

Excerpts

One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time. — André Gide

From the Prologue:

The only thing I knew with certainty was that I needed to leave Los Angeles, not because I was depressed or manic or looking to escape, but because some other part of me was demanding a radical change. I wish I could articulate this better, make it less elusive so it doesn't sound new-agey or clichéd, but the fact that I couldn't describe in words what I felt inside was part of the mystery, the pull. I knew only that after a decade of debilitating health problems and intense inward examination, it was time to make a break from my life and devote myself entirely to personal transformation. I left my fiancé, closed my psychotherapy practice, and sold everything I owned, not because I wanted to, but because I needed to relinquish all that was familiar in order to face something unknown.

Chapter 1

Lookout Mountain

At dusk there is a golden brilliance to the sky on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. The mountainous jungle comes down to kiss the sea, separated only by crooked palm trees and a narrow stretch of sand that tries to be a beach. Clumps of the coral reef protrude even at high tide, and flecks of light play on the water as the sun ducks behind the mountains. A newly paved single-lane highway traces the coastline all the way south to Panama.

Five hours outside of San Jose, on a bus heading to a destination in the remote jungle of the Talamanca Mountains, I drifted in and out of sleep. I was sandwiched between two young surfers, one from Italy, the other from France.

The rest of the passengers were Ticos, a nickname the Costa Ricans have given themselves. I swayed with the rocking of the bus, watching the darkness close in, feeling myself drift from self-doubt to excitement and back to self-doubt again. Tucked in my pocket was a torn piece of paper with the name of my stop written in Spanish, which I would hand to the ayudante (bus driver's helper) after we passed a little town called Caquita. My first destination was Hone Creek, known as the ghetto of the Caribbean. There, someone would drive me up the mountain to Samadhi, where I'd begin the first leg of my journey.

One of the surfers nudged me awake, indicating the bus was approaching Hone Creek. In a few minutes, I was alone with my backpack and two seventy-five pound pieces of luggage, standing by the side of the road in the dark. I watched the bus's red taillights fade out of sight. There were no signs, no one else waiting, and no little bench to denote an official bus stop — just an empty road and jungle all around. I stared intently in all directions. There were sounds I couldn't identify. Were those monkeys, bats, locusts? I started to feel uneasy. Maybe I'd gotten off at the wrong stop. I thought about flagging down another bus or hitchhiking. But then, where would I go? I was alone in the middle of nowhere.

Not knowing what else to do, I sat down on one of my suitcases and waited. I was afraid.



Headlights approached on the deserted road, and a 1969 Land Rover came to an abrupt stop right in front of me. A dark, curly-haired man with unnaturally white teeth got out. "You Yessica?" he asked. I nodded. At least now I wouldn't be found dead on the roadside. After loading my baggage, we headed directly up the mountain, which was so steep at times we rolled backwards, even with four-wheel drive. My anxiety continued. The farther up we drove, the more claustrophobic I felt. What if I wanted to leave this place? What if an emergency required a quick getaway? At each bend in the road I prayed that we'd finally reached our destination, but the man kept on driving. I tried to register

everything: the fear, excitement, curiosity, and all the other emotions flooding my mind. The stars were luminous and the jungle was thick all around. There was no sign of civilization as far as I could see, until my driver pointed up to the top of the mountain toward a small cluster of twinkling white lights. “Eso es Samadhi!”



He dropped me off at the front office, part of a main structure that housed a large open-air dining room built of wood and surrounded by jungle. I looked around for some form of life, but no one occupied the front desk and the dining room was empty. The gentle sound of flute and percussion music floated through the air, which ordinarily would have calmed me, but in this moment did not. I wondered if it was too late to jump back into the truck and head straight to the airport; I could probably make it home in less than twenty-four hours. Breathe, I reminded myself. Just breathe.

I glanced at my luggage, which was leaning against the railing, and then I looked back to the empty desk. I felt suspended between two worlds: the known, represented by my collection of things, and the unknown, symbolized by the eerie emptiness. How long would I be extracting symbolism from things — the luggage, the railing, the vacant space? Already I missed the carefree nature of a normal vacation, the thoughtlessness of tossing down suitcases and running off to play. But this trip wasn't a vacation; it carried a burden, a seriousness I hadn't expected. What had I expected?

A young girl with dark skin and black braided hair emerged from the kitchen. She greeted me and maintained fleeting eye contact as she picked up a walky-talky and radioed someone in Spanish. I searched her eyes for some sort of recognition, something familiar, hoping she'd confirm I was indeed in the right place, but she didn't speak English. You'd think I would have felt better having arrived safely at my destination, seeing other people, knowing I'd have a bed to sleep in. But I didn't.

Oblivious, of course, to the internal turmoil of her guest, Harriet (silent H) grabbed a flashlight to guide me through the forest to my room.

Minutes later we stopped at a low rectangular building where she flipped on a dim light to reveal a tiny cell-like room with two cots, one window, and no bathroom. A cockroach scampered across the curtains. "There must be a mistake," I said. "I reserved a bungalow overlooking the sea, not a room the size of a jail cell." Immediately, I felt a sharp stab of regret, amazed at how easily I was knocked off center, how quickly I complained without thinking.

Harriet could tell I wasn't happy, but we couldn't do much in the way of talking. I thanked her for showing me the room, deciding to speak with someone else later, hopefully someone who spoke English.

Feeling edgy, I rinsed off and made my way to dinner by flashlight. The gravel crunched beneath my feet as I followed the road that ran throughout the immense property, providing access for a few old trucks and cars. Clusters of various-sized cottages and bungalows were sprinkled over the mountain. Possibly some were houses. On the way I passed one of my suitcases, forgotten in the dirt road. A few people passed by and laughed at the sight of this lost suitcase. I wanted to explain that I'd been assigned the wrong room, that my suitcase and I were in transition, but I just kept walking.

The dining hall was the central meeting place for the retreat center; it housed the offices and supply rooms and one public bathroom. The area was neat and clean, with beautifully polished wood floors and high-beamed ceilings. Tiny white lights encircled the railing that jutted out over the mountain, and a few wood-bladed fans turned at the ceiling. It was obvious that a great deal of care had been taken to create a pleasant atmosphere, but I still felt unwelcome. I asked a young woman if I could join her table. She nodded that it was okay, but her body language and energy said, "Stay away," so I found another place to sit. I engaged in idle chatter, trying desperately to connect, embarrassed by my own discomfort at being alone.

After dinner I brought my tea down to the lower deck beneath the eating area, and sat under the night sky. The moon had broken through a crack in the clouds

and I stared out toward the horizon. I could feel my fear escalating, like a transparent blanket suffocating my consciousness, and I couldn't remember why I'd come. I had a comfortable life back in the U.S. — career, relationship, family, identity — why did I have to go to such extremes? Maybe I would just stay a few days and then go back home. But what would I go back to? I no longer had a house, a job, or a fiancé. The gravity of my situation began to sink in.

My mounting panic was interrupted when Zina, the retreat director, came down to greet me. A petite woman with a reserved smile and a somewhat militant air, she shook my hand and welcomed me to Samadhi. Thankfully, she spoke English.

“You made it,” she said. “How was your trip?”

“Long,” I said, cupping my hands around the tea mug. Heat vapors tickled my face. “I can't believe I'm here.”

We briefly discussed my accommodations, and she said she would try to work out a room change as soon as possible. I wondered if she meant it. Zina seemed to sense my unease, which I know wasn't hard since I practically attached myself to her arm, as if clinging would provide me a bit of comfort. She offered me some herbs to take before bed.

“The first night in the jungle can be very, um, different,” she said, “if you know what I mean.”

Sanda, though, had encouraged me to leave all sleeping aids behind, assuring me that I needed to handle my anxiety in a more conscious fashion. Zina sensed my hesitation, her eyes lingered a little too long, and I found myself wondering why I felt uncomfortable in her presence.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the little pouch of pills and tucking them into my pocket.

Zina said goodnight and I sat awhile and watched the clouds close over the moon, the stars radiant in the inky sky.

When I returned to my cell I surveyed all of my things. Why did I bring so much stuff? Who was going to wear all those clothes, read all those books, take all those medicines? I sat down on one of the little cots and listened to the noises

of the jungle. The creatures seemed to be monstrous, as if from some prehistoric land, and the monkeys howled like dogs.

I sat there, in a country where I didn't speak the language, and wondered if I was in trouble. I had just given over \$5,000 in traveler's checks, my passport, and my return airline ticket to a woman who spoke no English. She had stapled everything into a torn manila envelope, which she placed in a plywood cabinet, promising that it would be locked in the retreat safe the following day. There was no phone or any other means of outside communication. I'd been told that all written correspondence from the States was delivered to their San Jose office and took an additional week or two to arrive on site. I was at the mercy of these people to take me up and down that ridiculous hill, the same people who had put me in a tiny cell, left my valuables in a plywood cabinet, and failed to orient me. I was alone.

Still, despite the awkwardness and absurdity of my situation, I felt a sense of peace. Nothing was right, yet, in a strange and indescribable way, everything was perfect. I was in the midst of a crash course in trusting the inner wisdom that had unhooked me from my life and brought me here. The question was not whether I had done the right thing, but whether I could allow this experience to unfold without interfering. I had created my fantasy and it scared me.

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