. I counted my blessings that he hadn’t returned with live chickens that would follow us along the trek until the proper mealtime arrived. I’d seen this before and was not eager to add butcher to my list of group responsibilities.
We arrived at the trailhead in the heat of midday, expecting to meet our seasoned muledriver. Instead, we found two boys in clumsy rubber boots chasing a shaggy donkey around the meadow, under the watchful gaze of a grazing horse. While David and Yossi went to investigate, I unfurled a tablecloth and emptied the soggy breasts and drumsticks onto paper plates, remembering how my father liked to satirize the culinary preferences of the Britons.

Yossi came back cursing. Apparently the muledriver we expected was overbooked and had sent his nephews in his place. Not only were they barely tall enough to load the animals, but Yossi doubted they knew the route any better than he did.

"Just remember," Yossi said, "a cardinal rule of guiding: no matter how lost you are, never admit it to the clients."

With chicken-slick fingers and overfull bellies we shouldered our daypacks and took to a worn web of livestock trails that knit through the páramo. Mario and his little brother Hernan and most of our luggage sauntered ahead with the pack animals, leaving us with light loads for the steep climb up to the first pass. We all schooled together at first. Yossi pointed out landmarks on the horizons and recounted a few appropriate anecdotes. I studied his methods carefully, from his demeanor with the group to the way he walked uphill, and I made a point to model him. Soon enough the group fell into their own paces, and I took the lead with Dirk while the others trailed behind, Yossi bringing up the rear.

That initial hill was the kind that hikers truly despise. For miles it seemed like it was about to flatten out onto the ridgecrest, but somehow the pitch continued rolling
upward, never revealing distant views, only more browned slopes of tufted grasses. Occasionally I would see the boys up ahead, disappearing over a rise, and feel certain that before long I would top out and see them erecting our camp beneath the shadow of Cotopaxi. The entire afternoon passed in this way, and I felt impatient. Having been in Quito for a few days, the elevation hardly affected me. I wanted to walk fast, but I repeatedly slowed my pace to keep step with the others.

The sun was only two fingers' width above the horizon when Yossi suddenly appeared huffing up the hill behind me.

"They're getting pretty tired," he said, motioning back towards the group, "see if you can catch the lads and have them set up camp at the next good spot."

I took it as a challenge, winding myself severely trying to jog the steep hill at 13,000 feet. Finally the hill relented, and I was awarded a stunning view across the alluvial plain towards Cotopaxi. Below the pass, I could see Mario and Hernan monkeying with the horse's cargo. I assumed they had found camp and were in the process of unloading.

"Find a flat spot for the tents and start some water boiling. We'll be down shortly," I yelled to them. They waved back to me.

With the sun disappearing, I dropped my own pack and started back down the hill to see if I could assist any of the clients on the final leg of the grunt. Before long I ran into Dirk and James, who told me Ed might need a hand. I pointed them in the direction of camp and continued down to where Ed was struggling along.

"I'm about finished," he said, looking far too pale and shivering in the wind that had blown up with dusk. I asked if he'd been drinking enough water, but he'd run out
halfway up the hill. I wanted to chastise him for ignoring what we’d told them about
staying hydrated, but there would be a better time for scolding. I persuaded him to keep
going with the promise of hot tea and a sleeping bag just ahead. Yossi and Martha soon
catched up to us, and I told them camp would be waiting just over the ridge. This brought
a smile to their faces, and they quickened their pace.

Much to my horror, when we finally crested the hill, camp was nowhere to be
seen. Instead, the other three clients were huddled together in the spot I expected the
tents to be and Yossi was running full-bore down the opposite slope. I hurried down to
the group and asked what was going on.

“Yossi is off to catch the boys,” James said, “Why in the hell aren’t we camping
here?”

“I don’t know; that was the plan,” I said, feeling the mess was somehow my fault.
I tried to distract the group from the snafu-by pointing out Cotopaxi awash in the
afterglow of the setting sun. They seemed too tired to care much. We set off to catch our
gear before it became pitch dark.

Yossi had caught up with Mario and Hernan about a half mile down the hill, and
even from far above, I could here him unleashing his wrath on them. The lads thought
there was a better camping spot farther down the valley, oblivious to the fact that
darkness was falling and the group was utterly exhausted. Rather than retracing our steps
to the comfortable flats up the hill, we pitched the tents by headlamp on a soggy plain of
cushion plants just beyond the edge of a bog. While the clients collapsed into the tents, I
rushed about trying to get dinner started, feeling the most stressed I’d been in months.
I delivered a round of tea and soup to the clients in their tents. By the time the pasta was ready, I had a struggle convincing them it was worth sitting up in their sleeping bags to eat. Ed barely touched his food, complaining he had no appetite. I brought more tea to help him hydrate and pushed his full bowl back towards him.

“You’ll want the energy tomorrow,” I said, feeling as though I were dealing with a child. I was accustomed to traveling in the backcountry with people who knew how to take care of themselves, and I wasn’t sure I was going to like this new role one bit.

I took the dinner leftovers over to Mario and Herman, who averted their eyes from me, probably still shell-shocked from their scolding. My initial anger at them had faded, and I couldn’t help feeling a little sorry for them as I looked at their round, boyish faces. As Yossi suggested, they probably wanted to camp at a lower elevation for a warmer night’s sleep. Looking at the nest they’d made of two haggard sleeping bags and the saddle blankets, I could hardly blame them.

I tried to joke with them as they devoured the dinner remains. Gradually, guarded smiles crept back onto their sun-scarred cheeks. I learned Mario was sixteen and Herman was eleven, though he tried to convince me he was thirteen at first. I tried to imagine how I would have handled similar responsibilities at their age, back when I was worried about making the junior varsity football team or having my own car to drive to high school so the girls would take me seriously. The thoughts made me feel rotten, pointing out just how fortunate and spoiled I had always been.

The night quickly turned frigid under the open canopy of stars. Once I’d made a final check on the clients, I bundled up in my down jacket, thrilled to finally put it to use, and wandered off into the páramo for some time to myself. After the balmy comforts of
Costa Rica, everything felt crisp and sharp. The stars’ brilliance was magnified by the high, thin air and the lack of artificial light. I staggered up a cow trail to the edge of a short rise for another look at Cotopaxi. The glaciers on the peak radiated a ghostly glow, as if the mountain itself was incandescent. I wondered how many climbers were on its flanks at that moment, resting for a midnight departure to the summit. I tried to imagine myself there, questioning whether I was up to it.

I desperately wanted to become a climber of giant mountains. Yet I wasn’t sure how to justify this dangerous and selfish yearning. I thought of Yossi’s brush with death in the Alps and the fact that it had only pushed him farther into a life of risk in the mountains. I had hinted at this irony as we’d prepared dinner together, but he had shrugged it off. I got the sense that there was something inexplicable but overwhelmingly powerful in this desire to reach the world’s highest and most hostile places. It was partly about testing one’s mettle, partly about the sheer beauty of the experience, but still there had to be more. I wanted to grasp this unknown. As I stared out onto the world’s highest active volcano, I felt sure I could find it there.

The morning sun brought renewed optimism to the group. Looking at the maps over oatmeal, Yossi pointed out that we had put the steepest part of the walk behind us and that we ought to be able to reach the evening’s campsite long before sunset. As I did the dishes, Yossi and the boys broke down camp and the clients explored the area with cameras drawn. Had I been on my own, I would have spent the morning scrambling up the mineral-streaked screes of Sincholagua, a peak that had been glaciated until the radical warming trend of the previous decades. As it was, by the time I’d finished the
clean-up, the group was ready to depart, all except Martha at least, who had been nose-deep in her novel most of the morning.

We lost elevation gradually as we descended through the bunch grasses of the páramo, following a clear, cold stream that was born from the bogs beside our camp. We saw little in the way of wildlife, with none of the eponymous condors circling on thermals overhead. Instead livestock trails crisscrossed everywhere around us, and the vegetation was stomped down and over-grazed in many places. On a distant hillside I could make out a flock of sheep with my binoculars. Above them, lounging in the grasses, was an Indian girl and her dog. She was dressed in the traditional heavy skirts and bright cardigan sweater topped off with the felt pork pie that many of the indigenous women wore. I could see that she was watching us as I watched her. Her presence emphasized the fact that we were hardly alone out here. I wondered what ran through the young shepherd’s head as our odd assembly, clad in the bright colors of overpriced sportswear, paraded through her mountains.

We had no real right to be hiking there, I realized, though no one was likely to bother us about it. We weren’t in any kind of national park or nature preserve. In fact, most of the land in Ecuador above 4000 meters, or about 13,000 feet, was declared communal land by national law. This created a public grazing allotment, or what Garret Hardin would consider a “commons,” where locals who usually lacked anything more than a small parcel of land could scratch out a meager livelihood from herding. Although I bemoaned the impacts of their livestock on the fragile highland vegetation, I accepted that this was a landscape of production for these people, a place they depended on to fatten their animals in the dry season and to provide traditional medicines and the straw
thatch used to roof and insulate their tiny homes. These campesinos, mostly of pure indigenous descent, survived the uncertain life of peasants, yet they maintained a proud and resilient dignity that too often seemed lacking in those of us more fortunate.

The indigenous populations in Ecuador made the country seem like a world distinct from the United States or even Costa Rica. Whereas Costa Rica’s indigenous groups had been all but wiped out during the European colonization—a result of disease, the slave trade, and racial mixing—almost half of Ecuador’s population were still pure-blood Indians. Although there was a trend of immigration from the campo, or countryside, into the large cities, many of these people still depended on the lands they had traditionally occupied for subsistence, whether it was here in the highlands or in the headwaters of the Amazon. Ecuador’s government thus faced a difficult situation in trying to establish national parks and other large tracts free of human occupation. Often there were simply too many people tied to that land to tuck it away in tidy preserves. In some cases, they had gone ahead and established the parks on paper, but such designations meant next to nothing on the ground.

As we walked, I thought of how the early government of my own country had herded the continent’s native peoples into slaughter or virtual captivity in reservations, opening the frontier for entrepreneurial schemes and later for the do-good efforts of preservationists. The whole concept of national parks, as it was born in the U.S., hinged on the existence of huge parcels of unpeopled space. Long before it became the country’s first national park, Yellowstone had been the territory of the Shoshone and other tribes; Yosemite, the sacred valley of the Ahwahneechee or Miwok; and the Great Smokies, the hills of the Cherokee. Once these First Nations had been conquered and
contained elsewhere, their lands were free to be made into the national heritage sites they are today, where for a twenty dollar entry fee we are permitted to recreate within them and enjoy their scenic and highly-regulated wonders.

Before I’d become aware of all this history, I had always thought of my country’s parks as a birthright, beautiful places protected for the enjoyment of American citizens. It was hardly that simple, I realized. I had a history with our parks because of my parents’ love for them, and because we’d had opportunities to travel widely. I was lucky, and, even within the U.S., I was an exception.

When I considered what I’d seen in Latin America, I doubted that many children, or adults for that matter, thought of the national parks in their countries as something that existed for their benefit. Instead, protected areas were more often viewed as playgrounds for foreigners or as places where valuable resources were sequestered for the sake of some abstract concept like biodiversity protection. How many Ecuadorians could afford to leave work and make the six-hundred mile flight to the Galapagos or even the ten hour bus trip to the Amazon? And how many could afford to worry about the fate of biodiversity given the conditions in which they lived. In Costa Rica, where money and opportunities were better distributed, I had seen plenty of locals in the more accessible parks, and that had struck me as one of the park system’s major successes. But here in Ecuador, I had to wonder if the North American park model was suitable at all.

“Can I look,” Hernan’s sheepish voice asked from behind me, begging a look through the binoculars. Yossi had demanded that the pair stay in sight of the group at all times after the night’s debacle, and they were doing their best to drag their feet. I dropped the strap of the binoculars over Hernan’s head, explaining to him how to focus
the lenses. He recoiled from them at first, and I wondered if it might have been the first
time he’d seen the world magnified before his eyes. Mario wanted a look as well, and
they bickered over them as siblings will.

“Careful now, take turns,” I said, feeling protective of the optics.

“She’s pretty,” Mario said, waving to the girl on the far hill. Hernan giggled at
his brother, and I was happy to finally see them acting like the kids they were.

“Can we go that way?” Mario asked hopefully. I looked towards the group. They
were almost out of sight down the hill below us.

“No, we’d better catch the others,” I said, sorry I couldn’t let them go play.

“Can I carry them?” Mario asked, holding the binoculars.

“If you promise to be careful,” I said, and then, realizing I had the upper hand,
“and if you’ll help with the dishes tonight.”

We took the day’s trek at a leisurely pace and were still on schedule to reach
camp by mid-afternoon. After a long lunch and pleasant siesta, we made the final
descent into the valley we would follow to a cove forest nestled beside a turquoise lake.
Yossi remembered the spot fondly from years before and thought an afternoon of basking
on the lakeshore would make up for the previous evening’s misadventures.

The first sign that something was awry came when we crossed the fresh scar of a
road dissecting the belly of the valley. I saw Yossi pull the map from his pack and do
some refiguring.

“Hmm, new road,” he said. Thinking of the advice he’d given me at the
beginning of the trip, I wondered if he was just covering up the fact that we were in the
wrong drainage entirely. Picturing the lay of the land on the map, however, I didn’t see how that could be possible.

“As I remember, the lake should be just ahead,” he reported to the group.

Looking at the deep tracks of heavy tread in the clay of the roadbed, I had a sinking feeling our plan was doomed.

Soon, we rounded a bend in the road, cresting a knoll that looked down upon the lake. Fed by the runoff from the glaciers of Antisana, the water was milky, its pale glow a stark contrast to the dry grass that ran down to its edges. At the near end of the lake, however, where the road ran close to the shoreline, the water was churned and muddy. The crunch and grind of heavy machinery was audible below us, and the fringe of the forest where we’d planned to camp had been scraped away.

“Bloody hell! It looks like they’ve put the road right through the old camp; must be a new mine up the valley,” Yossi said.

“Seems like a big kink in our plan,” Dirk said.

Yossi ignored him, looking pained. Judging by the faces of the clients, their morale had plummeted. Even quiet Martha was looking hacked. Selfishly, I was glad to be the cook.

“Should we have a look at the map,” I asked, “perhaps we can find something up one of the valleys towards Antisana.”

“No, the water’s bad,” Yossi said, “full of minerals and heavy metals. We’d be shitting ourselves for days.”

I’d never heard of such a thing, but I wasn’t about to argue. He decided we’d backtrack up the road in search of a suitable water source. I disliked following the road
corridor, as did the clients. Our views of the mountains were cut off and any semblance of a backcountry experience, which was laughable at this point anyway, was ruined. The enormous dumptruck that dusted us in passing only added insult to injury.

We spent the rest of the day trying to keep pace with Yossi’s long strides. It was all too obvious that we had no sense of where we might camp. We were in a stretch of páramo where there was no surface water, and I began to worry that we might have to do without it, which would make my job as cook obsolete.

Fortunately, not long before dusk we saw a cement farmhouse squatting in the distance. I hoped Mario and Hernan might know the owners, but they were from the opposite side of the mountains and hadn’t a clue who lived here. We waited outside the entrance to the ranch while Yossi went to investigate. He returned shortly, indicating we could camp in the pasture and make use of the well water. No one argued. We pitched the tents quickly, and once again, the clients disappeared into them. The group camaraderie we’d enjoyed earlier that morning was gone as everyone sulked in their personal tents, waiting to be served. The general feeling about camp was one of mutiny. Once again, I called to the clients as the sunset lit up the icy cone of Cotopaxi on the western horizon, but only Martha even bothered to have a look. I had to wonder what they had come out here to see in the first place.

On the afternoon’s long march down the road, the group had begun to confide in me their discontent over the whole trip. I assured them I understood, while trying to defend Yossi and myself on the basis that things rarely went as planned in Ecuador. James and Dirk both argued that they had booked the trip in order to avoid the kind of hassles we’d subjected them to ever since setting out. I suggested that at least it was an
adventure. They thought it a lousy one. They’d wanted to breathe the mountain air and enjoy the scenery, without experiencing a crash course in the logistical difficulties of the Andes.

I recounted some of their complaints to Yossi as we prepared dinner. He dismissed them casually. While I truly wanted the clients to finish the trip happy and satisfied, he’d been guiding long enough to realize that not every trip worked out just right.

“They’ll get over it;” he advised, “and it’ll make a good story; everybody needs epics.”

“They obviously don’t get many,” I said, seeing his logic. I decided that perhaps that was the lesson in the trip: that life wasn’t easy here; that not even money could guarantee a smooth ride on the rockier sections of the Gringo Trail. I feared, however, that the group would fail to see the difficulties as inherent to the experience. Instead, they would only blame their inept guides. Had they considered the fact that two mere boys who should have been in school were leading their pack animals, or that mining interests were busy pillaging the watersheds that the people who lived here depended upon. I hoped they had realized these things, but I doubted it.

The next morning, Yossi took the clients on a hike towards Antisana so they might enjoy some final views of the mountains. The lads and I were to break down camp and hike to our pick-up point, where we would meet up with the rest of the group. I packed the bags as Mario and Heman struggled to load them. The boys were still wearing the same rubber goulashes, baggy jeans and cotton sweatshirts they’d been in the entire trip. Hernan’s clothes all hung off him, and I guessed they were his brother’s
hand-me-downs. While the rest of us had donned windbreakers, down parkas, hats, and
gloves these two had merely endured. Their resilience was impressive and made me feel
soft.

As we drove the animals across the páramo, we talked openly. They asked me
about my car, if I had a girlfriend, and what life was like in the U.S. They thought that I
looked like Alexi Lylas. I asked them if they'd ever considered climbing one of the big
volcanoes that had always dominated their horizons. Neither of them had any interest in
it. I asked if they enjoyed working as muledrivers, and they both agreed that they did,
that it was good to make so much money for only walking.

“What will you spend the money on?” I asked.

“We are saving for a horse,” Mario answered proudly, “then we can work for
ourselves.” I had to smile thinking of the frivolous items that I had squandered my
childhood earnings upon.

“Just remember,” I said, in as serious a tone as I could muster, “gringos walk
slowly and only sleep where it’s flat.” Laughing along with them, I felt as good as I had
in days.

We met the rest of the group right on time, after I insisted we go the direction I
thought was correct, despite the boys’ insistence that the pick-up was over a distant hill.
They would have liked to cause me that one last headache. Looking back, I wish I’d
given them my compass. After we’d unloaded the animals, the boys set off for home.
They would retrace our entire trek and then some, and still be home for dinner. They
received little in the way of thanks from the group, which I thought was a true shame.
Despite the troubles they’d caused us, they’d been good company, and they were only boys after all.

Our vehicle arrived on time—at least something had worked out as planned—and we were carted to some little town where the clients were to meet their new guides for the jungle leg of their tour. As we all shook hands and they doled out their tips, I was glad to see that they were all smiling again. The experience was already becoming an epic adventure in their minds, one to share with the folks back home. It would be the same for me I wagered.
No Hay Paso

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*We need sometimes to escape into open solitudes, into aimlessness, into the moral holiday of running some pure hazard, in order to sharpen the edge of life, to taste hardship, and to be compelled to work desperately for a moment at no matter what.*

--George Santayana, *The Philosophy of Travel*

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“The road’s blocked?” I asked an old man in front of me, whose shrunken countenance reminded me of an apple doll. I’d overheard some worrisome murmurings among the local passengers.

“*Un poco,*” he said, as the bus switchbacked up into the steep knot of coastal mountains.

“We can get by?” I asked, unsure what the road being out just a little meant.

“Walking,” he said, using two gnarled fingers to illustrate a pair of trotting legs.

Before long the bus squawked to a halt. Out the window I could see the line where the hillside above us had sloughed off a thick shell of orange mud that had oozed over the road. The driver shut off the engine and motioned for us to disembark. As we unloaded our baggage, another bus pulled up on the far side of the muck and honked at us, easing my concerns about how long we might be delayed by the walk.

Looking at the slopes of eroding clay perched above the road, I imagined this kind of detour was routine during the wet season. Clearing the slide with a bulldozer would have taken half a morning, but given the poor fishing villages that lined this sweep of coast, the wait for a dozer might last far longer than it would take to open the road with
shovels. Both possibilities required someone to do the work, however, and here in the land of mañana, I imagined the bus swap might be a semi-permanent solution.

Earlier that morning, Lucy and I had left David and most of our gear in Montañita with the masses that were gearing up for the Carnival holiday and the accompanying surf tournament. We were off to explore Machalilla National Park, Ecuador’s showcase coastal preserve, which protected the region’s last remnant of Pacific dry forest and boasted the postcard scene of Los Frailes, supposedly the most scenic beach in the country. Although the crowds would undoubtedly flock to Machalilla as well, we had hatched an adventurous scheme to avoid them. Our goal was to traverse the entire coastline of the park, sticking to the beach and avoiding all the usual access points. We had packed light, carrying only the mosquito netting, our sleeping bags, a big jug of water, and some snacks.

We bypassed the official entrance to the park and got off the bus in the village of Machalilla. The place felt dilapidated, a ragtag ensemble of weathered shacks squatting above the tide line. There was a small general store, recognized only by the Coca-Cola sign tacked up out front. Expecting the usual selection of crackers, candy, and random tinned goods, we didn’t bother going in. We cut down a sandy street towards the ocean and soon turned south towards the park. Apart from a surly dog with one brown and one blue eye, there wasn’t a soul on the beach. A fleet of fishing boats slapping at their moorings set a walking rhythm for us.

Rounding a sandy point, we lost sight of the village and got our first look at the terrain ahead. Instead of white sand beaches extending down the coast, we were confronted by a flat of wave-carved tidepools and beyond them a rocky headland.
“I think we better hurry,” I said, guessing we had little more than an hour before the tides peaked.

We rushed along the tidepools, measuring our steps carefully on the slick rocks. As we skirted the blocky chert and limestone of the headland, waves were already licking around our feet, erasing all sign of our passing as we went. We rounded the point with relief only to find that the shoreline curled back into a horseshoe cove of rock bordered to the south by another steeper headland.

“I had a feeling this would be more than a casual walk on the beach,” Lucy said, as the ribbon of sand at the edge of the rocks went in and out of the waves.

“We’ll get wet, but we can still sneak around the point,” I said.

“But what if there’s another one around the corner,” Lucy said reasonably.

We moved as quickly as we could, but by the time we reached the back of the cove, waves were exploding against the rocks ahead of us. Clearly, pressing on would be foolish; we’d have to sit out the tide.

We snacked on cheese and oranges, keeping a close eye on the waves. We scrambled higher up the rocks when the spray from an especially big breaker showered down on our picnic. We weren’t exactly trapped—we could climb out the back of the cove and take to the tangled scrub if we had to. Yet, I found it satisfying to be forced to sit through the tide’s cycle, like watching a long, slow story unfold.

As the sun sank towards the horizon and the waves still fell heavily upon the point, we realized the likelihood of being benighted on the rocks if we continued. The only good camping sites we’d seen were back on the beach near Machalilla. Everywhere else was rocky and slanted, and there was no shelter in case the dark clouds amassing out
to sea turned to storm. Had it been David and I, we would have suffered on the beach that night. Fortunately Lucy had better sense. As the day faded, we began retracing our steps.

The tidepools we’d passed in such a hurry had been refilled, and the wet rock polished smooth as marble by the waves glowed a milky blue in the oblique rays of sunset. Blue and red crabs scuttled over the sand in front of us as we walked among a pod of wooden fishing boats that had been drug up onto the beach for the night. We considered pitching camp under a shelter of palm thatch at the edge of the beach but decided to ask around in town to make sure we wouldn’t be imposing or chumming for bandits.

We made for the one restaurant we had seen earlier, a whitewashed facade on the main street that advertised fried fish and beer on a blackboard outside. A broad Ecuadorian man wearing a Dunkin’ Donuts windbreaker and a warm smile waved us in, seating us in the middle of the empty restaurant and ceremonially lighting the candles on our table. We had a round of beers and then asked for menus. There weren’t any—fried fish was the special of the day and the only offering. Maybe it was always that way.

As we picked the greasy fish off its bones, Bernardo, the proprietor, sat and talked with us, asking a flurry of questions about life in the States.

“Do people ever walk down the beach into the national park?” I asked him, after describing where Minnesota was in relation to Miami.

“From here, by the beach,” he looked at me quizzically, giving the impression he thought it a foolish idea, “no, no hay paso.” There was no way through. He suggested
hiring a boat in town to reach Los Frailes, or simply taking the road like most people did. I decided to spare him the exposition on my hunt for wilderness.

Rain began to pound on the sheet metal roof just as we were finishing dinner. We ordered more beer in hopes of waiting out the shower and continued chatting with Bernardo, who seemed pleased to have the company. We had been his only customers all evening. After the dinner hour had passed, Bernardo’s wife came out from the kitchen and joined us. Before long, his son was driving a toy dumptruck around beneath the tables as we talked by candlelight, Lucy and I straining to understand the coastal dialect over the roar of the rain against the roof.

The family lived together in a single room in the back of the restaurant. It seemed that they’d converted their living room into the business to garner a little extra money. Given it was Carnival week and we’d been the only customers all night, I imagined times were tough for them. Despite being the closest community to the national park, the town of Machalilla seemed to get bypassed for Puerto Lopez, which offered more choice in amenities and from where organized tours set out for Los Frailes.

Two beers later, the rain had yet to break pace and the wind had piped up. I asked Bernardo if there was a hostel anywhere in town and he shook his head regretfully. We considered trying to catch a ride back to Puerto Lopez for a room, but the road had been dead all evening. We resigned ourselves to a sodden night on the beach.

“You could stay here,” Bernardo said as we got ready to leave, motioning to the restaurant, “there’s no bed, but at least you will be dry.”

I wanted to give him a hug, and Lucy very well might have. We thanked him profusely as we helped clear away the tables to lay out our bedding. The cement floor
was hard and the light from the beer cooler was a bit distracting, but soon enough the
drumming of the rain lulled us to sleep.

We woke early to pots clanging in the kitchen and hurriedly packed away our
bedding, straightening up the dining area for the potential breakfast customers. The rain
was still pounding, and the main road that ran in front of the restaurant had become a
huge puddle. I couldn’t see trying to hike anywhere in such conditions.

Over breakfast, Bernardo, though still smiling kindly in his Dunkin’ Donuts
jacket, seemed distraught. I figured the weather was ruining a big weekend for business.
Trying to cheer him up, I suggested the rain might bring people off the beach and into the
restaurant, but he wasn’t buying it.

“The road will be fucked, no one will get through.”

I pictured the slopes of soft, orange mud we’d seen the day before and the steep
ravines that funneled runoff down to the sea. I mentioned our detour around the
mudslide. He expected much worse. I began to think of our things back in Montañita
and my flight to Chile in the coming week.

“How long could the road be closed?” I asked.

“How long will it rain?” he asked the sky. “If this keeps up, it could be days,
even weeks.”

I explained our predicament, how we needed to get back to Montañita in the next
few days.

“Go now, you might still make it!”
Bernardo flagged down the eight o’clock bus to Puerto Lopez as I paid for breakfast. Despite my insistence, his wife refused any payment for their hospitality, so I left a ridiculous tip on the table on the way out. We sloshed through ankle-deep water to get onto the bus and waved goodbye to the family who had gathered on the steps of their restaurant. I doubted I’d ever see them again.

There were only a few people on the bus, but the air was one of shared excitement. Rains like this brought trouble, and trouble brought people together. No one knew whether the road south was passable, but everyone had an opinion. The polls seemed to indicate we had about a fifty percent chance of making it.

Puerto Lopez looked like a paltry imitation of Venice when we pulled into town. The streets ran tire-deep with muddy water, and a couple of low slung cars were stalled out in the middle of things. Piles of trash floated through intersections without yielding as they raced towards the sea. The whole scene felt like a movie set. We popped our head into a storefront that advertised transport and found the clerks with their pants rolled up chasing water out of the back of the shop with mops and push brooms. They couldn’t tell us much, and they made no promises about the next bus south.

We helped push a stuck car off the street while trying to decide what to do.

“Should we go for it? It’s less than twenty miles, and we can hitchhike if there’s no bus,” I said, “it’ll be an adventure at least.”

“What else are we going to do?” Lucy said. It was true, we had little other choice but to sit tight and wait, which, given the shape of town, neither of us wanted to do. The national park would remain a mystery, but looking at the obstacles we’d encountered,
that seemed fitting. At least the rain was warm and seemed to be letting up as we walked out of town on the deserted highway.

From the ridge above town, the view back onto Puerto Lopez was shocking. The village was afloat, and where the ocean had been a soft emerald the day before, it was now rusty red for a hundred yards out to sea from the soil carried down out of the hills. Where the Carnival crowds had frolicked in gentle waves the day before, ugly breakers full of logs and garbage now churned onto shore.

Less than an hour into our walk, we were picked up by the first car that passed us, an overcrowded Isuzu trooper headed as far as the eco-lodge Alandaluz. The attractive bamboo cottages and the full bar at the resort would have been a nice respite from the storm, but we decided to keep our momentum. Perhaps a mile later, a dented-up truck sputtered by, and the driver motioned for us to climb in back with two other tag-alongs sheltered beneath a scrap of plastic tarp. As the rain slackened off, I began to feel like we were home free. But on the outskirts of Las Tunas, two women walking in the other direction flagged us down as we passed.

"No hay paso!" one of them said, wagging her index finger back and forth excitedly. The bridge outside of town was underwater. The news was enough to send our cursing driver back the way he'd come. By that point, we were almost halfway to Montañita, but we still had the mountains to negotiate. One of the other hitchhikers, an Ecuadorian man named Zenon, refused to be dissuaded by the locals who insisted that the road ahead was impassable. Buoyed by his optimism, we did our best to keep stride with him.
Soon enough, we encountered the obstacle everyone had been warning us about. What was a small stream I hadn’t even noticed the day before was now a wide swamp the color of a weak café con leche. Its edges spun with frothed eddies, and at its center, where the current ran fastest, we could make out the flat of the road where it crossed over a low-water bridge. On the opposite bank, where the road plunged into the current, a group of onlookers had gathered, probably to place bets on who might drown first. I had a feeling the appearance of Lucy and I might have upped their ante considerably.

The crossing was terrifying. Opaque with sediment, the river might have been six inches or six feet deep, and just below the bridge a nasty rapid swirled back on itself before the water spread out into a thicket of brush in its rush towards the ocean. I remembered David’s description of terminal holes on rivers—rapids where water recirculated endlessly. Once something went into them, it usually took a long time to get spit out.

My first thought was that we were stymied. Even if I had wanted to risk it, the look on Lucy’s face made me reconsider. Zenon, however, insisted a crossing would be possible far upstream of the bridge, and after discussing it briefly, Lucy and I decided to have a look. To reach the place he pointed out, we had to wade through several hundred feet of brushy overflow. As I pushed through the hip-deep water with muck and grass brushing my legs, I thought about snakes, wondering just how many had been displaced by the flood.

Hearing some commotion on the far bank, I looked over to see a heavyset man carrying a sizable branch out into the current. Following the roadbed, the man used the stick to steady himself against the current as it crept up around his waist. Unhappy to be
left behind, the man’s dog—a scrawny, speckled mutt—paced along the bank behind him, whimpering at his owner. The man stopped and looked back at the animal, barking some command just as the dog bounded out into the current. It had no more than begun to paddle when it was carried swiftly over the bridge, out of my sight. The yelps from the dog must have unnerved the man for he backpedaled to the bank, where the crowd watched helplessly. Hopefully the dog was washed free of the rapid, but we never saw it again.

We paused at the edge of a murky eddy, and Zenon pointed out the line to follow across. As soon as he started into the current, the water forced him downstream, off his intended trajectory and towards the bridge, where a culvert had to be making a dangerous sieve underneath the road. He kept his feet and moved diagonally towards the opposite shore. Fearlessly, he stopped and motioned for us to come out to him. We remained paralyzed. Instead of continuing across, Zenon fought against the current, making his way back up the eddy line to us.

“We will cross together,” he said, holding out his hand to Lucy. Given his effort, we could hardly refuse. We locked hands, with Lucy in the middle, and stepped out into the racing water. It was easiest to shuffle along, for each time I lifted a foot off the riverbed, I felt myself being tugged off-balance. Halfway across, my foot hung up on a submerged branch and I stumbled, letting go of Lucy’s hand. I felt my adrenaline coursing as I struggled to regain my feet, uncertain how far above the bridge I was. When I finally stood up again the water was only knee-deep, but I was closer than I liked to the roadway.
Lucy and I embraced on the shore as the crowd congratulated us. It was all Zenon’s doing, of course, and we thanked him to the point that his dark complexion seemed to blush beneath his baseball cap.

“Do you think that’ll be the worst of it,” I asked him, as we started to climb up into the coastal range.

“It will be difficult,” he said, waving his hand at the mountains, “but God will help us.”

He had seen it like this before, several times in recent years, and while the scientists argued it was a result of El Niño, he knew that God was punishing the local people, especially the youth, for their drug abuse and lack of morality. He said floods and earthquakes and other disasters had been occurring along the coast for years because of these wicked ways. Although I preferred the climactic explanation, I found his pious certainty chilling, especially given some of my habits.

Near the top of our climb, I brought out the king-size Snickers bar I had been saving for a special occasion and broke it into three pieces. Zenon refused at first, but I pressed it upon him. The treat came at a good time. Soon after the sugar began to course, we reached a shallow ravine that had made a deep incision beneath the road, undercutting its support and eventually washing most of it down the slope. A fringe of asphalt still hovered above the chasm like a cornice, and we hugged the hillside as closely as we could to pass. It would be a long time before any vehicle would safely make that turn.

Not long beyond the washout, we reached the point where we’d switched buses the day before. The entire slope above the road had released, and where we had skirted
the landslide before, there was now a mire of orange slop dotted by the remains of trees and shrubs. Shovels would now be of little use. While I would have stubbornly plunged into the quagmire, Zenon motioned to the jungle at the edge of the road. We clawed our way up the bank, encountering a light trail already beaten into the bush. I remembered this had all likely happened many times before.

As we moved through the undergrowth, I heard voices ahead, the first people we’d encountered since the river crossing. It was a father and three children heading north for Puerto Lopez; the dad carrying the youngest girl on his back. While we exchanged news of the road conditions, the older brothers scampered along ahead laughing, as though the trek was nothing but a big game. Their strength and lightheartedness boosted my morale considerably, reminding me that while Lucy and I had chosen this adventure, they likely had little choice but to live it.

The road beyond the mudslide was supposedly clear, but rather than continuing inland on the asphalt, which would take us miles out of our way, Zenon suggested we drop down to the ocean. From there, we could follow the beach all the way to Olón, where the father had said transportation was available. It sounded great, but, of course, there was a catch. Once again, we would have the high tides to contend with.

The trail to the beach was wet, sticky clay that made a standing glissade seem the best method of descent. Lucy and I were moving slowly with our water sandals caked in mud, and Zenon quickly disappeared in front of us. When we saw him again, he was waiting for us at an indistinct trail junction to make sure we didn’t take the wrong path.
“From here you will go straight to the beach. God be with you,” he said. We thanked him, shook hands firmly, and he took off down the hill. Suddenly, the whole setting seemed more foreign and wild.

It seemed the ocean had been building its wrath all day. From a knoll several hundred feet above the beach, we could see the distinct line far off-shore where the water finally turned from copper to azure. The surf zone was a mess of uprooted trees and other flotsam and the tides looked more than full, though the high was still an hour away. Once we hit the sand, I began to run, but Lucy was having none of it.

“I’m too tired to go on like this,” she said. I slowed my pace, realizing there was no way we were going to make it around the headlands lurking in the distance. This was not an ocean I wanted to push.

“Adam!” Lucy’s yelling barely reached me over the crash of the surf. I turned to see her waving me back. As I hurried towards her my mind spun with possibilities: twisted ankle, snakebite, a shard of glass. I soon realized she was stuck almost to her knees in a layer of gumbo mud that I’d avoided by walking closer to the waves. She was immobilized and visibly shaken by her predicament, but I couldn’t help chuckling. She called me a bastard as I gripped her under the arms and struggled to pull her free.

It was obvious Lucy was nearing the end of her rope, and the chaos of the ocean made everything feel slightly out of control. We were considering retreating to one of the deserted shacks we had passed on the trail down to the beach when two women in colorful t-shirts and short skirts came into sight from the direction we had been headed. Once again, the sight of others filled us with hope, especially this pair who looked better suited for a discotheque than death-defying adventure. I asked them where they had
come from, and they explained they had been going to Olón, but that the tide was too high. I asked if they’d passed Zenon. He had run by them just before the headland and disappeared around the point, wading through the waves. They thought he was crazy.

The women pointed us towards a steep footpath a short distance down the beach that would lead us inland over a scrubby hill. From the top of the hill we would find a dirt track back to the main road to Olón. I dreaded the steep walk, already feeling the spots where my filthy sandals had rubbed patches of skin from my toes and ankles.

As we drug ourselves up the overgrown path, my tired mind suffered again from snake paranoia. With each step into the high grass, I feared my foot would land on a fleshy coil. I broke off a low branch to probe along in front of me as I walked but remained jumpy. I was far out of my element and had no idea what to expect. Despite the fact that people lived all around us, I felt a sense of utter isolation as though I were deep in some wilderness.

When we crested the hill, I’d never been so relieved to see the ugly slash of a dirt road. We took to the track gratefully, passing a ramshackle cabin and surprising an old woman trailing a fat sow on tattered cord. She showed us a shortcut to the road and we tripped our way down the hill as fast as our tired legs would move.

With the road finally in sight, I again heard Lucy calling from behind me. When I turned, all I could see were her head and shoulders sticking out of the ground. I knew immediately she’d fallen into the deep drainage ditch I’d just jumped across. When I’d passed the trench, a long-defunct scrap of plywood had spanned the gap, perhaps a chicken crossing.
“Don’t tell me you stepped on that old board?” I asked, seeing the evidence that she had. Lucy, looking crestfallen, ignored my outstretched hand and grappled her way out of the hole.

“Could you be any more of an asshole!” she said, fixing me with a cold glare.

Thankfully, the ditch was the last major obstacle we faced, and Lucy’s frustration with me and the trials of the day faded as we bounced along the coastal road, watching the shadows lengthen over the deserted beaches north of Montañita. We shared the flatbed of the diesel truck with around twenty others, many of whom appeared just as filthy and exhausted as we were. Zenon was there, his tennis shoes and pants still soaked from his swim around the headland. The truck had stopped for him just outside Olón, and he’d been visibly surprised to see us when he climbed in back. We shook hands and congratulated each other warmly, like old friends, to the curiosity of the other passengers.

As I surveyed the wizened faces surrounding me, I thought about the harsh reality many of them endured. What had been a thrilling day for me, just trying enough to make for a good story, could lead to months or even years of inconvenience for them. Homes and businesses had been flooded, power lines knocked down, bridges washed out, crops destroyed, and water supplies fouled. While Lucy and I recounted our adventure to David over beers and a heaping plate of seafood, Bernardo’s family would sit patiently in their restaurant, waiting for customers that would never arrive. While I moved along to Chile’s scenic attractions and beyond, these people would struggle to pick up the pieces and continue forward, wondering when the next rains would come and how long they might fall.
The House of Wind

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And how often I’ve wanted to escape to a wilderness where a human hand has not been in everything. But those were only dreams of peace, of comfort, of a nest within stone and woods, a sanctuary where a dream or life wouldn’t be invaded.

-- Linda Hogan, Dwellings

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The plane was small, too damn small. Flying had never bothered me, but taking this gnat of an aircraft into skies infamous for some of the planet’s most ferocious weather had me thinking. Of course, my timing was impeccable. My arrival to Chilean Patagonia had coincided perfectly with the onset of the austral fall, a season known for nearly ceaseless bluster. As we waited inside the shelter of the Puntarenas airport, a relentless breeze herded trash and other untethered debris across the yawning landscape. Bienvenidos, gringo, welcome to the house of wind.

Looking away from the window, I glanced around the waiting room to see if any of the other passengers showed signs of trepidation. A sleek young man in the solemn garb of the Chilean Navy sat stone-faced, probably already accustomed to the turbulent trip to the tiny island of Navarino, where the only permanent settlement harbored a naval base. Across from him sat Jacqueline, calmly filing away at her bright red nails with an emery board. She was a round-faced Chilean, a beautiful and ever-smiling conversationalist I’d met the day before at the hostel where I’d camped out. She was married to a naval officer stationed on the island and was returning home from a family
reunion in the north. Her descriptions of the unpeopled mountains surrounding their tiny enclave had captivated my imagination, hooking me into this trip.

Behind me, out of sight, sat the only other passengers crazy enough to pay for a ticket on the Cessna. They were an oddly matched couple from southern California who I had crossed paths with in a café the day before. Rich was a lanky gringo who spoke only a little Spanish and, at 6’ 3”, stuck out at least as much as me and my muttonchops. He provided quite a contrast to his fiancée, Marisol, whose Hispanic heritage and fluent language skills helped her blend seamlessly into the local population.

During my brief conversation with them, we had both mentioned the appeal of visiting Isla Navarino, but secretly I had hoped they would decide against making the journey. It was nothing personal, only that I had hoped to be the lone gringo in such a remote location. I was headed as far south as I could go without an icebreaker or an igloo in order to avoid other travelers. In truth, I was hoping to avoid everyone.

As if he could tell I was thinking about them, I heard Rich’s friendly tone aimed at the back of my head.

"Decided to hike the circuit after all, huh?"

_Well, no shit_, I thought to myself, as I slowly turned around to face them.

“I’m not exactly sure where I’ll end up,” I said, knowing full-well we planned to do the same hike but wanting to avoid any suggestion of a group endeavor.

“We’re gonna stay in Puerto Williams and leave first thing tomorrow,” he said, with a little too much enthusiasm.

“I thought I’d start walking this afternoon,” I replied, changing my plans.

“I bet we’ll see you out there,” he said, trying to be nice.
“Maybe,” I said, hoping they wouldn’t.

The circuit Rich referred to was a fifty kilometer circumnavigation of the island’s highest peaks, the Dientes, or teeth, of Navarino. These craggy spires, more than a thousand meters high, divided the island roughly in half and sheltered its northern slope from the full brunt of the storms that raged up from the Antarctic. I had read about the tramp in a guidebook that described the region as a “superb subantarctic wilderness of rugged windswept ranges and alpine moors” offering “the most southerly trekking in the world.”

Despite the fact that it had already made the guidebook, the setting sounded too good to pass up, especially after Jacqueline’s description of the inhospitable terrain few people ever went to explore. I was in search of just such a place. After Ecuador, where every square mile I visited seemed altered by my kind, I longed to explore somewhere wild, a place where neither precious resources nor scenic attractions were worth the pains required in getting there.

I was also craving some time all to myself. Between David, Frederico, and Lucy, I’d been traveling with someone else for the last five months. This was far from what I’d had in mind when I’d envisioned my wanderjahr as an exercise in solitude and self-reliance. While I’d been having a great time with my companions, I couldn’t help but feel I’d cheated myself of the solo experience. Now that the year was more than halfway gone, I thought it was high time I struck out alone. Other gringos, no matter how friendly they might be, didn’t fit into my plans.
We'd been rocking about in the sardine can of a plane for nearly an hour when we dropped through the pillow of storm cloud and a bleak expanse of graphite water opened up beneath us. The pilot informed us it was the Beagle Channel named for the vessel that had carried Fitzroy and Darwin through the region in the 1830's. The channel was frothy with whitecaps and dotted with gnarled chunks of wave-carved rock where little managed to grow. Off to the north, narrow fjords cut into a maze of snowy peaks on Tierra del Fuego, the largest island in South America. As the plane banked around to the south, another island crowned with a sharp spine of peaks poked into my porthole window. These had to be the teeth of Navarino. They looked decidedly inhospitable as I tried to imagine the path I would follow in the coming days.

After a most-welcome landing, we piled into the back of the airport limo, a rusted-out Ford pickup, and rolled into town along rutted dirt streets. Puerto Williams is the southernmost permanent settlement in the world and possibly the most isolated place in all of Chile. In the drab light of the overcast afternoon, the village seemed to huddle against the hills, cowering away from the stormy sea. Even with their bright blue roofs, the uniform architecture of the naval housing was uninspiring. The town had a desolate feel with none of the traveler's luxuries one encounters in tourist destinations the world over. It was a good sign; this place was closer to the end of the world than I had imagined, and its isolation on a frontier to nowhere felt daunting.

I got out at a little mercado and waved good riddance to the other passengers. As I unloaded my pack, Jacqueline, who, in her warmth, had invited us all to stay with her family, seemed concerned.
"All by yourself? It’s already late! You’re crazy not to stay until tomorrow," she said, gesturing toward the stormy horizon, "You could leave in the morning, after a good breakfast!"

*Oh no, no chance,* I thought. How could I tactfully explain that the last thing I wanted to do was hang out in a small house with six other people and four stinking cats, only to awake in the morning feeling obliged to set off on my merry way with these other two gringos in tow. I bit my tongue, and made something up about wanting to explore the stream on the outskirts of town. As the truck pulled away, she offered one final warning.

"*Cuidado,* there’s nobody out there."

"*Perfecto,*" I shouted back into the dust.

I hurried through my shopping in the little store, happy to find delicacies like peanut butter, gouda cheese, and a couple liters of boxed wine. After stuffing five days of supplies into my swollen pack, I hustled to the far edge of town to register with the local police. Inside the tiny station, a somber but friendly official in an over-starched uniform had me sign into a thick log book. The last few years' worth of trekkers fit onto only a handful of pages. I had to note an emergency contact at home, which made me realize that no one I knew had any idea where I was. For some reason, I was just as glad they didn’t.

Just as Jacqueline had said, most signs of civilization disappeared once I had passed the requisite statue of the Virgin Mary on the edge of town. The dusk grew heavy as I entered an ancient forest of lenga trees growing along the banks of a tumbling creek. The leaves of this deciduous species of southern beech were turning fiery with autumn,
and it seemed strange to think that the dogwoods were probably blooming at home. I pitched the Yellow Sub on a level spot just close enough to the water to enjoy its gurgling song and gathered some wood from the deadfall that covered the forest floor. Given the shortage of trees in the Ecuadorean highlands, I hadn’t cooked over the campfire since the beach in Costa Rica. I looked forward to further blackening the bottom of my cook pot while enjoying the fire’s warmth and glow. I couldn’t think of better company.

Under the last light of day, I followed the creek upstream to a small fork. I veered here with a smaller tributary and arrived at a little pool only a few feet deep that sat behind a squat beaver dam. I paused for a moment staring at my reflection in the pond’s still glimmer and wondered if beaver shit might cause giardia. I hadn’t considered that possibility when I’d jettisoned my filter back in Puntarenas.

In my periphery, I noticed a ripple spreading through the pool, and then a fat beaver tugboating towards me from the far shore. He was approaching quickly and showed no sign of fear. I considered fleeing myself, but his demeanor seemed peaceful so I stayed put. He swam to within a foot of where I stood on the grassy bank. I spoke to him in a soft tone, admiring his broad tail and oily coat. He seemed pleased by the talk, his trusting eyes reminding me of those of the blue-footed boobies I’d seen in the Galápagos. There, just as on Navarino, a lack of predators has left the animals naïve to the threats of humans and other dangerous beasts.

Although I generally loathe rodents, I appreciated that beaver, for it seemed we had formed some special, unspoken bond. I felt alive, vivid, and if a rodent had helped me achieve that state, so be it, even if it were a destructive one introduced from North America half a century ago, probably by some greedy fur baron. In any case, he seemed
to belong there at least as much I did. We stared at each other for a moment, and he headed back across the pool, diving near the far shore and vanishing. After he disappeared, I sat in silence as it grew dark, letting my mind clear. Hours later, as I drifted into sleep, the stillness of that pool reflected calm upon my dreams.

The next day dawned blue, and the sky was streaked with racing clouds. I packed hurriedly, wanting a jump on the others, and hiked south uphill into a zone of tangled shrubs and grasses on the steep northern flank of Cerro Bandera, or Flag Hill. This rounded mountain was named for a giant Chilean flag constructed of sheet metal and erected high on the hilltop during the military tension with Argentina in the 1980's. I never saw any sign of the flag and figured it might have been blown into the Beagle Channel by the winter storms. Such an end to it seemed fitting; if anyone had claim to this land it was the wind.

Once above treeline, the strength of that wind surprised me. Despite all I had heard about the extreme weather in this part of the world, I was startled to find myself at the mercy of the gusts, forced to my knees or onto my backpack like a turtle flipped on its shell by a menacing kid. This happened several times as I teetered along narrow guanaco trails that contoured the steep hillside.

Though I was looking for them, none of the notoriously shy guanaco showed themselves. I wondered if the island’s population of this cameloid cousin of the llama lacked fear in the absence of predators, as the beaver had the night before. I thought about how easy this would make them to hunt and began to wonder what rotisserie-fired guanaco might taste like, or blackened beaver steak for that matter. I thought of all the
food wedged into my pack and the pounding my knees were taking and imagined how lightly I could travel if my predatory drive were a bit more developed.

Following this line of thought, I wondered how long I might last were I simply to disappear into the wilds on the other side of the range. Could I make it through the winter? Not a chance. I’d be back in town within the week. But what if there was no town? Perhaps I’d surprise myself. Even in the direst straights, people manage to survive. My mind jumped south to the plight of Shackleton’s disastrous Antarctic expedition of the early 1900’s, one of our greatest stories of humankind’s will to persevere in the face of overwhelming hardship. The group's ship, the aptly named Endurance was caught in and eventually crushed by the pack-ice of the Weddell Sea, before they even reached the true continent. They then spent more than a year trapped on the mostly frozen ocean, living off of penguin blubber, seals, and even their sled dogs. Amazingly, though they faced two Antarctic winters before being rescued, not a single member of the expedition perished.

I, on the other hand, was hardly roughing it. I stopped early that afternoon at a crystalline tarn sheltered from the wind by the crest of the Dientes. My plan was to make camp and cook up a big feast to lose some of the weight from my pack before the first pass of the trek. I cracked into a box of wine before setting up the tent and lounged with my journal on a sunny rock at the water’s edge. Later, I made a big fire and cooked lentil stew with fresh carrots, onions, and garlic. By the time I’d drained the dregs from the liter of Gato Negro, I could barely find my tent.

I awoke late and discombobulated the next morning to the sound of voices nearby. Rich and Marisol were down beside the lake filling their water bottles. I looked around
and saw their tent only a few hundred yards from mine. I packed quickly, still seeking space on the trail. On my way out, I wandered over to say hello to my neighbors. Although I wasn’t looking for new friends, we were both out here, and I didn’t see any need to come across as a jerk.

“Morning, when did you guys get here?” I asked.

“Just after dark. We saw your fire,” Rich replied.

“You could have joined me,” I said, wondering if they already thought I was a jerk from the airport.

“We were exhausted. We ate dinner and crashed,” Marisol said.

“Maybe tonight,” I said, thinking neighbors weren’t the end of the world, especially if they also wanted their own space.

I headed for the pass at the western edge of the range as fast as my hangover would let me. I was anxious to see the island’s southern half. Rather than the stately beech forests, it was supposed to be a moorland of rock and shrubs, hammered by the Antarctic storms.

I picked my way carefully up a huge stabilized talus field, passing below broken walls of dark red rock streaked with mineral deposits and speckled with lime and orange lichen. The pass was only a small notch eroded into the shoulder of the ridge that stretched along between the range's major peaks. The southern side dropped off steeply into dwarf lenga forests, and in the distance a moonscape of moorlands lay cratered with lakes. These alpine gems, sculpted by glaciers, were of varying size and ranged in color from azure to obsidian.
Beyond Navarino’s southern coast I could see a chain of smaller islands extending out to Cape Horn, the very tail of the continent. Beyond that there was only the vastness of uninterrupted ocean, the raging waters of the Drake Passage, one of the most infamous maritime crossings in the world. Here Shackleton and five of his men had braved the swells for seventeen days in a sixteen foot open dinghy in order to reach South Georgia and bring help to their stranded crew. And farther yet, beyond everything my vision could capture, I fancied I saw the granite towers of Queen Maud Land poking into the distant horizon. Those ghostly spires were an illusion I knew, but this was one of those rare moments, as in the dimness of dreams, when imagination proved more powerful than sight.

From my vantage point, I could see no sign of human impact anywhere on the southern half of the island, not a single road or clear-cut, no boats rocking on the angry swells, and no planes or vapor trails interrupting the quiet or marking the great blue canvas of sky. There was nothing to detract from the immense solitude I experienced staring off towards the South Pole into a wilderness of water and stone.

That view assured me of the existence of land where my kind had no place in the order of things. It was a feeling both hopeful and vaguely threatening. I’d felt this way before, crossing glaciers in Alaska and bushwhacking through dark glades along a tributary of the Amazon. They were rare, but I had found places where I knew deep in my bones that I was out of my element, places that suggested through subtle fear that I needed to find my way back to the trail and stay on it. There was nothing about Navarino that made me afraid exactly, but it inspired humility, and while it wasn’t any kind of designated wilderness, it felt as wild as anywhere I’d been on my trip thus far.
Sitting at the pass having lunch, I tried to imagine a daily existence in this environment, on its terms, without modern gadgetry or technological advantage. I tried to picture the Yámana, the indigenous people of the region who had been gradually killed off and bred out by the European settlers, exploring the interior of the island, hunting guanaco or steamer ducks. Yet they were a water people, and I imagine the pull of the sea kept them close to their mother's shores. Indeed, there seemed little reason, outside of the human drive to explore the unknown, for my kind to tread upon this ground at all. Realizing this, I had to wonder how many heavy-soled mountain boots, like the ones I wore, could tread upon this land before the sharp edge of it began to dull.

That night I couldn't drive the chill away. Although Rich and Marisol camped nearby, we shared no fire, for there was little wood to harvest from the stunted thickets of lenga, and the wind blew mercilessly. I awoke in the middle of the night and wrapped my down jacket around my head and still shivered until morning.

The following day, as the sun and the effort of steep hiking finally thawed me out, I crested a scree slope onto the second pass of the trek. I had to linger here for awhile as I reflected on the fact that I had reached the southernmost point in my long journey through the Americas. I thought back to the previous summer, Fourth of July, when my brother and I had camped in a storm of mosquitoes and black flies just south of the Arctic Circle in northern Alaska. There was so much ground, both physical and mental space, sandwiched in the expanses between here and there, the latitudinal termini of my life's experience. I wondered how much of it I could ever truly revisit, knowing change is inherent to every step we take.
Alone on that rocky perch, I envisioned my journey back north as a return, and in some ways a retreat, to the familiar. I still had a few months of travel left, more than many people would have in their lifetimes, but it was undeniable that I was on my way home. Homeward was the only direction I could go from here. This truth was both comforting and unsettling, for while I missed my family and friends and looked forward to some of the luxuries I’d grown accustomed to as an American, I couldn’t imagine settling down somewhere. I was hooked on movement, on the idea of belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I thought of Yossi and Jean and all the other expatriates I’d met, but deep down I knew I would go home.

Then there were the expectations I would have to confront at the end of this journey. None of it was new; I’d been wondering all along how this year would fit into, and perhaps shape, my life. How I might proceed with all I’d learned. I’d been given such opportunity, yet with it came an unspoken responsibility—even if only in my mind—to make something out of it all, to give back to these landscapes and people. I wanted to write a book but what good would that do? What good would anything do?

Sitting there, eating spoonfuls of peanut butter and hyper-sweet dulce de leche, in likely the most remote place I would find myself in on my entire journey, and maybe my entire life, I also felt a bit of remorse at returning to civilization. I knew most other landscapes would feel tame in comparison. I sensed I might often long for the strength of emotion that this land conjured within me. Feeling the pull of the wild tip of the continent, it took some time before I could turn my back on its grasp, finally reshouldering my pack and slipping over the pass into the valley to the north.
Just as the direction of my journey had been reversed over the course of a morning, winter fell upon Navarino overnight. I heard the snow against the tent but had no idea how much came down while I slept. Several inches, at least, lay draped across the craggy hills surrounding my camp when I awoke. Looking about the muffled landscape, my first thought was of coffee and my second was of Rich and Marisol, who I hadn’t seen since the previous morning. They were still somewhere behind me, probably not too far away. While I was prepared for mountain weather, I knew they had brought only a light tent and little more than rain gear. I found it ironic how quickly I grew concerned about them. After all my imagined misanthropy, here I was backtracking to look for their tent. At least I’d brewed my coffee first.

“Buenos dias,” I yelled, as I tromped up on their camp.

“Hey, good morning,” responded Rich, looking up from the stove he was busy packing up.

“How’d the snow treat you guys?” I asked, eyeing their partially collapsed tent.

“Lovely,” Rich grinned, but from within the tent I heard some grumbling of dissent.

“He had the dry side,” Marisol said, “I knew we should have gone to the beach.” She seemed in good spirits, which I was glad to see since she told me earlier she despised the cold.

“Looks like we’re going to have to hole up until spring,” I said, “the beaver should provide plenty of blubber and fur for mukluks.” We all laughed, but the joke raised some concern.
"We should get going," Rich said, "this could keep up until spring." Looking at the heavy clouds, I agreed and suggested we hike at least as far as the last pass together, just in case something happened.

Fortunately, the snow stopped falling soon after we began hiking, and the day warmed up rapidly. This made for a nice mix of slush and mud, and with the guanaco trails covered, we often found ourselves taking what seemed to be the path of most resistance, dragging our feet through scrubby bushes and climbing over hills unnecessarily.

The most annoying obstacle we encountered, however, was a complete reshaping of several valleys by the unmitigated population of beaver. The ambitious rodents were clearly out of control on this side of the island, and their civil engineering was taking a toll on the watersheds. Where my guidebook’s description from only a few years before described small streams, there were now long chains of beaver ponds. At first we tried navigating around them but found it maddening as they’d flooded the entire valleys, drowning the beech thickets and acres of habitat in the process. Virtually cut off from the pass by mucky sloughs, we were forced to teeter across shaky dams hoping neither structural failure nor our heavy packs would dump us into the icy water. As I crossed each of these frightening bridges only to find more inundated meadows, I began to wish some very hungry predator upon the whole population of these non-indigenous varmints. Of course, any more introduced species would likely wreak even more mayhem on the natural order of things on the island.

We spent the better part of the day negotiating this sloppy, frustrating terrain, eventually reaching a precipitous slope that we figured had to lead up to the final pass of
the trek. By that point, we'd covered only a couple of miles but were slightly disoriented and fairly exhausted. I walked back and forth along the base of the slope looking for some sign of a trail, but there was none to be found. The entire hillside was covered in dense beech thicket, and from below, we could see every branch of the shrubs supporting its width and length in soupy snow.

None of us wanted to climb the hill, but we had no choice. Finally I plunged into the brush, figuring the others would follow eventually. The ascent proved every bit as heinous as I feared. With each step my footing would slide out from under me, and I would cling to the branches of the stunted trees for support, bringing loads of wet slop down on my head and shoulders. Despite my hood, some of the snow always snuck down the neck of my parka. By the time I finally reached the relief of treeline, I was soaked from sweat and ice water. As I shivered through changing my shirt, I watched Rich and Marisol enduring the same abuse and had to laugh. Given the circumstances, hiking together wasn't so bad; if nothing else, at least we could keep each other amused.

Suddenly, I was drawn away from their spectacle by movement in the sky to the south. At first I saw only a single bird soaring high aloft, giant considering how clearly it appeared at such a distance. Then several others materialized, and they slowly glided in closer. They moved as one in broad circles on the thermal, climbing and diving together as if they were playing some harmony on the wind. As they swooped over me I could see their fleshy bald heads and the white feathers at the tips of immense wings. I had been waiting so long, since my first trip to the Andes, to see condors. Now that they were floating above me, it seemed as though they had always been there, and that I had just learned to see them, to distinguish their forms from the rest of the sky. It felt like a gift.
after the trials of the day, or a hallucination, some trick of my mind. But there they were, and then they were gone. As quickly as they had appeared, they vanished over the ridge and back into my dreams.

“There’s no way I’m going down that!” Marisol said firmly, as Rich tried to convince her that the scree slide wasn’t a death trap.

We’d crossed the final pass and had been searching for a safe descent route off the plateau for half an hour. Everything seemed improbably steep. I could see perfect camping spots beside the lake nearly a thousand feet below us. I was convinced the scree was our ticket down and finally summoned the courage to go for it.

“Okay, here goes,” I said, and bounded down the slide as the loose rubble cascaded along with me. I dropped several hundred feet in less than a minute.

“It’s fun,” I yelled up to them, but I could tell from her body language that Marisol was having none of it. I dropped my pack behind a boulder and started the tedious climb back up the slope. Together, Rich and I finally coaxed her into giving it a try. I took her pack down first and watched from below. By the time she reached the bottom, she wore a huge grin.

“That was awesome,” she said, as we watched Rich tear down the slope after us.

As we plodded along the shore of the lake together towards camp, I reflected how much I had grown to like these two. Facing the hardships of the day together had undoubtedly made it easier on all of us. Yet I would always wonder what the trip would have been like if I’d been completely alone. As it was, I’d hardly seen them those first
few days, but somehow just knowing other people were nearby changed things. If not here, I wondered where in the world I might actually find complete solitude.

That evening I made a big fire and watched my boots and pruned feet steam off the day’s soaking. To the north, the evening light reflected on the Beagle Channel and a few lights glimmered in Argentina. It was the first artificial light I’d seen in five days. The thought of finishing the hike the next day was bittersweet, and my mind wandered back and forth over all the ground I had covered.

I wondered what the future held for this island. Would the beaver turn every valley into a swamp; would the gringo trail that currently cul-de-sacked in Patagonia dip further south, incorporating this walk into its well-worn ruts? I had done my part to bring it here, traveling the extra miles to escape the rest of the herd. It was inevitable that more would come. I cursed the trekking guide, although it was the only reason I’d experienced the magic of this place. I’d sought space and adventure in this wilderness, and I’d found it. But had my presence diminished the potential for others to have the same experience? And most importantly, how would all the visitors change the very nature of this land?

I had been careful to leave as little trace as possible, but not everyone would. I had crushed some vegetation with the footprints of my boots and my tent, dug a few catholes, and burned a bit of the deadfall, but there was little lasting impact I could identify in my movements. Given all the powerful emotions I’d felt here, I was certain that Navarino had had a much greater impact on me than I had had upon it’s wildness.

That night I dreamt of wind, awaking often to the sound of nylon flapping wildly around me. Yet when I got up to pee at dawn, it was dead calm and the eastern horizon burned crimson. One of my father’s favorite adages came to mind: “Red sky at morning,
sailor take warning.” As if in response, not a minute later a mighty gust blew up the cirque and crumpled my tent, snapping one of the aluminum poles at the end. As soon as I could throw on my clothes, I broke down the tent, fighting the wind the entire time. I realized Rich and Marisol had also been rousted when I saw one of their fluorescent pack covers sailing high above me like a balloon, lost out over the lake.

Before long we were fighting our way into the teeth of the gale, seeking shelter below treeline. Once we had reached the edge of the towering lenga forest, we were free of the direct force of the wind, but above, high in the canopy, the creaking and moaning of the widowmakers hinted at a new concern. As the treetops absorbed the lashing from the gusts, twigs and small branches dropped around us. My inner mountaineer, accustomed to watching for things that might fall from above and crush me, was suddenly on edge.

We quickened our pace, as the wind blew harder. In places, whole sections of ground around the trees were undulating, pried up by the roots that were being flexed by the swaying of the canopy. I went from concerned to terrified when a huge branch, plenty big enough to kill us, crashed down where we had walked only seconds before. After that, I began to run as fast as my stiff boots and fifty pound pack would let me. I didn’t break stride until I had reached a slope of jumbled talus where there was no longer any threat from overhead.

Staring back into the forest, panting hard and waiting for the others to emerge, I had to smile despite the trembling in my legs. If it’s the wild they want, let the gringos come, I thought. For when they arrive, they’ll get what they came for, just as I had. No matter what, it seemed the experience here would always be on nature’s terms. For after
being chased from its house, I was certain that here on Navarino the wind would always make the rules.
Select Bibliography


