



Paseo Colonial (Colonial Stroll)

A Costa Rican Memento

-I-

*I*t was Tuesday morning and I was already wondering what I'd be doing over the weekend. Labor Day was less than a week away and I really didn't know what to do for the holiday. I was a little restless and I felt the need to do something different, completely unexpected, and totally disconnected from my everyday life. I didn't want to be married to a stringent plan, much less a schedule, and I wanted the escapade to be exotic and new, as

much as possible. Barbecues and get-togethers in the small town of Allen, Texas, wouldn't satisfy my sudden appetite. I had to find an adventure, whatever it was. I didn't know at the time that this inexplicable impulse would ultimately lead me to Central America and to a romantic and dangerous interlude with one of its locals.

It's truly mind-boggling to think of the marvels of modern technology, of our ability to do things remotely from the comfort of our homes or offices. A solicitous electronic message from my frequent flyer program, which summarized their "last minute" trip specials for the week, prompted in me the idea to travel. I glanced through the list of domestic destinations (e.g., Colorado Springs, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City, Houston, and the list went on), but none of them appealed to me. As I kept scrolling down, it occurred to me that I was looking through the wrong list and that I should try the international section, which is when I spotted Costa Rica. It caught my eye because the airfare to San José was very reasonably priced and Costa Rica's rainforest is world-renowned, which definitely stimulated my sense of adventure.

Whitewater rafting in the middle of the rainforest sounded both bold and extraordinary. So I searched for available tours and expeditions online. It didn't take long before I found a website with exotic water rafting information and overnight, two-day excursions in (where else?) Costa Rica. A scroll down the page and a couple more clicks led me to a cheap hotel in San José for only thirty dollars a night, which is all I needed. I purchased my plane ticket and made reservations for the hotel and the rafting trip through the Internet.

-II-

Friday night came quickly and, before I knew it, I was on a plane to Costa Rica. I arrived later that evening in *El Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaria*. I like to take advantage of local exchange rates, which generally outperform those offered in the US, and so I didn't take

any local currency with me, just US Dollars. Having not really planned my trip well, I didn't take note of the fact that I'd be landing in San José close to midnight, when everything is closed. The only people in the airport were a skeleton airport crew, passengers from the only arriving airplane, a few taxi drivers, and families waiting for their loved ones. Thankfully, the hotel offered transportation to the airport and I reserved that ahead of time (although I wasn't exactly sure they'd pick me up because they never sent me a confirmation).

As I walked out of the airport, I saw folks lining up on either side of the passenger path. They were waiting and calling out names. Just when I was about to hail a taxi, I saw my name printed on a plain, letter-sized manila folder. The man holding it didn't look Hispanic or Indigenous, which surprised me a bit. He was a tall, slender Anglo-looking man wearing plain clothes. He was a little unkempt, too. There was nothing distinctive about the man. He didn't even look like a taxi driver, but he knew my name and that I'd be there at midnight, which only the hotel staff and the rafting company knew.

"Soy Gabriel. ¿Viene usted del Hotel Rey Amone?" I asked the man if he came from the hotel.

"Si, si. ¡Venga por aqui!" He said yes and told me to follow him.

He led me out of the pack and to the parking lot. His car wasn't parked by the curb with the other taxis, as I'd expected (this concerned me a little). Fortunately, there were plenty of lights and they lit up the parking lot quite well. It was only a short walk from the terminal anyway. Besides, his demeanor was friendly and quite inoffensive.

He drove an old, faded, red compact car, something like a Fiat or a Hyundai. Dents covered the vehicle from bumper to bumper. The look and feel of the car bore signs of a struggling third-world economy.

The long and bumpy journey to the hotel gave us a chance to talk. The driver had a foreign accent, but not an American one. As I later found out, he was from Russia and had only been in Costa Rica for two years. He came to Costa Rica with his wife and two sons on a quest for a new life. As he put it – and most immigrants often do – he arrived with nothing but the clothes on his back, without a single possession to his name. Apparently, he sold everything for pennies on the dollar just to be able to flee the country in the hopes of a brighter tomorrow. Fortunately, that is exactly what he found: a humble but stable life filled with faith and serenity.

He had a great sense of humor, without an ounce of animosity, in spite of the losses he and his family had endured. He found something amusing in everything and smiled all the time. His laughter was heartfelt and distinctive. It originated from deep within his throat and manifested itself in short, consecutive cough-like chuckles, like the sound of a muffled machine gun.

While on the road, he told me I could pay for the hotel and the taxi ride in US Dollars (I was relieved) and that I could buy *Colones* at the hotel or through the *Cajero Automatico*, which was the Automatic Teller Machine that was within walking distance from the hotel. Upon arriving, we found the barbed-wired garage door locked. He honked the horn exactly three times, as if yelling out a code, and a woman, who I later learned was his wife, opened the door for us.

The dirty-yellow one-story house had high ceilings and tiled floors. The reception, bar, restaurant, and kitchen were all in one single environment, like a studio, with (incredible as it may sound) free Internet facilities included (and available twenty-four hours a day!). All the windows had long vertical steel bars. The rooms didn't have air conditioning, nor did they have running hot water. Fortunately, my hosts were very genial and friendly, and I felt safe.

I had scheduled for my bus ride to the rapids to pick me up at seven-thirty the following morning, so I asked for a seven o'clock wake-up call. A small dark blue minivan picked me up at around seven-forty. Two Americans were already in the bus (Jim and Kevin). The driver told us we'd ride in the van for an hour or two before making another stop where we'd have breakfast. We'd then go on another short ride to pick up three more people before finally heading down to the rapids.

The journey was smooth, for the most part, and picturesque. We drove through numerous mountain ranges full of coffee plants and banana trees. The farmers deliberately planted and grew the banana leaves to shade the coffee plants. The mountains were overstocked with forest life. We also drove through several towns. The colors of the colonial-style housing ranged from plain white to pink and green. There were also brown barracks and unfinished adobe skeleton structures sprinkled across the basin.

We finally arrived at our first stop and had breakfast on a mountaintop overlooking the valley through which a huge meandering river ran. We had scrambled eggs with *Gallo Pinto* (rice and black beans) on the side. Shortly after finishing breakfast, we picked up the three other passengers: two Americans and a local; all women. The Americans quickly introduced themselves as Donna and Barb. They were very friendly and outgoing, but the beautiful *'tica* mesmerized me (*'tica* is a local term for Costa Rican women). She had silky black hair down to her naked white shoulders. Her eyes were light brown and her features were angelic, soft, smooth, and perfectly symmetrical. She was wearing a red tank top, black shorts, and white sneakers – no socks. Her body forged an ideal pedestal for her face; she was curved in all the right places.

“*Me llamo Gabriel. ¿Como te llamas?*” I asked for her name as she sat down (luckily beside me).

“*Claudia.*” She exclaimed with a melodic yet sexy, whispery voice.

My mind went into overdrive. I was thinking of subjects that would keep her sufficiently entertained without me fabricating weird, ill-placed come-on lines. I took a shot and we hit it off immediately. It was easy to talk to her. She was passionate and expressed herself colorfully, but without vulgarity or superlatives.

We talked about how we both loved adventures, how she hated coffee, how I enjoyed movies, and other things we liked and disliked. She loved the outdoors and was no stranger to the wilderness. She actually knew the guide from previous outings and often joined his groups, but at discounted rates because of her regularity. We also discussed the political situation in Costa Rica and its Central American neighbors, as well as the local customs and how they differed around the region, how a demilitarized country seemed to prosper, and how absent checks and balances were throughout Latin America. She longed to visit Europe to see its beauty and history, and also to compare and contrast cultures. She lacked the optimism most of us express when referring to foreign travel, though, and she seemed to succumb to a sense of resignation, as though it were impossible.

-IV-

We drove for about twenty minutes before steering off the pavement and onto a dirt road down the mountain, which, from the onset, was rough. The car path was narrow and fractured. It was laden with odd-sized stones and large intermittent crevices. The incline became steeper as we descended. The *Gallo Pinto* complicated matters and gave me slight feelings of nausea, but fortunately, my stomach held strong and the eggs and black beans didn’t resurface. This part of the trip took us between twenty-five and forty minutes (I don’t remember exactly how long be-

cause I never looked at the time). At the end of the trail, *El Río Pacuare* awaited us, which is one of the top five rafting rivers in the world, as the *Discovery Channel* puts it.

We took our gear out of the van. Two other guides, who were already by the river when we arrived, bagged and placed our backpacks in a raft. Our official guide led us into another raft and coached us on some of the mechanics of paddling together before entering the thickly wooded rainforest. His two compatriots, following suit, took a kayak and the raft with the gear and headed into the jungle.

Talk about natural beauty... We navigated through endless canyons. Tall precipices filled with lush vegetation lined the walls of the impressive passage. Majestic waterfalls cracked the canyon walls and they ranged from small to fantastic hydrant-powered streams. They gave the whole scene a beautiful, delicately balanced, feminine quality. Our host, the river, lived and breathed. At times, it was serene and placidly still, like glass, but becoming turbulent, agitated, and desperately powerful at a moment's notice, without any warning.

I was on the nose of the raft, which gave me a unique perspective. I felt the brunt of the water's shifting temper. There were moments when the nose of the raft stood still, suspended in air, before suddenly plunging straight down and into the cavity of the gyrating rapid, where spiraling walls of water converged from all directions. Often, the bow sank well beneath the waterline, engulfing the front crew (i.e., me!) with a cold, revitalizing, drenching shower.

We made a couple more stops along the way before arriving at the *campamento*, where we'd spend the night (in the middle of the rainforest). We hiked and explored the beautiful secrets of the jungle, and searched for treasures hidden in every waterfall. Claudia and I stuck to each other like glue, with ridiculously happy smiles stamped on both of our faces. We were constantly looking for a reason to touch each other. We held hands and helped each other cross

every nook, rock, and stream, no matter how insignificant the obstacle. Both she and I knew she didn't need my assistance in hiking or climbing, but I helped her anyway, just to have her close to me. She let me play the innocent, romantic, and seductive game of chivalry.

-V-

Once we arrived at the *campamento*, we hiked into the woods and found an oasis. It was a four-story high waterfall gorged through a U-shaped cliff, which literally was like the outline of a small canyon, only vertical. At ground level, the water pressure from the showering waterfall was powerful. It was stronger than any whirlpool or sauna jet back home. The pool of water into which it fell must've been fifteen feet across and seven to ten feet wide. The water eventually congregated at a single point and continued its path down to *El Río Pacuare*. Slippery stones coated with green algae lined the periphery of the pool.

Later that night, Claudia and I took a shower there on our own. The water was cold but extremely rejuvenating. I slowly slipped under the brunt of the falling jet stream as Claudia hid behind the glassy curtain of water, inside the see-through cage and under the soothing sound of splashing water. The force of the water pressure gave me a fabulous massage, which was a perfect preamble to the treasure hidden behind the mantle of water.

“*¿Cuando regresas a los Estados Unidos?*” As I walked into the water cage, she asked me when I'd return to the U.S.

I told her I was returning on Tuesday morning, in two to three days. Then I asked her if she'd be going back to San José and, if not, where she would go.

“*Cuando se acabe esta excursión, ¿regresas a San José? ¿Donde vas a estar?*”

Her eyelids fell and tears suddenly trickled. She stood silent for a couple of seconds and then said:

“Desafortunadamente, me voy de viaje al interior a visitar a mis padres. No estan muy saludables y me estan esperando para celebrar con ellos su aniversario. Tienen treinta y cinco años de casados y no puedo dejar de ir...No sabes como quisiera quedarme contigo en San José. ¡En mi vida he pasado unos momentos tan bellos como estos! Pero la verdad es que no puedo, a pesar de cuanto quiero.”

After telling me all this, that she was going to visit her ill parents to celebrate their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary and that she only wished she could stay with me to surrender to our newly found romance and its bliss, she wept and we embraced, softly adorning our bodies with each other's warm and tender caresses. We both understood our relationship couldn't last. It couldn't survive the distance and the separation. I had never felt that close to a woman, and in such a short time. Everything felt right, yet circumstances doomed us. We decided to quit talking about the inevitable and enjoy the moment, the *now*, the *present*. We still had that night and most of the day Sunday. Not talking about the dreaded subject, however, didn't keep us from lamenting it.

-VI-

We woke up to the loud and unceasing sound of the creek running beside our *cabaña* sometime around seven o'clock in the morning. It was a beautiful, gorgeous day. It reminded me of *Tarzan and Jane* and *Fantasy Island*. We had breakfast, packed, and continued on our way down *El Río Pacuare*. We had a blast! On one of our stops, we all hiked up the mountain to a deep pond, maybe fifteen to twenty feet deep, and dove off into it from a two-story cliff. We went through more rapids after that and floated down a long narrow canyon hidden from the sun by towering cliffs.

Sunday night came rather quickly, unfortunately. That was hard on us. Claudia and I just looked at each other and didn't say a word. I felt empty, drained, cold, shaken, and resigned to say goodbye. She cried and cuddled my left hand with both her hands. I pulled her close to me with my other hand and placed her warm cheek against mine.

“¡Vamonos! Vente, vente.” The guide said we had to leave and pointed to the van.

-VII-

After an arduous two-hour trip, we arrived at *Hotel Ray Amone*. That evening I went to *El Pueblo*, which is a popular mall in San José. Bars, restaurants, nightclubs, and shops populated the quaint *Centro Comercial*. Its décor was colonial in style, a Spanish legacy. As luck would have it, I met Kevin and Jim there. We ate at one of the restaurants and talked, among other things, about going to a casino called *Hotel de los Reyes*, which was famed for being a *burdel* (brothel). I felt a little uneasy at first, but became excited at the prospect of witnessing something unique and interesting. We decided to meet at the casino later that evening. I wasn't really planning to partake in its main course, but rather be a fly-on-the-wall, just an observer.

My hotel was only about eight to nine blocks away from the casino, according to the little map I had. The streets were numbered and laid out in a nice, even grid. I decided to study the map a bit and walk to the place without the map in hand, so as not to paint a “rob me” sign on myself. It was already about ten o'clock in the evening when I left the hotel. Everything went fine except, after ten or eleven blocks, I realized I was completely lost. The streets were virtually deserted and completely dark. I couldn't just ask anybody for directions, but I didn't have much choice. There was no one on the street except for a small, skinny man in his thirties with a t-shirt, blue jeans, and a baseball cap. I wasn't keen on asking him for directions, but his light trot and easygoing demeanor eased my apprehension.

“¿Como le llego al Hotel de los Reyes?” I asked how to get to the hotel hosting the casino.

“¡MUCHACHO! ¡Te van a atracar!” He answered with an alarming tone.

Hearing that response (“¡MUCHACHO! You’re gonna get mugged!”) didn’t make me feel any better, that’s for sure. I intentionally disregarded his comment, although not really at heart, and again asked where the casino was. I tried not to show my growing fear. He gave me directions and off I went. Fortunately, nothing happened along the way, except for the aggressive but inoffensive verbal attacks of a vagrant walking by in a small dark alley. I was able to keep away from him by exercising indifference and by again masking my fear.

-VIII-

Just after ten-thirty, I arrived at the casino. It wasn’t as big as I had imagined it. Men congregated around five to six main tables and played roulette and blackjack, for the most part. The slot machines occupied a special section, but they weren’t as popular as the tables. Smoke and American tourists completely inundated the establishment. The casino obviously catered to the visiting American men.

Off to the side, there was a bar area filled to the rim with men and extravagantly provocative *‘ticas*. The girls were dressed in short, tight-fitting skirts, which ranged from dazzling velvet red to flashy egg-yellow colors. Streaks of pink blush, bright red lipstick, and dark, succulent eye shadow accentuated their facial features. Their eyes were eager to flirt and they did so with diabolic assertiveness. Once they spotted and landed on a potential customer, they immediately closed the gap separating them from their prey and slipped their hands into action, sensually making contact with their target.

As I stood gazing, ready to master my fly-on-the-wall position, I felt a pair of hands slide up on my sides, from behind me and underneath my arms. They embraced my torso and slowly

inched their way across my chest until finally reaching my nipples. They were the hands of a striking brunette with a short green one-piece dress. The thin-skinned dress tightly held her breasts in place while also allowing her to parade a seductive, colorfully tattooed cleavage. She had short hair, perfect hourglass curves, and thick, provocative lips. Her slightly bronzed skin exuded a sweet, delightful, and sexually intoxicating store-bought aroma.

“*¡Hola!*” she said.

As she greeted me, she pressed herself against me and gently squashed and rubbed her breasts against my back.

“*¿Como estas? ¿Te quieres divertir un poco?*” She asked me how I was and if I wanted to have a little fun.

Her face wasn’t pretty, *per se*, but she oozed sex, and lots of it. Her tone of voice was hushed and the soft wind that carried it tickled my ear as she whispered her sexy innuendoes. I took a moment to settle down and recover my composure. It was very arousing. Still believing in my determination and will not to sign up for any services, I nonetheless thought this would be a great opportunity to acquaint myself with the evening working girls of Costa Rica.

“*¿De que es el tatuaje que tienes? Parece un delfin.*” I asked her about her tattoo.

As she started to describe the tattoo on her breast, she pulled down the top of her dress and showed it to me in full. It was a dolphin jumping out of the water. It must have been two inches long, with soft and faded gray tones. The mammal was breaking through a blue wavy waterline. It was pretty.

I also asked her where she came from and she said, “*Republica Dominicana,*” which probably wasn’t true. Then, hesitantly, I asked her how much the night would cost me...

“*¿Y cuanto sale la noche?*”

She answered that for one hundred dollars, she'd do *ANYTHING* for two hours. All of Costa Rica is well accustomed to charging dollars, as I was beginning to learn. The local currency could've very well been dollars. In any case, the price seemed somewhat expensive, although I really had nothing with which to compare it. After two other girls quoted me the exact same price, I started to wonder if that was a standard, unionized price, at least for this particular *burdel*. Interestingly, they all had a similar story to tell, too; they all supported their families back in the Dominican Republic.

As I finished talking with the third girl, I noticed a familiar head of hair. Then, I saw her eyes, her beautifully endearing soft look. It was *she*...It was my *Claudia*...She looked back and instantly locked into my eyes. At the time, she had one arm wrapped around the back of a man as her other hand tickled his chest through the cracks of his shirt. I lost my breath. I couldn't move, talk, or even breathe. My body was frozen. A thousand images came to my head, several of which were of her soliciting and pricing herself for other men. I felt a sharp pain in my chest, as though a rusty, jagged knife was stabbing me.

“¿Qué?” I couldn't help but say “*What?*” (barely finding the composure to say that much).

As my lips moved to utter that dumbfounded word, she pushed herself off the stranger and quickly ran through the crowd toward the door. Without thinking, I went after her. Unfortunately, she was much closer to the door than I was. I shoved people out of the way in agonizing desperation and yelled, “*Claudia, Claudia,*” but she just kept going. It was difficult to dart through the thick crowd. Kevin and Jim quickly noticed and ran after me.

I could scarcely see the crown of her head when I realized she had reached the door. Her head whipped around one last time and her eyes, once again, met mine. They spoke volumes. Tears were running down her face as her eyes whispered, “*Goodbye, goodbye forever.*” Then,

she lashed her head around again and took off. In her haste, she fell – but quickly stood up again. It was only seconds before I arrived at the door (it seemed like an eternity), and by then she was out of sight. There was no one else outside either. The street was empty and quiet. I looked frantically in all directions, but I didn't see anyone or hear anything.

I sat on the curb where she'd fallen. I was dazed and resigned. As I put my hands on my head and looked to the floor, the memory of us flashed in front of my eyes: the two amazing days and the one glorious night. I saw these still, frozen images projected from her earring, which was lying next to my foot on the asphalt. That delicate golden memento was a gift from the heavens. It became a constant, indelible reminder of a magnificent dream, of a timeless love affair lost in the infinite abyss of time.

-IX-

Despite my desperate attempts, I never saw her again after that, at least not up 'till now. I don't even think her name is truly Claudia, which has perhaps made the search futile, but not impossible, never worthless.

Rebirth

I finally understood what people sing about,
The misery behind lost love and vanished dreams,
The long, heartbroken winter of loneliness.

I never knew such a wretched life could exist,
With veins straining and struggling,
With life failing and my heart choking.

The thought of you never escaped me.
Your absence stripped me bare.
It left me without course and without air.

Desperation became my friend,
And fantasy was my lifeline and work my life.
You were my bread, then my wound, and now my demise.

The day I realized you'd truly left me, that you'd forgotten me,
My world collapsed in fright,
But my life found meaning in that vice and I lived for the very first time.

Today, no song is beyond my grasp;

They all sting and make me cry.

They overwhelm my spirit and jolt it back to life.

Thank you, my love, for giving me manly life,

For letting me suffer the torment of a million nights,

For showing me the boundless and tenuous depths of my soul in strife.