

Pura Vida

By

Spike Hampson

To Katherine, who brought me back from the brink of emptiness and showed me how to live. This is dedicated to you, but more than that, it is written to you. I love you.

Day 1

When I was young the lure of foreign places was a string attached to my heart. No matter the nature of the place—be it harsh or barren or stifling in its heat—once its nature was known to me and I could accept its existence, it had the power to tug at me from the other end of the string. I was utterly indiscriminate, prepared to give myself instantly and wholeheartedly to any world I had not yet seen. I was enthralled, for example, by the prospect of being cast upon the stony shelf of exposed Pitcairn Island, a small and pitiless piece of South Pacific real estate where a lonely handful of descendants from the treasonous Bounty crew carry on an ordinary existence and engage in the petty conflicts that are so rampant in a small and ingrown community. To an objective observer, there is little about the place to recommend it as a refuge. But to my mind it was different—as removed from my world as is Saturn—and that was enough to make it attractive. I knew very little about the nature of life on Pitcairn, but reality had no hold on me at the time. It was better, I thought, to simply use its raw material to construct a world of my own design. If chance should ever take me there and its character should fail to match the standards I had set for it, why then, it would be the simplest thing in the world to abandon the place and seek out a different idyll—one whose character was more faithful to my fantasies. After all, a place is not a person and should not feel slighted by such fickle behavior.

I have never made it to Pitcairn Island and, indeed, most of the exotic places that I conjured in my youth have continued as nothing more than fabrications in my mind. The string has never broken, though, and through the years I have been conscientious in my efforts to make more real these childhood loves. There have been things to read and

photos to absorb and my knowledge of these faraway places has become ever more complete. Now my fantasies are thoroughly grounded in fact, I believe, and this of course makes each illusion that much more real.

I set out now for Costa Rica, a slice of tropical splendor where rainforests thrive on sunshine, mangrove swamps quell their own gaseous stench, and sleek jungle cats may prowl and lurk in a sinister way that suggests evil but never unleashes it. Costa Rica—a land of little culture but countless hues of green. Costa Rica—the place where life is abundant but nobody really believes that nature is heartless. I like this version of Costa Rica and I am off to find it.

There is a complication, though. This morning when I awoke the woman lying beside me looked more fair than all the emerald fields and mountain forests and sun bleached beaches that beckon from so many miles away. It is a curious problem, alien and discomfiting. Existence has been a reasonably satisfying thing over the years, but its pleasures have rarely come from the ordinary bread of daily life. Dreams and illusions have given life its luster; the here and now has never been able to match their allure. But on this occasion there seems to have been a bipolar switch: can the unknown pleasures of that place beyond the horizon ever hope to match the peaceful glow of awakening with you beside me? The whole prospect seems dubious.

But the future has a life of its own that cannot be so easily denied. An airline ticket has been bought and the flight leaves today at 12:17. Work has been rearranged; plans have been made; good-byes have been said. There is no reason why all this history cannot be defied, but defiance seems childish if it serves no clear purpose. Why abandon a sensible plan just to cater to a vagrant emotion? To even pose the question of “why”

begs a logical response, but logic is, perhaps, the source of most bad decisions. Well, life seems at times a litany of bad decisions ameliorated by mysterious forces that somehow find a way to forgive our wretched reliance on reason.

Down below, the Utah landscape creeps by silently. Near Salt Lake, the residual snow from a recent local storm lies on the land, but as we inch off to the southwest it soon gives way to autumnal browns and tans, and then to the garish and bruised hues of the Colorado Plateau. South runs the solitary road to Hanksville with the serrated and multiply breached swell of the San Raphael flanking it on the west. The road runs straight as if primed to pierce the anomalous Henry Mountains in the distance, volcanic protrusions in an otherwise layered landscape, but comes to a halt at Hanksville as if puzzled by their alien shape. The Henry's are in fact two distinct clusters of peaks linked by a high saddle, and my mind is drawn to contemplate what lies beyond. Traverse the saddle and sudden descent will bring you to Bullfrog Basin, the desert outpost at the edge of Lake Powell where Kobuk lies in wait. But if instead you curl around the Henrys and head a little west of south you will eventually come to Boulder Mountain with Hozro tucked away at its feet.

Kobuk and Hozro—two charged words, each so rich in possibilities and both so free of worldly dross. The first is the name for a boat, a sturdy little cruiser that offers up the possibility of reeling in those strings that tie me to exotic places. The second is the name for a place, a fantastic red-rock retreat that has stolen the heart of the woman who has stolen mine. “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . .” Mr. Frost liked both choices—and I do as well—but he had the good sense to accept that only one could be taken, a level of realism so stark and unyielding that my will falters. Surely it is foolish

to think so, but I wonder if it would not be best to simply pause at the fork and spend life contemplating the delicious prospect that each has to offer. Could the reality of either choice ever actually surpass its promise?

The layover in Dallas drained away the day. By the time the flight departed for San Jose, the sun had set and the sky was darkly purple with a streak of flame in the west. There were towns and small cities along the way and their night lights patterned the dark landscape lying below us. Their straight lines and rectangular layout proclaimed “Texas” at first, but it was not long before we crossed the Rio Bravo and thereafter each town would be a network of sinuous, bent, and disorderly lines of lights.

It was raining lightly when we disembarked in San Jose, but this was really the only cue as to whether we were indoors or out; the ambient temperature did not change as we stepped outside the airport terminal and neither was there any hint of a breeze. It was as if weather was an outmoded concept, one for which there was no longer any reasonable need.

For the sake of convenience, I took a room at the Best Western Irazu on the northwestern edge of the city. It was an artifact of global culture with generic amenities and predictable room layouts, but it did have the good grace to clutter its entrance with a people’s bar—a gauntlet of gaiety to be traversed before opening the large glass doors and confronting the stony silence of the hotel lobby. It was as if the bar had sucked all the life right out of the hotel; I wouldn’t be surprised if the only guests remaining on premises at this early evening hour were either sleeping or sulking. Since I did not wish to be one of such an uninteresting crowd, I hurriedly registered, took luggage to the room,

and returned to the lively sounds of the percussion band that was filling the entranceway with sounds of Latin rhythm so loud and penetrating that even the air seemed to vibrate.

All eyes were on the band. There were six musicians with drums and sticks and castanets, and although the lead singer eclipsed his compadres, they all acted as if making Latin music is the next best thing to making love. They were into it and so were all the people in this open air bar. Cat-like seducers danced, fat old men and dumpy old women danced, waitresses and bartenders danced. Waiting taxi drivers standing by the hotel entrance danced. And they all had the moves; it was as if some dancing god had descended on these people and anointed each and every one of them with this divine gift.

There were no serious faces in the crowd. People laughed and hugged and flirted and fooled around—as if being a child is what you are supposed to do at ten o'clock on a Wednesday evening. I watched carefully, and I do not think there was a person in the place telling a life story in sober style to a captive audience. No question about it—I have left home.

Day 2

The first order of business is to put America behind me and slip into Costa Rica. Considering the fact that the paisanos have managed to occupy even the entrance gates to this fortress of Americana, it should be easy to escape into their midst. After all, just beyond the circular drive that taxis use to shuttle guests in and out of here there beckons a world of disorder and color, of noise and dirt and unusual people.

We are all free to come and go, of course. As much as they might like to, multi-starred hotels are not in a position to imprison their guests and keep them from savoring off-premises experiences. Still, it would be inconvenient for them if any money should leak out into the local economy where ordinary people have to sustain their ordinary lives. One can almost feel the exhaled breath of institutional exasperation any time a paying guest actually walks away from the hotel without benefit of guide, taxi, or shuttle bus. How could a paying guest be so misguided? Everything worth seeing already has been identified and flawless operational systems already have been perfected—systems that can take you there (and back, of course) with a minimum of inconvenience, systems so articulated as to satisfy every whim.

“Local food? No problem. There’s a restaurant along the way that serves local food. Of course it recognizes that foreigners may not appreciate some of the oddities that local people eat so the more offensive items have been struck from the menu, or else modified in the spirit of WTO.

“Having trouble with the alien tongue? That’s a minor thing. We have experts who can interpret everything for you. Education, after all, is nothing but a set of facts,

right? And our interpreters are the best fact providing machines money can buy. Their accents are authentic and their facts have been vetted by the ministry of culture. If these folks can't answer your questions then you really need to ask yourself if you are asking the right questions.

“You say you want to buy something? Well, leave it to us. It just happens that we know about this wonderful gift emporium located en route. The items for sale there are perfectly representative of local arts and crafts—marketing research has clearly established that these are the things visitors most often want to buy, and what could be a better indicator of authenticity? It will be a busy trip we most certainly will find a way to fit in a stop for your convenience.

“A lot of time and effort has gone into creating these systems. They are complex and require considerable daily investment to keep them running. Naturally, we would like to be able to offer them to you free, but that is of course impossible. We hope you recognize that the \$150 charge for an afternoon outing to the crest of Irazu Volcano and back is a small price to pay for such a truly authentic experience.

“Whatever you decide to do, we strongly recommend that you avoid making the excursion with that questionable character out at the end of the drive loitering around the back of his brother-in-law's battered Toyota. The seats are torn, it smells in there, and just because his ancestors have been here for centuries does not mean that he can properly educate you about Irazu. We're quite sure he is only after your money.

I left around noon (by taxi, ironically) and after a half hour of stop and go lurching in lunchtime traffic I was deposited at the front door of the Don Carlos Hotel, which is located just a few blocks from the center of the city.

Here we have a kind of hotel that speaks a different language. There is nothing about it to suggest a corporate decision. The floor plan is irregular, unpredictable, and—in fact—outrageous. The décor is eclectic and subject to abrupt changes of mood. The staff talk like ordinary people with individuated personalities. The rooms are way too large to meet the demands of cost efficiency. Whereas the place I came from was constantly saying, “Stay with us, stay with us, until your money runs out,” this hotel was speaking in a softer voice and saying, “We would be happy to have you live here, but that’s up to you.” I was more than a little pleased with my change of address.

When I reached the front desk of the Hotel Don Carlos, it offered up a surfeit of serendipity, rather like being starved on a desert isle and happening across not just a cocanut with meat and milk inside but a full-blown Hawaiian luau just when the succulent pig is being unwrapped. I explained to the front desk clerk my intention to spend most of the next two weeks in the countryside bicycling from place to place and asked if he could recommend particularly appealing byways and hotels. He admitted to lack of knowledge about such things but, raising his eyes and looking at the man standing beside me, indicated that I should talk with this gentleman.

This gentleman turned out to be Kevin Hill, an American expatriate, a California refugee, who for the past dozen years had been organizing bicycle tours here in Costa Rica. He was a short, thick-set man with thinning hair of a dirty blonde color. He was not fat, but he certainly seemed to have the physique and body movements more like those of a bureaucrat than a bicyclist.

Looks are deceiving, however. He sat me down and proceeded to outline an itinerary—with hotels designated—that would best suit my interest in rugged scenery, my

disinterest in beach bumming, and my twelve day block of available time. Kevin took me through all this with friendly professionalism, after which he swept together his papers, said a supportive good-bye, and breezed out the door as if carried by a gusty wind. I was dazzled and disconcerted. True, I now had a viable plan with a battery of reasons that could be used to justify it. The only problem was that I now had to put it into motion—that or face the prospect of explicit failure. Without a plan, failure would occur in stealth with no disturbing sign appearing until the trip was over and I was back home thinking about what I had failed to do—and I would know each day whether the big picture was being painted. But now with a plan in place there were destinations and objectives and schedules.

A funny thing happened while I was with Kevin. As he talked he started to write a list of where to go and where to stay, but when eventually I produced my National Geographic map of Costa Rica he latched onto it like a giant magnet in an auto wrecking yard and suddenly asked me if I would mind if he wrote directly onto the map. Well, of course I would mind, but I couldn't very well tell *him* that. I said "Go ahead," and then spent ten minutes secretly curbing the cringes I felt every time his pen approached the paper. I kept telling myself that the map only cost ten bucks and that I would gladly pay twice that much for the information he was giving me, but all the logical thought in the world couldn't drag me into the Zen-like peace that I so desired.

In the evening, I went out to the Blue Marlin Bar in the Hotel Del Rey. The Moon Travel Handbook for Costa Rica identifies it as ". . . a pickup spot for the flirtatious local lassies and out-of-town girls making good." Being picked up in a bar sounded like a novel experience—and not an unpleasant one either—so I had resolved to

make myself a target. I had passed by in the middle of the afternoon and the seething mass of bodies inside certainly gave the impression that pick ups did indeed occur.

Even as I walked in the door of the place I began to get a sense of what it must be like to be a woman in a bar full of out-of-control men. As I pushed through the crowd to get to the counter I was squeezed and held and generally detained by virtually every woman I passed—and most of them were both young and good looking. All were dressed, incidentally, to put a swell in the cleavage, show a flare in the hips, and expose their incipiently ripe bellies. It was pretty overwhelming stuff and soon I found myself attached to an inside corner seat of the bar where the advances of young ladies were diminished somewhat by the limited avenue of approach: they could only come from one direction and whoever was making a move would have to depart before the next one could slip into the gap.

I don't think I ever realized how hard it must be for women to reject such advances. It was obvious what these girls were after, but even armed with this foreknowledge the temptation to believe the flattering looks and touches and comments was almost irresistible. In a different time and circumstance I would surely have succumbed.

Day 3

San Jose is not an attractive city. It is not ugly, exactly, and whenever you look the length of one of its streets you often a lovely snippet of the surrounding mountains framed in the distance. Cities in Latin America would envy its lack of favelas and most cities anywhere would gladly exchange settings, but there is nothing about this national capital to suggest glory or greatness—and if a city doesn't do this it is hard to justify its existence.

There is a certain character to Latin American cities that sets them apart from what you would find north of the border, and in a number of ways San Jose fits the stereotype. It has narrow streets, for example, that are hemmed in by the buildings on both sides. The sidewalks, too, are narrow, and the buildings all seem eager to have their faces brushed by the passing pedestrians. And the blocks are small: three or four undersized buildings and there you are at the next intersection.

With few exceptions, the buildings of downtown San Jose are diminutive; they usually only have two stories and their street-front breadth doesn't vary much. Many buildings have a bright splash of color to them, but the gaiety is diminished somewhat by the chronic state of disrepair that seems to afflict everything in sight. Everywhere in this diminutive setting, a tidal wave of people flows and ebbs like a living thing while the streets are constantly clogged by a ragtag army of poorly trained vehicles. One thing is clear: when transportation arteries are overwhelmed, people on foot have a big advantage over vehicles. As the cars and trucks lurch and stop, lurch and stop, the never-ending flow of pedestrians sweeps around them and on to unknown destinations.

In all these ways, San Jose differs little from its Latin brethren elsewhere, but some of those other cities are much more captivating than San Jose. I couldn't help but wonder what had put the curse on this particular place. After a while, I came up with an explanation that works for me, at least.

The thing that makes a city exciting is the unpredictable or out of place. When you turn a corner and suddenly see a particularly ugly building—not just drab or undistinguished but truly ugly—you can't help but pause and gape and wonder to yourself how such a thing ever could have been conceived. And then sometimes you come across something inspirational like a grand cathedral or a rich, green cemetery or a shopping street of inconceivable opulence, and once again your mind is derailed by the inconsistency of it all. Occasionally, it is something truly outrageous like a post-modern statement piece planted in a stately neighborhood of, say, Victorian elegance. Whether bad or good, these things are a shock to the system and your memory gets etched with images that give definition to the city. Poor San Jose, though, is a little short on these kinds of surprises; it is like a secret agent whose worst fear is to do or be something that stands out in the crowd. San Jose is trying to pass itself off as just another city with nothing to betray the fact that it is this particular city.

This lack of individuality even extends to the Plaza Central, which in most Latin cities is a place where the founding fathers outdid themselves. But in San Jose, the Plaza Central is a feeble attempt at cultural conformity. Although it tries to project the usual magnificence, it is undersized and underdeveloped and lacks a dominating cathedral. The main cathedral is located at a different plaza but even there it is not dominating. It is nice and tasteful, but certainly not the work of those who would enshrine the Quixotic

tradition of engaging in the grand (and fruitless) gesture. It looks more like a bunch of Unitarians got together and decided to do something a little special.

At least San Jose has its people, and they loom larger than their city does. They offer a good blend of abandon and order—neither so exhaustingly irrepressible as Italians nor so stiflingly formal as the Swiss. I never thought I would be complimenting a Latin culture for its moderation, but there you have it.

As I returned from my walk shortly after sunset I ran into a blizzard of confetti. People everywhere were covered in the stuff and the sidewalks for many blocks looked as if a freak snowfall had just left a skiff. Just as I began to notice this shift in weather, a young boy gleefully blasted me with a fistful of snow that evidently had been taken from the bag he was holding in the other hand. The flurries came more frequently after that. When at last I slipped into a street side eatery for dinner and took a seat near the cash register counter, my smallest movement would set off a sporadic shower of small, white, paper circles that would flutter to the floor and table and occasionally even spice my food.

In the evening I decided to return to the bar that had treated me so well the night before, but as I left the hotel and walked along the side of the park located nearby, a police car drew up beside me and the officer in the passenger seat motioned for me to pull over. I somehow doubted that I had been speeding. He was very polite as he asked me for my passport, but since it was back at the hotel he settled for my driver's license instead. As his partner frisked me and obliged me to display my pocket items, he disappeared back into the police car with the license. Eventually, it was returned and I

was asked whether I had any drugs. When I told them the truth, they shook my hand, commented that there was a problem with drugs in the area, and sent me on my way.

I returned to the hotel not long after midnight and in the very place where the police had stopped me were three young men and a woman hanging out and talking. As I passed by, one of the men was in the middle of the sidewalk and I nearly had to step into the street to get by him. I continued with the stucco wall of a building on one side and a street with the adjoining park on the other. Just as I reached the next intersection, I felt a hand in my right rear wallet pocket. I grabbed the arm at the wrist but could not get the hand out of my pocket. As I turned to face the man, the building was very close and I was able to press him against it by grasping his neck with my free hand and pushing him. Since he was at my mercy, he did at last let go of my pocket. I released his wrist but did not let go of his neck until after checking to make sure I still had my wallet. I foolishly assumed that he was beaten and would flee, but when I released the hold on his neck he grabbed my shirt and began yelling in Spanish. At first I had no idea what he was saying, but gradually I deciphered some of the words: he was screaming for the police and claiming that I had not paid him. I was astounded, of course, and began dragging him to the entrance of my hotel which was just across the intersection only about half a block away. By this time, cars were slowing down to watch the scene, but in spite of all his yelling no police arrived, for which I think I am grateful. Although he was lighter than me and I was gradually moving him closer and closer to the hotel, he kept on screaming and he would not let go. Twice I tried to punch him in the face, but my blows only struck him lightly and were utterly ineffective. I ought to have kept at it, but it seemed a terribly

uncivilized thing to do and I wasn't angry enough to go at it in earnest. I was more bewildered than anything else.

At one point, I dragged him past an armed night watchman at the entrance to a building. My assailant and I were yelling at him to take action, but he simply stood there only five feet away, stony faced and still. Finally, as I started to haul my burden across the street to the hotel entrance, he lunged with his free hand for a signpost in order to stop our progress and the front of my shirt gave way. I fled to the hotel entrance, which, ironically, was locked and was opened for me only after I had rung the bell and waited for the night clerk to make an appearance.

After the event it struck me as remarkable that at my advanced age I should try to hit somebody. I cannot recall ever doing such a thing, not even as a teenager. I suppose I must have done so as a young child, but if I did I don't recall it. Of course I've never been assaulted before either. Thank God it didn't happen in Samoa.

Day 4

Kevin Hill had cautioned me against trying to cycle out of San Jose. For where I was headed, the only road out of town is the InterAmerican, a four-lane, undivided highway with rush hour traffic all day long and non-existent shoulders. As I was to learn through direct experience later in the day, the narrow roads of Costa Rica generally drop away precipitously on either side into a trench that may or may not be paved but that in any event is large enough and deep enough to carry a small creek. On Kevin's advice, I was to take a bus to San Ramon and then bicycle north from there to Fortuna, which is in the vicinity of Lake Arenal and the steadily erupting Arenal volcano.

I had consulted the National Geographic map that Kevin had so considerately annotated for me, and it indicated that the length of this first leg would be a little over fifty kilometers. This did not seem particularly far—even with a trailer—and I was rather casual about starting in the morning. In fact, after getting up and getting packed and getting fed, I returned to my room and took a little nap. The result was that, even though I happened to arrive at the station just in time to board an outbound bus, I did not reach San Ramon until noon and did not have the bicycle assembled and ready for departure until after one. Even so, I was not concerned: as slow as my pace might be I knew I would be able to cover fifty kilometers before sunset.

On the bus trip to San Ramon, the Costa Rican countryside was richly green and pleasingly irregular. There appeared to never be a time when the bus was on the level. There were no broad valleys and no sprawling hilltops—each ridge was narrow-backed and each valley was a notch. The unremitting ruggedness was masked to some degree by

the lavish vegetation that cloaked it all in green. Here in this upland zone, most of the land has been cleared of its original forest, but even so, stands of trees were scattered everywhere and the fields were either thick with crops or ripe with grass. In any event, it was a landscape with no exposed ground and no scarred earth. There was nothing equivalent to a field lying fallow and one would rarely see an erosional gully or a road cut that had not already been reclaimed by irrepressible plant life.

One curious aspect of the landscape was its general lack of concave surfaces. Hilltops of course were convex, but the hillsides also tended to be either straight runs or gently convex slopes that achieved greater steepness the farther down you went, until at last the two flanks of a valley dropped abruptly into a good-sized stream. As the bus would run down into a valley, therefore, it seemed to make a sort of rollercoaster descent and then before actually reaching stream level abruptly traverse to the other side on a high bridge, after which a sharp ascent ensued that became less and less acute the closer one got to the top of the next hill.

While sitting on the bus, I patted myself on the back for being so observant, but it was only after leaving San Ramon on my bicycle that I actually began to think about the implications of such a landscape for touring with a bicycle. In no time at all I was yearning for a nice flat piece of land to pedal across. With no wide valleys and no broad hilltops it was always up or down, up or down. The start of each little ascent was like trying to push a stalled car from its stationary position, and even the pleasure of descending into a little valley was lessened by two distractions. The first was that the upcoming ascent was bound to be extreme at least to start with and the second was that

Costa Rica's notorious potholes were so abundant that a free-running descent on a bicycle with small wheels pulling a trailer would be foolhardy.

I was not discouraged by all this for I knew in advance that the land would be rugged and I had mentally prepared for a spell of hard work. Also, I anticipated that the closer I got to Fortuna the flatter the land would become. Besides, the sight of all this rolling greenery with blue-green mountains in the distance was more than enough to take my mind off corporeal concerns. Gone were the cities and vehicle choked roads; now it was only small villages, widely scattered farmlands, and forests that seem to be sneaking in closer whenever you are not looking.

After a couple hours, I angled down into a modest valley that broke all the rules. It had no sign of human settlement and there was a floodplain for the river running through. It was like a small western canyon with a flat valley floor and cliff walls all around, but cloaked all in green. The upstream amphitheatre of jungled cliffs was a warren of waterfalls dropping down on all sides, evidently from springs located partway up the cliff faces. They all collected eventually into a surprisingly robust river with an urgent current tumbling across its cobbled, shallow bed. I crossed it on a rusty suspension bridge that had as a traveling surface a sequence of concrete planks separated one from the next by gaps so large that you could catch glimpses of the whitewater far below. The gaps between the planks were not consistently sized and on occasion I wondered whether the trailer wheels would drop down into one of them and not come out.

A short time later I began to suspect that my map had underestimated the distance from San Ramon to Fortuna and when I later came across a signpost indicating the

remaining distance it became evident that Fortuna was 25 kilometers farther on than I had been expecting. This presented a problem as it was no longer at all certain that I could reach Fortuna before nightfall.

In fact, I didn't. As the end of the day approached, the sky turned dark with clouds and heavy rains began to fall. It was quickly over, but by then the road was wet, I was wet, and night had fallen. Fortuna had to be near, but how near was undetectable.

Cycling in the dark was an unanticipated adventure. Exhaustion and lack of food opened the door on surreality, and I could hardly see the precipitous edges to the road. Whenever a car came along, its headlights would be blinding and the task of getting to the opposite side of the road, without going too far, was full of tension. A little too far, and the bicycle and trailer might plunge down into what I imagined to be a deep ditch with a bushmaster or fer-de-lance lurking in the weeds. The mind is an ungovernable thing: it obviously had far more pressing problems than the unlikelihood of encountering a poisonous snake, but anxiety trumps practicality any day..

Eventually, a lit oasis came into view on the right side of the road. It proved to be a bar, unusual because its large, square, barn-like silhouette and extensive gravel parking area with its row of pickups and 4x4's made me feel as if I were back home. Although there was heavy vegetation all around, it was almost unnoticeable in the deep darkness and completely marginalized by the sensory experience of encountering a bar in the middle of nowhere. Since I was already slipping in and out of a hallucinatory state, the bar reminded me of some roadside watering hole ten miles from, say, Bozeman where cattlemen and car salesmen drink beer, play pool, and listen to country music.

I staggered through the open doorway dripping wet and took a seat on one of the few remaining barstools. I was served two quick beers in succession and the proprietors managed to scrape up a bowl of seafood soup for me. As life began to ooze back into the system, the distinctive character of the place became more evident. Inside this spacious square was a bar and little else. The bar was circular except for a small opening on its back side where the bar top abruptly flared back and away to the back two corners of the building. The entire service area, the bar, and the barstools for the patrons were on a level one step down from the entrance level, and the seating was virtually filled with local men in work clothes while behind the bar the serving was done by four young Latin women, all of whom were plump and pretty and prepared to serve. At one point a particularly rhythmic piece of music came on and one of the barmaids began to dance in the Latin way, her hands snaking over her head and her hips bobbing to the beat as she shuffled around in a circle. The dance was suggestive and the men were delighted and the woman glowed from all the attention she was receiving, but there was not the slightest hint of anything lewd or disreputable.

When I went to the cash register to pay, I asked the woman who took my money how many kilometers it would be to Fortuna. Her dark eyes opened wide with surprise and she told me that it was only about 400 meters. I exited the building put right and walking straight and thinking about what an excellent world it is.

Day 5

Today is the day to see Don Pedro's farm. He lives in the lowlands, in the jungle next to a river that issues out of the nearby mountains and sweeps past his place. We will reach his farm by putting into the river upstream and floating down in an inflatable. We did not set out until early afternoon and the real intent of the trip is to spend a few hours passing through a riparian rain forest where Paolo the guide is responsible for navigating the inflatable and pointing out some of the tropical creatures for which Costa Rica is so famous.

The river is a mighty thing, broad and deep. Its current is powerful and fast with roiling waters and eddies constantly scarring its brown surface. There are no rapids and it is intended to be a leisurely float, but there is nothing leisurely about the pace at which we move through massive bower of overhanging trees. Occasional low branches extend out over the water from both sides and Paolo is constantly busy maneuvering the inflatable around them so that his guests do not have to duck. Every time, the hazard bears down like an approaching train, Paolo angles the inflatable out of the collision course, and the snag slips by only to recede at the same marvelous pace at which it approached.

The guests are only three—myself and a ruddy-faced couple from the Midlands in England. In addition to their stuffy accent, they are burdened with all the unfortunate symptoms of middle-aged sedentarism. Both are paunchy, fleshy, and awkward on their feet. Both appear to have never been in an inflatable boat before. They wear their

outdoor incompetencies in good humor and in fact turn out to be fine boat mates because they stay still and their quiet talk is infrequent.

Paolo has his work cut out because boatmanship is a demanding task and yet he must simultaneously watch for the creatures of the forest. His performance is flawless: in no time at all we have seen more wildlife than you would see in a week in Yellowstone. Not as much if you are measuring by body weight, but profligacy if you're thinking about diversity.

Shortly after we started the trip I became impressed by how many different animals Paolo was pointing out and decided to keep a list. The only problem was that I had a pen but no paper. After hesitating for a moment, I resolved to use a Costa Rican 500 colones paper bill. The list became so long that I almost ran out of space and had to use a second bill, in which case it would have been like going to the Laundromat.

Of course many of the names were so odd and esoteric that I butchered them in transcription, but I imagine that North American readers would never know the difference, so here is what we saw (along with occasional annotations):

- (1) A limitless supply of Two-Toed Sloths draped in trees like dirty rags.
Paolo distinguished them from their three-toed brethren by their coloration, although to me they all looked like dark, amorphous blobs.
- (2) Great Blue Herons that were few in number but tall and elegant.
- (3) Large Black Vultures, one of which was holding out its wings while perched on a branch, looking like a Nazi symbol of power.
- (4) Little Blue Herons that were more common than their larger cousins and just as finely configured, but failed to impress as much because they are

smaller. Size, it seems, *is* important. On the other hand, the juveniles are a brilliant white and *that* gets your attention; too bad they grow out of it.

- (5) A Snowy Egret looking soft, sophisticated, and refined.
- (6) Countless troops (herds? gaggles? prides? flocks?) of Howler Monkeys perched in trees. Paolo does a convincing imitation of their ear-splitting croak which elicits a cacophonous chorus every time he spots a bunch and lets loose. These tricksters, incidentally, scared me mightily when I visited Tikal in Guatemala. I was lying in bed there one night in a thin-walled cabin when a bunch of them started to do their thing. It is absolutely inconceivable that a creature making this sort of noise could possibly be anything but angry and big.
- (7) A Great Putou high in a tree looking like a giant beehive with a two-toned chest patterned with a collegiate “V.” These nocturnal birds run down bats for a living so you may want to import one for Halloween.
- (8) Toucans that flit from tree to tree at a lightning pace and with a scalloped flight path, as if they drop like stones whenever their wings don’t flap. You may picture them standing around showing off their colorful and funny looking heads, but in fact they are on the move a lot. Although I could not tell the difference, we apparently saw two varieties—the Colored something-or-other and the Kill Bill (My distorted interpretation of Paolo’s speech influenced by the pointless film of the same name?).
- (9) An Ahinda, commonly referred to as the Snake Bird.
- (10) Iguanas all over the place, and one of which was orange.

- (11) A Chestnut Mandible Toucan that I did not see very well but that goes through life with the kind of name that would impress a Wall Street broker.
- (12) A single, small Blue Jeans Dart Frog, whose diminutive body from the waist up looks so transparent that you think you can make out his internal organs (including a rapidly beating heart), but whose lower extremities are a Mexican tile blue. He is supposed to be deadly poisonous if you lick him, but how was this first discovered? Who would admit to having done such a thing?
- (13) A Broad Billed Heron whose distinguishing feature is a disgrace to the elegant heron conformation. Such a feature must be highly functional, but in this case beauty must be an acquired taste.
- (14) A couple crocodiles, one of which was as long as a canoe and had teeth that looked as if they had recently been brushed.
- (15) A Montezuma Oropendulo. I can't remember whether he was a bird or a beast, but his name is too good to pass up.
- (16) A few Emerald Basilisks, lizards in fluorescent slime green that also are known as Holy Jesus Lizards. I don't know whether we are dealing with reverence or astonishment here.

This is not a complete list, but the remnants are hardly worth mentioning since they would elicit no morbid fascination from North Americans who probably have seen most of them: swallows, variegated squirrels, honeycreepers, bluebirds, woodpeckers, hummingbirds, and a Passerine Tanager. Oh yes, there was also some sort of snake

draped on a branch overhanging the river, but I never saw it and that left me wondering whether Paolo might not have thrown it in for local color

After a couple hours of relaxed floating with my seat on a soft, inflatable berm instead of a high-tech, low-comfort bicycle seat, we pulled over to the less chic right bank and hiked up to Don Pedro's farm. He bought this 200 hectare spread back in the 1930's when he was a young man and has remained here ever since. He is now 91 years old and retired, although his younger brother of 89 continues to put in a few hours of physical labor each day. When Don Pedro first bought the land he put his energy into clearing it in order to run cattle, but when he went to town to buy some it was a one month trek. Now it is a one hour drive on rough dirt roads that do not permit speeds in excess of 30 kilometers per hour.

In later years, Don Pedro saw the light and began cultivating crops on limited acreage, allowing much of his remaining land to revert to jungle. Of course, the tourism business has changed the rules of the game for him and although he was for decades a traditional agriculturalist he now makes good money by receiving visitors like us. Even so, in typical farmer fashion, he has not allowed this new-found cash to change the way he lives. The farmhouse he built seventy years ago still has no electricity and no running water. Without appliances and modern conveniences, Don Pedro's life remains pretty much the same as when he moved here. I suppose that when he dies the money will pass to the wide-eyed grandchildren who without a tradition to sustain them and with no sense of the terrible things that money can do, will find themselves lost and disoriented in a world of things.

I asked Don Pedro if he had ever been in a hospital and although at first he said no, he suddenly confessed to visiting a clinic last year for a physical exam. Of all the useless things that go on in the world, it is hard to imagine one more useless than a healthy, 91-year-old man going to the hospital for a physical. I suspect it was not his idea.

According to Paolo who was translating, Don Pedro served as physician to both himself and his family, relying on traditionally recognized natural remedies extracted from the immediate environment. Nearly fifty years ago, Don Pedro's younger brother had an accident with a machete, nearly severing the forefinger and middle finger on his left hand. Although they considered amputation at the time, since the bones were pretty much cut through, they eventually thought to try the application of sap from a tree known to have curative powers for such wounds. It restored the fingers but regrettably their usefulness has been very limited ever since.

You know, it doesn't really matter whether all this Don Pedro stuff is true. The only thing that matters is whether you believe it.

Day 6

Late yesterday the hotel desk clerk told me that Saddam Hussein had been captured. Through an open door behind the counter there was a separate room with a television mounted on a high stand and when images of a bearded, aged man appeared on the screen the clerk motioned toward it as confirmation of his words. But the man on the screen was too old and too careworn to be Saddam. I had already passed by televisions in town and seen this same footage, but not being able to hear the accompanying narrative I had wondered why the news would be paying attention to someone who looked so much like a half-crazed indigent peasant. I now realized that Saddam had aged so much as to be unrecognizable. It never occurred to me that the countless people we see every year whose faces betray a life of defeat could ever have been reduced to such a condition in only half a year. Old age does not lure us down some path of least resistance; it strikes like a snake. Yesterday I would have thought Don Pedro a diminished man overshadowed by the sinister Saddam. Today he stands taller and the broken Iraqi leader looks like he is waiting for death.

The hotel has a small outdoor area protected from the rain where coffee is constantly brewed and guests can meet the day. When I arrived this morning the place was empty and so I claimed the best seat and the one small table for my coffee and books. I had to return to the room for some forgotten item, however, and when I got back a quiet couple had taken up the two remaining seats.

They were young and serious and soft-spoken. The tall, blond woman had an air of confidence about her and a certain benign smugness that left you thinking she knew

something you didn't. Her meek, broad-faced husband was a different story; he had a look of perpetual embarrassment, a ruddy face and serious expression that seemed a precursor to sweaty moistness. He looked as if he was overwhelmed by life.

I could not help myself; I had to engage them in conversation. They were Dutch, it turned out, and she worked as a nutritionist primarily engaged in helping people find ways to fatten up while was a biochemist who advised the government regarding the risks associated with genetic manipulation of DNA.

Everything started off well. I inquired about more detailed aspects of their work, and each of them seemed happy to elaborate. But then something happened and I began to take control of the conversation by talking more and more compulsively. I don't remember what I talked about but whatever it was they did not seem bored; they paid close attention to everything I said and gradually their faces took on a fixed look of morbid fascination. Probably this was just European politeness, and it did nothing to stem the verbal flood.

I never used to talk too much. For most of my life I spoke little and thought the constant chatter of other people a sign of moral weakness that was ameliorated only in those few instances when the narrator was unusually knowledgeable, clever, or entertaining.

In mid-life I came to the conclusion that most inveterate talkers are trying to cope with some unknown source of nervous anxiety, although in a few instances the driving force behind words must surely be nothing more than self-worship. I did not wish to see myself in either of these categories but it was increasingly obvious that I was inadvertently hypnotizing this poor Dutch couple.

The source of my talkativeness was neither nervousness nor Narcissism: it was love. I am in love and I have to talk about it, but total strangers would think it queer to have such secrets in their ear and so I was doing the best I could to talk about it without revealing the secret. It was deliciously stressful, this business of talking about one thing and thinking about another. It must be the closest I have ever come to multi-tasking. Eventually, I left the bewildered couple alone.

The road out of town scribes the shoulder of the Arenal Volcano and then skirts the irregular northern shore of the Arenal Lake. Starting out along it, I inched up around the conical hip of the volcano, catching occasional glimpses of the peak's sweeping sides, although the top with its molten rivulets always remained hidden in a roiling mass of white clouds or steam. The sun would occasionally appear, but only for a moment or two before ducking back behind the clouds. It was like a young child who rushes at you laughing from a favorite hiding place and then darts away to hide once again. The rich green landscape of gentle volcanic slopes and distant rolling hills glistened brilliantly whenever the sun came out, retaining all day the look of early morning when the sun first strikes a dewy world.

High up on the side of the volcano the road entered a cloud forest of towering trees draped from head to foot in epiphytes and vines and adorned with potted plants balanced on their outstretched arms. Directly overhead, through a filigree of treetop branches, black vultures circled in a powder blue and confectionery white sky. A fine, light mist began to sweep through the forest, feeling like the spindrift from a waterfall, only warmer.

After the volcano, the road along the edge of the lake bounded up and down and this way and that, offering up a surprise every now and then. Sometimes it would be a picturesque view of the deep blue lake and its far shore, glimpsed through a gap in the trees. Occasionally, it would be a rail-less, deteriorating platform bridge across a rushing chocolate river tumbling all around massive boulders, bowered in jungle green. Often it would be a host of coatis with their long noses and even longer tails, scurrying and scampering and sniffing along the road, and always alert for the next food offering from a passing motorist. Most often of all, though, it would be a giant clod of wet earth, perhaps containing a full grown tree or two, sprawling in the middle of the road after having lost its grip at the top of the road cut high above.

Every few minutes a little rain would fall and then the sun would come out again, but in the middle of the afternoon a more serious storm blew in and it rained in earnest for a while. It was deliciously cool, without a hint of a chill, and I pedaled through the mud and rain delighted to be so wet and feel so strong.

In the little town of Nuevo Arenal where I began to search for a place to stay, I could find nothing pleasing and decided to move on. Just then, a young man dressed in an orange t-shirt and dark shorts approached with a question. He had a baby's complexion, sandy colored hair, and what appeared to be an adolescent's meager start at a mustache—only visible at close range. He was looking for a place to stay the night and wondered whether I had found anything reasonable. I explained that I hadn't, but mostly I was distracted by his Canadian accent, so thick it sounded like a caricature. He was an oil field worker from the town of Red Deer in Alberta—a place of stark, northern beauty—and he was on six weeks vacation traveling around alone on a moped. I

expressed surprise at his solitary travel (for he didn't seem the type), and he responded disgustedly that, "All my friends are married, eh, or paying so much for their divorce that they can't afford to go anywhere." I allowed as how I knew what he meant.

Back in San Jose, Kevin Hill had recommended the Mystica Hotel at the far west end of the lake, so I decided to carry on and check it out. This is reputed to be one of the finest windsurfing spots in the entire world and although I did not see any boarders in action, there in the distance along the rugged skyline of the green hills was a row of modern windmills—stork-like affairs in white, each with three long, thin propeller blades turning through a full revolution about once a second. There were dozens of them all in a line running along the hilltops.

When I first saw photos of such high tech energy generators, I cringed at their ugliness and my heart sank at the prospect of an environmentally friendly world full of them. Now I see them for real cresting a landscape that most anyone would consider beautiful and they do not look so bad, really. I wonder if I have become hardened and uncaring or softened and less discriminating.

When finally I arrived, the Mystica Lodge was a credit to its name. It sits on sloped land high on a hill overlooking the lake. Its extensive grounds are a beautiful balance: sinuous walkways, trimmed hedges, and clipped lawns sweetly integrated with the unpredictable shapes and riotous colors of tropical plant life. The buildings are modest and simple and hand-constructed according to the architectural plan of somebody who knows how to realize a personal dream. It shows in many ways, but I will give only one example. On the broad, rustic porch in front of each room, all off which are hardwood expanses one step above ground level, there are two hand-built Adirondack

Mountain Chairs constructed of a rich tropical hardwood, unpainted and with all their sharp edges rounded off.

I was the only guest at this small lodge. During dinner the power went off and the rest of the evening was a candle lit reverie with the prowling wind outside shaking shrubs and rattling leaves. The atmosphere was a living force—just as it is when you are at sea and the wind is driving the boat and assailing the waves.

Day 7

This morning when I awoke the tropical air was wisping in through the large open window and exotic birds were squawking in the near distance. Every once in a while, far away, a howler monkey would emit his fearsome roar. I lay in a state of undiluted peace, not unlike the warmth of post-coital surrender. I decided then to stay another day and do nothing all day long.—and that is what I did. How often do you live through a day when nothing much happens, and yet keep it in your memory years later? I will do so with this day, I think, for it has had a deliciousness to it, an ineffable sweetness that is too rare to be forgotten.

Where I come from, to do nothing is to commit a sin. Its basis in religion is questionable, to say the least, but such is the way of the world that non-religious prohibitions take on the weight and authority of religious dictates. The source of that authority can be nothing more than traditional ways of thinking, but what is the use of tradition in a world of constant change? I suppose it functions as a rock, a still point in the turning world to which one can anchor and avoid aimless drift. But why is being stationary considered so much more admirable than being adrift?

For those of us trained to industriousness, work is its own reward—or at least pretends to be. All manner of activity is conjured by the mind for execution by the body, but always there is the nagging sense that our tasks and projects are, if not pointless, at least something less than necessary. Only rarely can this seed of doubt germinate, however, for work keeps us busy and leaves no time for its maturation process. Perhaps it is just as well; perhaps if we left ourselves free to think about such things we would

only become less certain of who we are, more alienated from the world around us. Is this possible? Could we be any more discontented than we are already? We surely can *suffer* more than we already do, for the world always contains countless examples of greater suffering and deeper misfortune. But suffering is a superficial thing in comparison with discontent: suffering merely reveals our obvious vulnerabilities, but discontent exposes our god-like capacity to make ourselves unhappy.

In order to properly appreciate this day of doing nothing, I get up early for a change and spend hours gliding through an endless breakfast eating fruit and bread and eggs and drinking coffee and sharing my table with a small green parrot named “Draco” who is accustomed, it seems, to perching on the shoulders of strangers and stealing their food. He is a messy eater, this Draco. As he perches on a chair back he stabs and pecks at a piece of bread held in one claw, but crumbs fly in all directions and sooner or later he seems to tire of his one legged balancing and the remainder of the bread drops to the floor. He makes no effort to retrieve his lost plunder for he can see that the table top is a banquet with not just bread but also an abundance of other delectable items. He makes for the butter, but I shoo him off. Then he tries to nab a piece of pineapple but I anticipate his plan. Birds aren’t built to creep, but he hops as unnoticeably as possible towards my plate with a round, black eye on my egg, but I thwart him once again. With options exhausted, he moves reluctantly toward the bread basket and I break off another piece for him. Once again, the beak pecks, the crumbs fly, and the piece of crust drops to the floor.

After breakfast when I returned along a hedge rowed path to my room in a separate building, there was Draco waiting for me, perched on the back of a porch chair.

He kept me company for hours as I wrote and read and watched the whitecaps on the lake and the windmills on the hill. Eventually I tired of my extended relaxation and went inside to take a nap.

In the sweet shade on the broad bed I imagined my love beside me. Her breath was on my cheek and our words were whispers in a secret cave. Outside, through the open window, the wind murmured in the trees and the distant sky was bright and gay as pillowed clouds breezed by, and Draco kept an unreliable watch.

Later, when the afternoon was no longer young, the thought of cycling down to the edge of the lake almost possessed me, but my extended stillness had given me the strength to resist such a distraction, and the sun set and the day ended and the twilight thickened with me reclined in an Adirondack chair looking out across a divine world of such exquisite loveliness that no human could ever think of it as his creation or his possession.

Deeper and deeper we descended into the heart of the night. Only the few distant lights across the lake and a sprinkling of stars in a clear corner of the sky punctuated the sweep of inky blackness, and it was then that the wind became the thing that strokes the senses. To hear its rushing urgency and fitful breath is an all-embracing thing. Smells are nothing and tastes are less than nothing, and the things to see and feel are so ordinary as to be like nothing. But the wind—in your ears the wind—sweeping through you like a hurricane, leaving you shaken and trembling like a leaf on a tree.

Day 8

Even on vacation a day of doing nothing exacts a price. From here I plan to head south to the Nicoya Peninsula and then work northwest along the coast until reaching Liberia where a convenient bus connection back to San Jose will wrap things up. But the beaches cannot be rushed, can they, and that means I ought to get to Nicoya tonight. The problem is, it's 135 kilometers away and I have never before done more than 75 kilometers with the trailer.

The solution is to start early. Ordinarily, I would get up late, dawdle over breakfast, drink coffee until the system is backed up to the esophagus, read a little, write a little, shower and pack, shop a little, and then finally check out. It ought to be possible on this one occasion to pare down on all these routines and pedal off at an early hour.

I was on the road by 9:10 AM and for me that is very early, indeed. I regretted having to leave the Mystica Lodge, but the lure of the unknown exercises an unreasonable hold on me. I imagine that if by some bureaucratic oversight I were to end up in a place called "Heaven," and someone were to whisper in my ear that "Psst, just down that road a short ways is a place called "Hell" and it's got some of the hottest Mexican food you could ever eat—but the road back is a bitch," I would mull it over for a while and then eventually decide that if you can get there it must be possible to get back, and besides, if I'm gone for a few days nobody will even notice.

Let's get serious for a minute. In many people's minds, Heaven and Hell are pretty rock solid places. That is, whatever they are they are, and it is almost inconceivable that they might be different for different people. Is this not an odd

attitude? After all, in this world whatever we see as good or bad, or pleasing or repulsive, is relative to all the other experiences we have had in life. Assume that two different people have won an all-expenses-paid, week-long vacation at the Bellagio in Las Vegas. One of them is a policeman living in a small town in rural Georgia, a place he has never left throughout the entirety of his life. The other is a wealthy celebrity who has traveled the world and who lives in . . . Las Vegas. Do you really think that hitting the jackpot will turn out to be an equivalent life experience for the both of them? *I* certainly do not.

So now, what does it mean to go to Heaven when you die? If you have lived a good life, which is what is supposed to be the thing that gets you there, then your earthly existence already has rewarded you with a little bit of heaven and your eventual passage into the real place is likely to be somewhat of a letdown because of your jaded outlook. I need not lay out the comparable argument for the slimebag who disses his friends, cheats on his wife, and never goes to church. You can construct it for yourself.

“Aha!” you may argue, “but the real difference is that those afterlife extremes are so much *more* extreme that the passage to Heaven or Hell is a passage to a totally different level of intensity.” Ok, I’ll buy that argument.

But now here’s the problem. Why does Las Vegas mean such different things to the policeman and the celebrity? I would contend that the difference is largely a matter of exposure—in one case overexposure and in the other case under. Might we not then presume that given enough time in the afterlife anybody there is going to suffer from a case of overexposure? That guy (or to be politically correct lets make it a woman) who receives her daily dipping in hot boiling oil will eventually develop a certain tolerance to the intensity of the pain (you can’t turn up the temperature without subjecting equivalent

sinner to different degrees of punishment). I am quite sure that she will begin to think to herself, “Well, this isn’t going to be much fun, but I lived through it yesterday so I guess I’ll just put up with it again and distract myself by thinking about the perverse things that Duane and I are going to do this evening when we get together.” Really, it’s not that much different from the 27 years she spent in her forelife working at the Firestone factory (thank you, Bill Bryson).

Given this aspect of human nature, the only way to sustain a just concept of Hell is by permitting it a sort of dynamic character such that the longer someone is there the worse the living conditions become. Only that would maintain the same level of unbearable intensity for all the inmates—I mean sinners. Since the term to be served is rather lengthy—infinite, in fact—will the system not have to descend to levels of punishment that are infinitely cruel and infinitely harsh? Even the Devil hasn’t been *there* before.

Most everyone agrees that human life does not extend infinitely back in time (although we won’t get into the Darwinian argument here), that there was a beginning to it all which for the sake of convenience can be tagged as the advent of Adam and Eve. We need not argue over when they appeared since they must have appeared sometime and whenever it was it was a hell of a lot less than infinity. So there had to be a starting point. To contend that all living creatures might be subjected to Heaven and Hell (in which case, I pity William Blake’s tiger), might push the starting point back in time somewhat, but we still don’t get to infinity, do we? Since that first beginning, Hell has had to develop ever more fiendish levels of inhumane punishment in order to preserve its integrity as the just reward for a few years of bad behavior.

This version of Hell is a pretty nasty place, but I don't see how it can be denied by anyone who would let reason have a say. The only way out would be to argue that once we die we are incapable of any sort of modification and change and development. How depressing! It doesn't matter whether it is Heaven or Hell, there would be no creative energy in either place. This is utterly inhuman and I suppose it means that we are only human for a flickering instant and then we die—and become even less human than a stone or a mountain since both of them are capable of being transformed given enough time. The stone will be a sandy bed in some mountain stream with trout or crayfish casting their shadows on its golden, rippled surface. The mountain will be a vast and muddy expanse of sub-oceanic deposits, so deep and heavy that they will compress once again into rocky strata awaiting their turn to reemerge as mountain—something that may take a long time but is a certainty since time is infinite.

It would be hard to defend such a static form of Hell, so let us return for a moment to that more dynamic variety. As time goes by, those early entrants—that first wave of Hell-bound sinners—have by now descended to a level where they are subjected to indescribably brutal forms of physical and psychological punishment. They have suffered more and longer than any other dead souls, and given human nature there are two things that we know must be true about them. The first is that they take great pride in their unsurpassed level of Hellish pain and they look with disdain on those who have not yet progressed so far. How odd that the Eternal Punishment has developed such a source of consolation! The second is that from their perspective the initiates—the mean-spirited souls who have just entered this Underworld—live in conditions that no rational mind could consider to be anything but Heaven.

I suppose that tucked away in various corners of the Netherworld there are fragile psyches who find the brutality of the system to be so oppressive and so overwhelming that they eventually steel themselves and perform a sort of suicide in reverse. They terminate their afterworld existence and lacking any other place to go I imagine they end up back on earth again in full flesh, so to speak. I wonder what happens to them “in the long run.” I am being facetious here; it doesn’t pay to stay serious for too long.

One last thought: this argument has been developed using Hell as its vehicle, but the operating principles are clearly applicable to Heaven as well—and this raises a certain paradox regarding God and Heaven. Heaven is associated with Godliness but it is also associated with happiness. It is hard to escape the conclusion that God must be a really happy entity. Did S/He get that way by living forever in Heaven (incidentally, are a past forever and a future forever equal to two forevers?) or was S/He always in this supremely happy state? If the latter, then surely the denizens of Heaven only *look* like a happy bunch: when they compare themselves to God they cannot avoid being somewhat crestfallen as a consequence of their inferior level of happiness relative to the gold standard. If, on the other hand, God got to happiness via the continually intensifying levels of pleasure provision that accrue to those who have been there for extended time then God’s nature must be shaped by a different set of principles from those that shape the human existence. If that is so, it hardly seems sensible for us to live by a set of irrelevant principles. We might as well live by the principles that shape a pineapple.

With idle thoughts such as these, I cycled through countless kilometers of beautiful countryside and ugly, past many saints and sinners, and finally arrived in Nicoya.

Day 9

The town of Nicoya sits at the center of the Nicoya Peninsula, a giant, stubby thumb hanging down on Costa Rica's northwest Pacific coast. It is tropical, of course, and the heat is a constant presence. Although the region gets plenty of rainfall by mid-latitude standards, it is not enough to maintain a rainforest.

The rainfall is seasonal, furthermore, and sunny, dry conditions prevail in what is considered the summer—a period running from November to July. As a result, the region has a hardy and durable collection of plants that specializes to some extent in surviving the summer drought. The landscape is neither brown nor bare, but the greenery is less rich and riotous, less overpowering than in the better watered part of the country—which is to say most everywhere else.

Still it is a verdant land, a lovely one with faintly yellowed greens that would not look out of place somewhere like the Napa Valley. And the natural vegetation *is* a forest, although perhaps the word “wooded” would better convey the modest size and uncrowded spacing of Nicoyan trees. Of course, much of the landscape was deforested during the Spanish colonial period and extensive zones of tall grassland have been maintained ever since. Recently, however, the country has become environmentally self-conscious to a degree that perhaps surpasses any other. Much of the national area has been set aside as parks and preserves, but this is not the whole story. Costa Ricans have adopted environmentalism as more than just good practice; being an environmentalist has become a part of the national identity. Costa Rica is renowned for its land preservation and its citizens evidently have decided that this reputation is one that they like having.

As everywhere, Costa Rica sees its share of square-offs between developers and greens, but my sense is that there are relatively few nationals who would view the greens as an unreasonable bunch of namby-pamby sentimentalists. I am not familiar with the ins and outs of Costa Rican politics, but I should imagine that any politician who finds himself on the wrong side of the environmental issue is in a whole lot of trouble.

This national consensus has had an effect in Nicoya, I think, for it is quite obvious that numerous tracts of land have returned to forest. In many instances the trees are planted ones that will either yield an annual harvest or will become a harvest themselves. In any event, Nicoya is returning to a more wooded look—and not because of inferior soils or uncompetitive prospects for commercial farming.

There is one notable consequence of the national consensus on environmentalism: litter is scarce. Cycle along any road and you are more likely to see a coatimundi than a candy wrapper. The roadside ditches are deep (and dangerous) and hard to clean, but in them you rarely see plastic, glass, or paper. Even in the poor villages, where the concentration of people is high but the sanitation department is nonexistent, there is no litter to be seen. Plenty of poverty but not any litter. This may be one of Costa Rica's most remarkable achievements. When was the last time you saw a poor neighborhood that was litter free?

It is mind boggling that Costa Rica could enter a competition for the least littered country and probably would finish as runner-up to Switzerland. Switzerland *does* enjoy a national consensus on the undesirability of litter, and it is quite true that the social pressure there could shame a pig into taking a bath, but in all societies there will be a small number of incorrigibles. I should imagine that in Switzerland the telltale trail left

by such misfits is swept up by foreign nationals hired to do this very thing, whereas in Costa Rica the locals would have to do the job themselves.

The landscape on the Nicoya Peninsula is of two kinds. The landward half—the part of the thumb closest to the palm—is more or less flat with a liberal sprinkling of hills while the seaward side is hill country with little in the way of flat land. The hills are mostly cloaked in groves of trees but wherever plains exist they are likely to be open fields with tall grass for grazing cattle.

The hills have a certain character to them that I think may be typical of the tropics. Their flanks generally are of a constant pitch that does not vary from one hill to the next and that abruptly intersect any existing flat plains with no transition. It is as if someone created them by pouring granular sugar on the land, allowing it to heap to higher levels in some places than in others, and often simply moving the sugar container to a new position without bothering to stop the flow from its spout. Whereas the volcanoes of the interior tend to be isolated and have flanks with a fine concavity, these coastal hills run together and have slopes that vary not at all in their pitch.

From the looks of the people in Nicoya, there are surprising physical differences from region to region in this small country. Costa Rica did not have a large native population when the Spanish arrived and the result has been a contemporary national character in which neither race nor culture have been significantly influenced by indigenous people. Although it is well recognized that Black slaves and fugitives ended up in large numbers on the Caribbean coast, one would think that people living along this Pacific side would look like the people of San Jose and the heavily populated Meseta Central.

But in fact they don't. They have much darker complexions and a handsome oily sheen to their skin. There is limited variety, furthermore, with virtually no light-haired or blue eyed-people around. Variety also seems somewhat limited as far as height is concerned; deviations from the norm are even less common than usual. This contrasts noticeably with what you see in San Jose where, a fair part of the population—perhaps even a majority—is light skinned, and where in other respects variation is noticeable as well. Many people in San Jose could pass as Spaniards and indeed a number of them might be mistaken for northern Europeans. Here in Nicoya, however, hardly anyone looks like they might have come from Europe.

The most plausible explanation of all this is that Nicoyans have more indigenous ancestry than is generally supposed. This in itself would not be surprising; what is surprising is that mobility and intermarriage within the country have been insufficient to blur the physical distinctions. Costa Rica, after all, is a small country—about the size of West Virginia—and yet these racial differences persist.

The road south from the town of Nicoya to the coast works its way through increasingly hilly country—not bigger hills but more hills more closely packed together and connected to each other by low ridges. It is pedal, pedal up that steep sugar-slope, be alert for vistas as the crest flashes by, and then a breakneck descent to the bottom of the notch with its small bridge across the next little stream.

Playa Samara is at the end of the highway and there is something refreshingly direct about the way the road wraps up its job. The final descent to the ocean's edge is a direct frontal attack, straight at the beach where the pavement peters out and you have to halt if you are going to avoid getting wet.

The beach itself is more masculine than feminine—more handsome than beautiful. It arcs around for more than a kilometer and the distance across the sand from the water to the trees could accommodate a soccer pitch the long way with the team attacking the water enjoying only the slightest downhill advantage. Indeed, that is the way young boys are using the beach when I arrive there. The flat beach is dark and wet and water soaked—and firm, so firm that the occasional bicyclist passes slowly by, looking for once as if the journey is the point and not the destination.

As the sun is setting, I find myself sitting alone at a small outdoor café table in the shade of a broad, low-branched tree looking out at the beach as it subsides into darkness. There is a distant headland at each end, prominent and green, but turning black as the light begins to dim. The waves roll in from far, far out, across shallows so broad that three or four lines of wave are simultaneously rolling over, pushing their foamy curls in front of them and sweeping with a sweet slowness toward their final destination.

As the sky loses its color, lavender and cerise streak it in the west, and a solitary train of tropical clouds troops westward, their bottoms flat and their puffy tops blown into downwind streamers. They capture the last remaining hues of color in the sky and from where I sit the broad swath of wet and glistening sand on which the boys still play reflects the surreal colors of the clouds. The boys become black silhouettes, jumping and running and dancing on an oily field of unnatural colors, their shouts and calls occasionally reaching me in the quiet. As the stars come out and the lines of land and sea are lost in darkness, the only thing left is the little rows of fluorescent combers, gleaming white, coming ever closer.

Day 10

Just before the highway runs onto the beach it forms the main street for the little village of Samara. Three ramshackle blocks of little inns and shops and open-air restaurants—and then the beach. This kind of place is easy to like, but it could be different tomorrow. Already, visitors and vacationers are the life of the town, but at least today the tourists are few in number so that the people on the street are either locals or else foreigners with no intention of ever going home. The holiday crowd is limited to a handful like me who look a little different, wander around aimlessly, and search for ways to spend money.

The place reminds me of Breckenridge or Park City a few decades ago, before the storm hit. Back then, those little run-down towns could feel a change coming and had begun to prepare by installing the right kind of shops and the right kind of services, but at a level of capacity so amateurish and so small as to be a joke by their contemporary standards. So too, Samara has geared up for the deluge and probably even anticipates arrival with naive eagerness—but it has no idea how much power the forces will wield that are about to descend on it. When the first rains arrive there will be joy and dancing in the streets to celebrate the end of the long drought, but then the tempest will begin in earnest. Nothing will survive if not big and sufficiently backed by big money.

But for the lucky few, the locals who are today the lifeblood of the town will be pushed aside. Some will die; some will cling to a fringe existence; some will leave in disgust. A new breed of more efficient predators will arrive on the scene and in a fleeting instant the sidewalks will be repaired, the new-age shops transformed, the rodeo grounds

on Main Street dismantled, the beach posted, and the post office rebuilt—as the edge of town moves ever outward. Nostalgia will set in and second thoughts will multiply, but by then it will be too late. There will be no going back.

But I will be *coming* back. In a few years I will pass through here again, only then it will be by boat instead of bike. I don't know exactly how long it will be until I return, but when I do I will drop anchor in the harbor and come ashore and see how the transformation is progressing. Poorly, I hope. I hope that the locals are still waiting for the future and that the rodeo still is an annual event.

To think about the future is a suspect activity. Just as we look with pity on those elderly who spend their time retrieving the past, so too must we extend our sympathy to those for whom the future is the only consolation. Here and now is where we need to be, and who can argue with such a sensible doctrine. I am a believer myself—although I have been known to sin.

Real richness lies in the present, but the present is a fleeting thing, as hard to collar as a flooding stream. This instant, when the rustling at the side of the road abruptly becomes a foraging armadillo—is it the present? Ah, but that moment is past now and when it was the future we could not see it coming. It just flickered by, a single frame in a feature film. To keep our eyes trained entirely on the steady stream of images passing before them is to overlook the story being told. As much as we enjoy the fixity of a beautiful image, it only seduces us when it is part of something bigger—some tale of joy or woe that tells us where we have been and where we may be heading.

So living in the present is not such a simple matter. We must pay attention to everything that surrounds us here and now, but without a larger landscape of hopeful

dreams and soothing memories the present passes too quickly to be savored. Those who would be here in Samara without regard for its languid past and unsettling future are refusing to hear a story being told. They will of course play inconsequential bit parts in the story of the town, but there is nothing wrong with that: inconsequentiality has its own rewards. No, the tragedy for them is that a story will have been told but they will have been too busy living in the present to have noticed.

All along this coast, the roads are nothing but dirt tracks with no greater ambition than to link together adjacent homesteads and small villages. There is no road from Samara to Nosara—my destination for today—only a collection of back road connectors that if properly selected will get me where I want to go. The road surfaces are potholed and gullied, but firm and easily passable in this dry season. The tropical sun irradiates the land, giving it a lime-colored glow that refracts to yellow in the fields and green in the forests. The sweet blue sky is a monochrome lid as I glide along in the shade of trees that have been planted along the shoulders in the cleared areas but are a natural extension of the forest in the wilder ones. It is a dream-like trip; the peace is palpable, the people few.

Small, shallow streams must be forded and on one occasion I misjudge the depth of the water and find myself midstream with the level above the chain and the trailer floating like a boat behind me. I am quite proud of it for it floats high enough to keep the lid above the waterline and everything inside stays dry.

At one point, I overtake a man and his son who are cycling along under broad-brimmed hats. We exchange greetings and I continue on ahead, but they decide to pick up their pace and keep me company. Nothing more is said and we continue on together in silence, side by side, until at last I peel off onto a small access road for Playa Garza, a

sun soaked sweep of sand with lazy palms and lazy people and a row of small, unpainted homes at its doorstep. I eat lunch there, watching the children play in the surf, with fishing boats and sailboats anchored off shore and gleaming white in the dazzling sun.

Not far from Nosara, at Playa Guiones, I check into an older style hotel—the single storey type that will soon become extinct—and then follow a short path that leads past palms and dune shrubbery to Playa Guiones, a vast stretch of gray sand with a muscular waves rolling in from the sea. The broad strand, with sand so fine that the backwash leaves a surface film of water, is littered with migrating snails and abandoned cowry shells, all so numerous you have to watch your step to keep from treading on them. The water is tropical warm, the sky is clear, and people are but pinpricks in the distance.

After dark, I walk along a pitch black dirt road under a swirl of magnified stars to a nearby bar where a small crowd of local residents is using English to exchange suspect tales of the day's happenings and to mock the idiosyncrasies that each is known to have. As I attempt to consume a mound of eggplant parmesan, the locals come and go, none immune to good-natured harassment—all done in English.

The bird-like man beside me with bright eyes and a black, trimmed beard sitting under a stylishly crumpled black felt cowboy hat is a refugee from Calgary. Beside him is a powerfully drunk, loquacious and incoherent man from California. They work separately, but both are building contractors who find a way to work a good part of every year here in this undiscovered corner of the world. Between bouts of abusive banter, they make plans to meet in the morning at the local church where they have volunteered their time to give its fascia a facelift. The waitress behind the bar has fled from Houston—a wise decision given the ugliness of that place. A few barstools away sits a tall, trim

Englishman of incipiently middle age. His wife is next to him, a worldly Dutch woman who talks with everyone. She is deeply engaged in conversation with the man beside her, a completely bald octogenarian dressed in shorts and a shabby, short-sleeved shirt, untucked. He has retired here, it seems. At the end of the bar are two young men from the states who come here for a few months each year, ostensibly to surf but probably to escape.

Escape seems to be the common denominator here. All are looking for a way to distance themselves from Corporate America with its competition and cold-hearted decision making. The Europeans, too, are fleeing from the material excesses of the global economy. There are true locals here, although not in this bar, but even they often turn out to have moved in from other villages up and down the coast. The hopes and dreams of these two groups obviously are different.

Late in the evening back at the hotel I sit at the open air bar where an irresistible young man named Grant—a surf bum turned temporary bartender—serves free shots to the assembled guests because he thinks the hotel is overcharging for its drinks. Grant is a Kama’aina boy from Honolulu in surfer’s shorts and an aloha shirt. His wavy, sun bleached hair pokes out from under his baseball cap and displays an odd hue of steely blue, the suspect work of a recent girlfriend, a hairdresser in Los Angeles who had designs on his head.

Grant, you see, is a chief mechanic for American Airlines. He is not as young as he looks—36, if fact—and he too wants to escape, so every year he makes his way here and spends a couple months surfing and surviving.

Day 11

Last night Grant got lit downing shots with everybody else, and when before midnight the management closed the bar and evicted everybody, Grant came out from behind the bar and buttonholed me for a little decompressive conversation. He is as carefree and uninhibited as any man I have ever known, and he talks with the unconstrained enthusiasm of a teenager. Still, he carries a burden of lost illusions that are subtly revealed in the texture of his language. I consider myself a loner who generally has no interest in other men (and only a limited range of interests in women) but this is one man who I would like to see again someday.

He is something of a folk philosopher and I should imagine that this is part of what makes him so fascinating. At one point he was explaining why he had so harshly dismissed the complaints of Danielle, the pretty young California woman who had been sitting at the bar. Grant claims that she constantly puts down her dark and sober husband named Don who regularly cares for their two young daughters and shows them tender affection. Grant, it turns out, grew up with his mother and grandmother—for his father left early on—and he thinks that Danielle does not appreciate what she has.

Grant explains it like this: there are only two kinds of people in this world—“us” and “them.” For them, the only way is their way and anything that stands in their way is targeted for destruction. For us, according to Grant, the world is what is and we can appreciate it without the need or the desire to change it. The tragedy, he seems to be saying, is that we must struggle to survive in their world.

His philosophy, I must say, strikes a cord in me, and I should imagine that it explains the presence here of so many expatriate fugitives. It is a simple philosophy, of course, far too simple to be the whole story, but most philosophies *are* an oversimplification because that is the only way our simple minds can embrace them.

Consider, for example, the simple poem by Robert Frost in which fire is equated with desire and ice is another word for hate. Mr. Frost does not know whether the world will end in fire or in ice, but he is convinced that it will be one of them. A simple analogy, is it not? The travails of the world are nothing more than unconstrained greed or hate. Surely the world is more complicated than this, but it is nonetheless a good first approximation. Just as Robert Frost has led me to a crisper understanding of the world so too has Grant advanced my education.

In the morning as I was eating breakfast, Grant appeared again, this time all set to depart with a friend for Playa Ostional, a surfer's beach some distance north along the coast. While waiting for a companion—a young local with a sheepish smile and a cleanly shaved head—Grant regales me with his philosophy of sex and how to get it. When his friend arrives, he says a sudden goodbye and they are out the door.

An hour or so later, I set off on the same route, but dawdle along the way because the day is young enough that time seems unlimited in supply. After an hour of sun baked back roads, I come to a broad stream that has to be forded and on the far side are two vehicles parked, one of which has a problem. After pushing my bike through the deep water with the wheel axle submerged and the trailer floating free behind I reach the other side and there with an engine that will not start are Grant and his friend. They tried to bowl through the stream as quickly as possible so as to avoid bogging down and settling

in at mid-current. They did make it across, but the air intake scooped water and now the engine is uncooperative.

After half an hour of aimlessness, Grant and his friend decide to return to Playa Guiones with acquaintances in the other vehicle. We say goodbye and I continue on alone. The road turns rough and gravel-pitted, with stones and shards that are imbedded in the baked clay. It is better than if they were lying loose, but the surface is rough and continues that way all afternoon. It is like riding a horse that will neither walk nor lope, and insists on trotting all day.

Time proves to not be endless and as the sun gets low in the sky I find myself still inching along toward Playa Junquillal where I intend to spend the night. Eventually the road improves and I make it to the destination before sunset. The place I choose to stay is called Hotel Tatanka, a small inn set back away from the beach, on a site carved out of the tangled, dry forest. It was built by a young Italian man and his Tican wife. He has the classic dark Italian features with olive skin, an aquiline nose, and bedroom eyes so languid he has to put his head back to see out of them. Back in Italy he worked for a large corporation in an office job, but he found the way of life too materialistic and too complicated for his taste, so he moved to Costa Rica. He has one employee, a slight, sober-faced German with thinning hair turning gray and a narrow face that looks congenitally sad until he manages a smile and temporarily defies his fate. I think his name is Günter, and about five years ago he gave up his job as a design engineer with Bosch in order to pursue a simpler life here in Costa Rica. Now he caretakes a finca in the morning hours and then does gardening and bartending at this hotel in the later hours. As you can see, Costa Rica is accumulating a collection of expatriates whose stories are

in parallel. They all seek a sweeter world and think they have found it here. What they are after is what the grinning Ticans sometimes shout as I pedal past them in the dusty, dirt road villages: “Pura vida!”

Playa Junquillal is a quiet place—small, widely spaced hotels with forest intervening and little else. The beach is near and after dark the distant drum roll of the surf is the only sound. The open air restaurant for the hotel is a small pool of light in a dark wood.

The only other guests are a Canadian family with two teenage daughters and the older sister and brother-in-law of the wife. The family is new to the tropics, invited for Christmas by the older sister who with her husband migrates from Vancouver to Costa Rica for a three-month winter stay every year.

They all invite me to have dinner with them and the next couple hours are spent exploring our respective backgrounds. The family is awed by their surroundings and full of tentativeness, for they have just arrived. As it happens, they were long-term residents of Hay River, a small frontier community in the Northwest Territories where he operated the town newspaper and she was a family physician. This fascinates me for I have always thought that given a slightly different set of circumstances I might have ended up as a northern frontiersman myself. The stark, blank Arctic with its sharp, clean lines is a land of basic choices and if I had been just slightly more courageous and slightly more willful I might have stayed there when I visited so many years ago.

One would think that a greater contrast could not exist than that between Arctic Canada and tropical Costa Rica, but it seems to me that a person from Hay River is better equipped to understand what is going on here in Playa Junquillal than a well-traveled,

worldly visitor from Miami or Los Angeles. Playa Junquillal is a rural place with a local population extracting a living from the land in a simple manner. An invasion is under way as fortune seekers and societal misfits arrive from far away with little more than dreams to sustain them. Hay River cannot be so different.

Who is to say what forces control the lives we lead. Each of us likes to think that we have shaped a life and put it into a form that approximates the vision that we had for it, but this surely is not so. On a different day, long ago, I might have met an Inuit woman who knew how to touch my heart. I am sure that I would have embraced her inner beauty and allowed it to lead me to a different life.

After all, here I am on the threshold of old age with a plan in mind for how I expect to spend my final years—a plan that is exciting, but lonely. And then along comes a woman—the only woman—and I am cast adrift on an unknown sea. Should I follow the dream that I have designed—for it is unquestionably a suitable ending to a satisfactory life—or should I . . . should I abandon my destiny and instead put my fate in the hands of forces unknowable and unreliable? It is a sweet choice for I cannot lose—although to win in one instance could be far, far sweeter than in the other. But I am such a child that I do not know which choice offers the greater reward. Ah well—if I am wrong again it will not be so bad.

Day 12

And now comes Tamarindo, the place where sweet sounding surf and tropical skies meet money. The place where people will be looking for more in life than mere happiness. The place where love is complicated and tomorrow will be different from today. But this is simply prejudice for I have not yet seen the place. I have read the guidebooks, though, and looked at the situation, and all the elements are in place for it to be a tourist spot spun out of control.

It is, for example, the largest town along the entire Nicoyan coast, many times the size of any other village. It has hotels of distinction and restaurants with reputation. It has a national park at its backdoor and a marine reserve at its front. It has the kind of name that causes love *before* first sight—a worthy contestant in the name game, a rookie competitor with places like Santa Fe, Bali, and Ipanema. But most of all it has a road, a paved highway connecting it to the core of Costa Rica, a concrete conduit that delivers cars to Tamarindo and to nowhere else. And all this in a country that has recently decided to join the major leagues of international tourism.

Before I get to see whether Tamarindo deserves such a sour reputation, there first will be a few final hours of cycling back roads, fording streams, snaking the trailer through gullies, and gazing out across the sunlit landscape of small hills and small meadows and the occasional small house with chickens in the yard and children at the door.

These Costa Rican people are very civilized, I think. I am clearly not a local but the Tican reaction when I pass by is either cheerful curiosity or—in many instances—the

normal look of non-recognition that we all use for people who we do not know but who do not strike us as different. In other words, my gringo status and odd equipment do not automatically relegate me to an alien category; no matter how I talk or how I look, to many Ticans I am just another person.

I have not so far encountered any people, in the city or in the country, who have given me looks of hate or awe or mistrust or disdain or envy or any of a number of other such emotional reactions that have occasionally played across the faces of some few in the other poor countries of the world that I have visited. The conventional wisdom is that Costa Ricans treat everybody as their equals and the small amount of experience I have had here tends to confirm this.

There is one particularly telling way in which this sense of personal integrity shows itself. Ironically, it does so invisibly. Although there are many countries that are poorer, Costa Rica is more poor than rich. A very large part of the population here has a material existence that is meager and marginal. In most such poor countries tourists are constantly beset by touts and hustlers, persistent salesmen who are virtually impossible to discourage and whose apprentices in the trade often are young children. But they do not thrive in Costa Rica. Taxi drivers are occasionally aggressive, but they seem willing to accept “no” when they hear it. In this singular way, Costa Rica is a comfortable place for foreigners to visit, and perhaps it confirms the notion that Ticans do not think so much in terms of winners and losers, victors and vanquished—without which it is hard to justify exploiting the rich.

According to experienced expatriates, the sense of parity between all extends to the realm of sexual relations. If a Tican woman likes a man, they claim, she will not

hesitate to ask him out and indeed to ask much more than to just go out. It would be unwise for either me or you to accept as fact this sort of hearsay, but there is no denying the astonishment with which these expatriates talk about it, and this strongly indicates that such parity does *not* exist where we come from.

Since leaving Samara a few days ago I have noticed that my voice has gotten increasingly hoarse. I do talk to myself quite a bit, but in a sufficiently low voice that that cannot be the explanation. Today I realized what is going on. On these rough roads it is impossible to go fast and yet often there are untied dogs lying around in the front yards of the houses along the way. Some of them are protectors and chasers and every day there are a few that come after me barking and snapping. With no chance of racing away before the dog reaches me, I have gotten into the practice of immediately stopping and jumping off the bike to its more protected side. I then turn to face the assailant and aggressively bark at him. Without exception, the poor bewildered dog stops in its tracks, stops barking and looks at me—and then blinks. Obviously, these dogs are amateurs when it comes to protecting the homestead; they just don't have the killer instinct, thank God. Ordinarily, we part ways by walking off quietly in our own separate directions. It seems that all this barking at dogs has made me somewhat hoarse. My routine has come to resemble a baseball player's superstitious rituals for a game, though; if I don't treat each canine challenge in this ritualistic fashion there is no telling what might happen. A little hoarseness is a small price to pay, I figure.

And now we come to Tamarindo, a place not near as bad as I made it sound but one that is headed for perdition even if it hasn't gotten there yet. Of course as is so often the case with these sorts of resort towns, the downward spiral is hard to notice because

everyone is so preoccupied with having a good time. Preoccupied or not, most are succeeding in this benign pursuit and it gives the place a healthy glow. As with individuals, sex appeal can be more stirring than simple natural beauty, and Tamarindo is still able to capitalize on its ripening youth and naïve adolescence.

What I am trying to say is that I was wrong about the place. The Big Boys haven't kidnapped it yet and the search for worldly pleasures is less frantic than I had feared. I don't think it is the kind of place that I would ever grow to love but I can appreciate its charms and recognize that for those with different needs Tamarindo could be the answer to their dreams.

I used to think that being wrong is like being lost: your life is more or less on hold until it all gets sorted out. But life doesn't stop for such trivialities as being wrong; it doesn't even slow down. It makes more sense, then, to play your imperfect hand and keep in mind that nobody else's hand is perfect either. After all, when you are lost you still are *somewhere* and that could easily be a better place than where you were trying to get to; so it is that when you are wrong your situation is such that you can see things—unrelated things—that are hidden from the view of those who may have it right.

Anyway, this whole human concern with being correct is vastly over inflated in our minds. It focuses our attention on the things we know about—since that is where we are least likely to go astray. But what kind of life do we lead when we wander around in our meager corner of the known world when there is an unknown universe out there begging for our attention? So what if we misunderstand it and view it with imperfect eyesight? If we do not go astray—if we are, God forbid, never wrong—then surprise is

inconceivable and risk is a meaningless word. These two draughts are the elixir of life, but they are available to us only when we are wrong—or at least willing to be.

I was wrong again later in the evening when an overly friendly young man joined me at an outdoor bar under the stars and waving palms, next to the rolling surf. He squeezed a conversation out of me by being wrong: he was too young and socially insensitive to realize that I was in retreat with my mind far away in Chico, California. I humored him by playing my part in a meaningless conversation, and then along came the surprise. It turned out that this young man has a marine license and spent some amount of time delivering power boats to various locations in the Bahamas and Florida and other places nearby. Suddenly, an irritant stranger became a source for dream-feeding information: I plan to pass through that part of the world on my own boat next year and he was able to give me helpful information for navigating that particular part of my unknown universe. Even better, he treated me as if my amateurish foray into his professional domain would be something worthy of respect. Most people who I talk to about my Quixotic venture—a long distance trip alone in a boat I built myself—betray a certain skepticism about the seaworthiness of the vessel and my capacity to handle it properly. But here is a yachtsman who makes no presumptuous judgments about the foolhardiness of my plan. He accepts it automatically as both feasible and reasonable and spends his time asking me practical questions and suggesting sensible courses of action. He gives me the feeling of having been accepted into a world that always I have viewed yearningly, from the outside looking in.

Day 13

The streets of Tamarindo are still and empty in the early morning when I cycle out of town. Here and there a local shopkeeper is opening a sidewalk stand or a hotel worker is hosing down the sidewalk pavement, but most businesses are shuttered and the holiday crowd is not yet prowling. Slanting rays of the sun are beginning to play on one side of the main avenue, but there is lots of shade on the other.

I will pedal to distant Liberia where I hope to catch an afternoon bus back to San Jose. It will be a full day: even if everything goes as planned it will not be possible to reach San Jose before nightfall.

The road to Liberia is paved and pothole free, a rare combination here in Costa Rica. It also seems to be an extended stretch of flat or gently undulating land, another rarity hereabouts. Even as I am leaving the outskirts of Tamarindo, however, the rear derailleur on the bicycle begins to bind and a short distance later refuses to downshift at all. It will readily shift to a higher gear, but not to a lower one: downshifting can be accomplished, but only by dismounting and manhandling the derailleur directly. I cannot find the source of the problem so I decide to carry on with the chain wheel shifter only. In effect, the bicycle has become a three-speed from a different era, but this will not be particularly bothersome as long as the terrain stays flat. One hilly stretch does eventually intervene, but its hills are manageable and small, and I am able to overcome them with a little extra effort.

A few hours pass during which time the distant town of Liberia moves closer at a satisfying rate. I have a schedule, of course, for I want to catch the 2:00 pm bus, and it

begins to look as if I will arrive with ample time to spare—time enough to break down the bicycle and convert the trailer back into a bicycle suitcase.

The wind, however, intensifies with each passing hour and twenty kilometers from my destination the route turns due east and straight into it, just as the landscape becomes an open plain with only occasional rows of planted trees. The wind blows so strongly that the tall grass lies down flat and so steadily that it can't get up. Forward progress becomes a painful struggle, like cycling in soft sand.

Patience and stoicism are not missing from my mental make-up, but this particular adversity is one I do not handle well. I can easily accept the travail of overcoming hill after hill because I expect their appearance and each one has a summit that offers a small reward when finally it is reached. Pain is always rewarded with victory. But the wind is a different matter: its invisible resistance is for me a source of real frustration. It can't be beaten; it always wins and the only question is how badly you will lose.

In this instance I was drubbed, for my arrival in Liberia was much later than early progress had suggested it would be. And yet I cannot complain: a strong wind often has been my companion while I have been cycling here in Costa Rica and yet this is the first time it has headed me.

It was a hot, sunny day and my final labors against the invisible foe left me sweat soaked and weak. When finally I reached the bus station there was little time to spare before the scheduled departure. The repacking of the bike was done hurriedly and when I boarded the bus I was even hotter than I had been pedaling against the wind.

The bus was full and had passengers standing in the aisle. This is to be expected in a Central American bus, of course, but I was secure because I had bought my ticket early enough to get an assigned seat. When finally I found it, there was a small, moon-faced woman standing nearby with two young children in tow. I thought it would be nice to offer her my seat and after initial hesitation she agreed to take it.

The trip to San Jose lasted many hours. To stand for so long in a poorly ventilated, tropical bus while the driver stops and starts and veers unpredictably on narrow, snakelike roads takes the word “gallantry” to a new level of absurdity. The workout proved to be more strenuous even than the morning cycling had been. I must be a wimp, however, since many others—some much older than I—made the journey under the same conditions as mine, and they seemed not in the least phased by the experience.

The two children, as it turned out, were on their own and not attached to the lady in my seat. I occasionally looked her way to see how she was doing, but she always seemed preoccupied and not in the mood for eye contact. I would not have accused her of having skinned a gringo but in my distressed condition I did wonder about it. It all ended, however, for she disembarked before we reached San Jose and when she did she made a point of insuring that I got the seat. She gave me a very nice smile as she left and I spent the last hour of the trip in a well-deserved stupor, deliriously contented even though the teenager in the seat beside me was a Walkman head-banger who knew how to sprawl while nasty music oozed out from around his ears.

During the first few hours when I was standing on the bus, I could not help thinking occasionally of how messy it would be if we were to have an accident. I won't pretend that this was one of your stereotypical Latin American bus rides where a salsa-

crazed driver whips the bus around cliff-hanging roads with two wheels on the outer shoulder and the other two in the air, but it wasn't like taking a German reisentour on the autobahn either. The roads were plenty narrow (I began to wonder what had protected me on the bicycle), and as we climbed up to the Meseta Central they became more than a little hairy as well. Passes in questionable circumstances were commonplace here and a bus accident, although not a constant worry, was definitely a possibility. The thought of a crash and rollover with fifty seated passengers, and a dozen more standing in the aisle, was not the kind of thing the mind should dwell on. Of course the carnage would be little worse than for a Greyhound to take a dive in Kentucky, and both would pale in comparison with an airline crash of any sort. Still, Greyhounds don't crash much and jetliner do it even less. But given the bad roads and packed buses in a country like this, the bus catastrophe probably is as likely as an accident involving private vehicles, and that is a legitimate concern when we are talking about mass transit and lots of passengers.

All this speculation about bus accidents, though, probably does an injustice to reality. Everyone hears such stories about crazy drivers that talk of bus crashes must only reinforce a prevailing myth. I should not contribute to the stereotype for the situation is not so dire.

I have spent a fair amount of time traveling not just in Costa Rica but in Guatemala and Mexico as well, and I have rarely seen the sort of vehicular insanity that is supposed to be the norm in such countries. I find that most drivers in this region are alert and skilled. They indeed are not cautious, but their aggressiveness is a calculated thing that arises from the dismal driving conditions and the need to get somewhere. To ask them to be more cautious would be like asking a New York City taxi driver to be a

little more polite. Undoubtedly, the accident rates are very high, but give a bunch of sober Midwesterners similar road conditions and I daresay they would crash a lot too. One thing I do know: if I am riding down the road on a bicycle I am far less nervous about being overtaken by a Tican than I would be if the person behind the wheel were a Utahn.

One last journey lay before me before I could savor the sweetness of a shower, food, and sleep: I had to take a taxi from the bus station to the hotel. My fare was taken by an outgoing and confident young man who liked to talk but spoke no English. His vehicle was in terrible shape. After shoving my bags in the rear, he literally hopped into the driver's seat and began a two-step process for starting the car. First he pulled the wires from under the dash and hot wired them to get the engine running. Then he fished out the ignition key from his pocket and inserted it in order to release the steering wheel. We bounded away like a rabbit and raced through a warren of back streets in a patternless fashion that soon made me suspicious. Sure enough, we were lost. But that was not a problem according to the young driver's tone of voice, and in the end he proved to be right. After asking around, and racing around, we eventually arrived at the Don Carlos Hotel and I was at last able to get the things that I had been dreaming about for hours. The taxi ride was diverting, actually, for the young man was full of energy and confidence and good cheer.

Day 14

Breakfast at the Don Carlos is a fine introduction to the day. The Hotel has an outdoor patio of modest size, sequestered from the street by an ochre wall with a gentle waterfall and pool at its base. The tables are round, black, and wrought iron with white marble tops. The chairs are a matching style and color but highly illusory; their shape would remind you of the lightweight wicker chairs you often see in ice cream parlors, but when you try to pull one away from the table you discover that it is so heavy you can only do the job using both hands. There is something very satisfying about a seat and table so rock solid that nothing can shake them or cause them to shudder. When you put your coffee down its liquid surface quickly turns as still as oil.

The food buffet, simple and unadorned, contains a sensible variety of eggs, breads, and fruit. Of course it includes gallo pinto, the Costa Rican staple of rice and black beans mixed with various spices. Gallo pinto is like Labor Day: it is not much to anticipate but once you've got it you wouldn't want to give it up.

It's a good idea to eat a hearty breakfast because the day's activities are going to be the most demanding of the trip: shopping. Nothing aches the feet and saps the will like shopping. I have often set out with a little spring in my step anticipating the pleasure with which the exact item I am looking for will miraculously reveal itself in the first store I enter, with a little sale tag on it. Somehow, it never seems to happen that way. I always start my search in the most logical stores—or so it seems to me—but the store clerks there usually either cannot understand anyone buying such a thing or else kindly direct me to a store on the other side of town.

By the second or third store I am beaten. I have no real confidence in my ability to shop successfully so the first setback usually is enough to infect my mind with the thought that I am about to fail once again. I lose focus, the task at hand becomes a burden, and my mind begins to dwell on alternatives—alternative things to buy or, better yet, alternative things to do with my time.

This is when my feet begin to hurt. There is nothing physically wrong with me and standing or walking has never been a problem, but shopping causes my body to rebel in this way. It should not seem so strange. If the thought of a dentist drilling is enough to raise beads of sweat on the forehead or the thought of going to school can precipitate an upset stomach, why, there is no reason that the thought of shopping should not cause the feet to ache. Aching feet effectively ends the psychological torture for the physical ailment takes precedence here and more or less requires that the shopping be put on hold. If the items sought are absolutely needed then the reprieve is temporary, but during the period of rest the mind works feverishly at finding an alternative way to meet the need that first initiated the shopping trip. Often it is successful. I can conceive of no better way to differentiate between the truly essential shopping trip and the merely optional one. All optional forays are quickly exposed as frauds and justifiably abandoned.

One might think that so powerful an aversion would be a stimulus to efficiency, that the desire to avoid the painful would encourage careful planning. But there is another sort of person out there and I appear to be of that sort. Avoidance and procrastination are second nature to me, and that is why I find myself here on the last day of the trip fortifying myself for a day of shopping.

But this time is different—far, far different from all the other times I have taken on the chore. I have spent two weeks thinking about what I will buy; I have made a final decision; I have researched the very best source for what I want to get; I have ascertained the exact location of the establishment and prearranged with the hotel for a ride there. This outing is to be a model of Swiss efficiency and I am actually looking forward to it.

It may sound as if the shopping to be done is so simple and undemanding that this unfamiliar strategy has been easy to adopt, but that is not at all the case. In fact, I want to buy something for the only woman who has ever given me her heart and forgiven all my sins. I wish to bring her something that will tell her I love her, and this is not so easy when this feeling of love is so unprecedented and yet the practice of gift-giving is so trite. Early on, I concluded that that the standard gifts would not be suitable. Clothing and jewelry are the normal categories, are they not, for conveying the idea that someone is important to you. But from my point of view nothing in either of these realms will work.

Clothing is completely out of the question for I believe that this woman's taste in clothes is vastly superior to mine. Why should I want to dress her up in something that enhances her appearance less than if she were to do the choosing? Such a state of affairs would be unsatisfactory for both of us. She could, I suppose, find a reason to not wear whatever I gave her, but that doesn't sound terribly satisfactory either.

As for jewelry, the problem is two-fold. First, I have no regard for it. This is not to say that I never see a stunning piece, but only that most of it leaves me wondering why anybody would spend so much money for a little bit of flash. Most diamonds, emeralds, and rubies are pretty enough in a glittery sort of way, but to me they are no more enchanting than I imagine the trinkets were that Europeans used to purchase Manhattan.

We generally recognize that the Indians got a bad deal, but if jewelry is such a desirable commodity why do we think this way? The answer to this question would seem to be that the Indians failed to bargain for something truly rare (although such things *were* rare to them), but this is just another way of saying that the reason jewelry is so desirable is that it is expensive. That's pitiful.

The second problem with jewelry is that to perform its aesthetic function it needs to be not simply unusual but downright unique. How do you go about shopping for something unique? Since it *is* unique you haven't seen it before and so you have absolutely no idea what you are looking for. You can wander around gazing at displays in store after store, I suppose, waiting for that special piece to pass before your eyes, but the odds are not good that it will happen and even if it does there is no guarantee you will be able to afford it. This particular scenario sounds like my worst shopping nightmare, and besides, the Holy Grail may not reveal itself in just one day of shopping.

So much for clothing and jewelry. That still leaves a lot of choices, but most things are highly functional, which makes them highly suspect since functionality is not the point here. It needs to be something that will convey a sort of secret between the two of you. When at last I struck upon an idea that would do this—in a vague sort of way—I was energized and set about bringing it to fruition.

I took my taxi and found the store. It was a small, unpainted structure in a poor neighborhood with two dirty display windows framing a simple entry door. On the inside was a mostly bare room bereft of furniture. In its square space with plain wood walls and floors, no larger than an ordinary living room, an elderly lady in a plain, dark housedress was walking around waiting for a customer. Behind her was a very small counter, barely

lower and wider than a podium, and on the two side walls were hung a few pieces of merchandise. Two simple easels were positioned in the room facing the windows and they also displayed merchandise. But even so, the stock for sale was no more than ten items. Any man of modest means could easily purchase the entire inventory without missing a monthly house payment.

The lady asked if she could help me. When I told her I was there to make a purchase for “mi novia,” her eyes crinkled with delight and she immediately led me to the end of my quest. I made the purchase without any hesitation because the item chose me. I have no idea whether mi novia will in fact be moved as I was, but it will not matter because she cares little for material things and she will be much, much happier to see me than to see what I have brought her. It is a selfish gift, this present, not because it is something I would like to have but because it is a confessional purging, a self-indulgent commentary about what touches me.

When I left the store I decided I would walk back to the hotel because it was a sunny day and there was too much boil in my blood to sit immobilized in the back seat of a taxi. The streets looked enchanting and all the people who passed by looked happy. It couldn't be true, but that's the way it looked.

Day 15

When I was a young child, not yet confounded by the teenage years, I lived in splendid isolation. There were no friends to share my world for none lived near enough; no siblings either for none existed. Each day was a solitary exploration, a retreat into the wooded landscape and the recesses of my mind.

There were no conflicts, no contests or struggles to mar the Edenic nature of such a life. I did not feel deprived for nothing had been taken from me; neither was I lonely for companionship was an unknown concept. When the stars came out at night I communed with them alone. When the sun rose in the morning I alone was the object of its warmth.

Before the embrace of this idyllic life began to loosen, I happened to read a book that spoke to me with the benevolence and authority of an Old World prophet. It was Green Mansions, a literary oddity written by William Hudson, a strange tale of a young man who deep in the tropical forest discovers the existence of an elusive, wraith-like woman named Rima who lives alone and avoids the corrupt and profane world of human strife. The young man becomes consumed by his need to reach her and his tireless pursuit brings him ever closer to her essence. In the end, for reasons unfathomable to a child like me, Rima is consumed by a fire in the forest and the young man is left in grief.

I did not understand the story, but that was unimportant because the narrative voice of the young man searching for Rima resonated in my soul and left me no less obsessed than he with this elusive forest spirit. It was as if she held the key to my own unintelligible essence, as if only when I found her would I ever know who I really was.

And then there was the forest, a vast, organic cathedral within which sound was modulated and modified by the thick atmosphere so as to always reach the ear in mellifluous form. Although resonant and sweet, sound was rare and conveyed as much by being a counterpoint to silence as it did by bearing a more specific message. The forest itself was a protected world of shade with occasional shafts of sunlight streaming down from the intertwined canopy far above. The forest floor was clean and bare of greenery, so sacred that shrubs and bushes and weeds dared not enter.

Rima and the green mansions were for me a mystical representation of all that I held dear. Their essential nature was what kept me in thrall, whereas the story was little more than meaningless background noise, like the muted sound of traffic on a distant freeway while immersed in the timeless magic of making love.

Years later, as life grew complicated and the burden of living with others became unbearable, I tried to retreat back into the simple world of my childhood. I built a sailboat to take me there, and I named her Rima. She was brave, she was beautiful, and she was mine. I had resurrected her with the meager sort of love that existed in me and her every nuance was a familiar facet, a consolation to my troubled soul. Rima was to be the guide, the good shepherdess who would lead me to my destiny, but alas she perished once again and grief paid a second visit.

After that I put away my childish dreams and entered the half-world of small pleasures extracted from a melancholy landscape. I fit in, at last, with those around me and life passed by in the manner familiar to most of us. Although at first intolerable, ordinary life became with time an acceptable way to spin out existence to its final terminus.

But buried deep inside me there was still a burning ember that had remained unextinguished. I am sitting now in a window seat of a 757 watching the blue wrinkles of the Caribbean and the broccoli green of Nicaragua's coastal forest. I am returning from a solitary journey that I had not realized was just another effort to find the green mansions and their elusive Rima. Rima—the delicate one, the unformed child of innocence who knew nothing of the world and did not care to know. That spectral being was never intended to be found for she did not exist in anything but mortal form. She knew not love nor hate nor anything of life because she was outside it all—distant and unapproachable.

I know now that I will never find her. She was found by someone else who lavished her with love and gave her life and hope and the courage to be someone. I am Rima.