



Eduardo

WE FOLLOWED EDUARDO TO THE THATCHED HUT, closely watching the ground out of the corner of our eyes for stray snakes. There were two other structures in a clearing behind the hut — another thatched hut on stilts, similar to the first, and a thatched lean-to, about ten feet long, between them. A smoldering campfire beside the lean-to snaked a thin curl of smoke into the air. Thick bunches of bananas hung upside-down from banana trees along the edge of the clearing. A small black monkey chattered from the top of one of the huts.

“You will sleep there,” Eduardo said, pointing to the farthest hut. “And I stay here.” He slapped one of the thick poles supporting his hut. “Lucita sent you. She has returned to the Great Mystery. How long can you stay here?”

“Well,” I looked at Annie. “We’re supposed to return to the States in twelve days.”

“How long can you stay *here*? With *me*?”

“Well, this is the third of fourteen days,” I replied, making some mental calculations. “We’ll need at least three days to get back to Pennsylvania. We better make it four just to play it safe. That leaves us seven days. I suppose we could stay here a week, if we had to. What do you think, Annie?”

“Well, I guess we could stay that long, if we really needed to.”

“Sarah, Michael, how about you two?”

They both shrugged noncommittally.

“Seven days is not enough,” Eduardo insisted. “But if that is all you can stay this time, then we must make the most of it. I have already prepared four mosquiteras in your dwelling. I have been waiting.”

“*This time?*” repeated Annie.

“What’s a mosquitera?” Sarah interrupted.

“A mosquito net over a hammock,” answered Michael. “You can’t sleep without them in the tropics or the mosquitoes will eat you alive at night.”

“How did you know there were four of us coming?” I asked Eduardo. “How did you know *anyone* was coming?”

“You already know the answer, *amigo*. Some things cannot be explained in words.” He looked at me knowingly and turned toward our hut. “Come, I will show you your room.”

We followed him up an eight foot ladder made of wooden poles lashed together with vines. Four woven hammocks, each with a mosquito net draped over it, hung closely together in the hut’s interior. Crude seats fashioned from logs were positioned around the bamboo walls of the hut, and an oil lamp hung by a thin wire from the rafters. The filtered sunlight of the rainforest trickled in through the windows, which were merely openings in the walls without glass or screens.

Eduardo left us alone as we made ourselves comfortable in the small structure. We sat in a circle looking at each other, not quite sure whether to believe that we were actually at the lair of the infamous witch doctor. “If we’re going to be here a week, we need to make some arrangements right away,” I explained to everyone. “Michael, would you go back to the boat and put our luggage on the bank for us? Then take the boat back to Puerto Maldonado as quickly as possible and reserve our return flights?”

“No *problema*,” Michael assured us.

“Would you mind picking up some food, too?” Annie asked. “As much as you can carry?”

“And come back as fast as you can?” Sarah added.

“It’s only around noon, and if you hurry you’ll be back before dark. Make sure you arrange for the boat to pick us up in seven days, too,” I instructed.

“I better write this all down,” Michael mumbled.

I handed Michael enough traveler’s checks to pay for the plane tickets and food, and gave him an American ten dollar bill to tip the boat guide so he would remember to come back and get us in a week. We all climbed out of the hut and Michael took off at a slow jog down the jungle path. “We’ll be right behind you to pick up the luggage!” I shouted to him.

Eduardo appeared again, seemingly out of nowhere, a disconcerting feat we would have to get used to. “What chance is there that our boat will actually come back in seven days to pick us up, Eduardo?” I asked. “Can we trust the guy with the boat? Is he reliable?”

“If the boat does not come back,” Eduardo replied, “we can go up river to Tambo in my canoe and wait for a boat there. But he will come. He needs money. You are not the only visitors to come here, but there are not many. I do not like to have visitors unless I invite them.”

“We need to go back to the pool where we came in and get our bags now,” Annie explained to Eduardo.

“We will all go together,” Eduardo insisted. “You must begin your instruction at once. Seven days is not enough.” As if echoing Eduardo, the little monkey chattered in agreement, scrambling down from the roof of the hut to perch on Eduardo’s shoulder. Sarah and Annie clapped their hands in delight, enchanted with the tiny creature’s theatrics.

“We don’t have to meet the monkey, too, do we Eduardo?” I asked, envisioning a monkey on my shoulder.

“No. But the monkey wants to meet you. She’s a little devil. She’ll climb up on you when you’re not looking. You must learn how to say no to her and chase her away if she

bothers you. Don't leave any food where she can get it either or it will disappear. So will your tools, clothes, and anything else she can get her paws on. Keep everything in your bags at all times," he cautioned us, scratching the monkey affectionately behind her ear.

We started down the footpath toward the boat at a leisurely pace. Wasting no time, Eduardo kept up a constant conversation to prepare us for our stay. "And always shake out your shoes before putting them on," he said.

"For heaven's sake, *why?*" asked Annie.

"You probably don't want to know," I replied sarcastically.

"Scorpions. They live in the thatch roofs. Sometimes they drop down at night and climb into your shoes. Always shake out your bedding before climbing into your hammock, too. The mosquitera should keep out the scorpions and snakes, but you should check your bedding and clothes regularly."

"More snakes?" asked Sarah in disbelief.

"If you see a bright red snake, a small one, it is a deadly viper. Avoid it. The other snakes will leave if you hit at them with a stick."

"That's your job, Joe," Annie offered, laughing nervously. "You can be in charge of hitting the snakes."

"And checking the shoes and beds, too, Dad," Sarah added.

"Anything else we should know, Eduardo?" I hesitantly asked.

"The mosquitoes can carry malaria. There are about seven kinds of mosquitoes, but only the big ones carry the disease. Try to avoid being bitten. They will all be out preying on us after the sun sets. We will liven up the fire then and the smoke will keep them away until we sleep. Also, sand fleas and some flies carry disease, too. Keep a long-sleeved shirt and long pants on and keep your skin covered unless you're in your mosquitera, or swimming underwater."

"Where can we swim?" asked Sarah. "Our guide said

there are crocodiles in the water.” We were walking single file through the jungle with Eduardo leading the way. I brought up the rear.

“He is correct,” Eduardo said over his shoulder, pushing aside a huge fern frond as he passed by. “But the crocodiles will not hurt you. They are small, no bigger than two meters long. But you must never swim anywhere if you are bleeding. The blood will attract dangerous fish to you. Tomorrow, we will go to a place back the other way, through the bush, where I swim and bathe. It is a large lake and the shore is sandy, like a beach. We will catch fish there for dinner tomorrow.”

My mind drifted as I became totally engrossed in the surrounding flora. The ferns scattered over the mossy ground were unbelievably huge, like in a fairy tale. Vines hung everywhere. Liana “air plants” were nestled in every tree crotch like leafy spiders, thriving without roots in the soil. The trees we walked between towered overhead and seemed to disappear into the sky. Walking behind my family down this path through the Amazon rainforest with a strange shaman in the lead suddenly seemed totally incongruous to me. Three days ago we were home in Pennsylvania, now we were having anacondas wrapped around our necks and thinking about scorpions in our shoes. I thought about the circumstances that had led us here, and I desperately needed some clarification on this matter. “Why did you want my Aunt Lucy to come here, Eduardo?” I asked. “Why did my aunt come down here to see you? And why did you send for us?”

“Lucita came here many times. She needed my guidance. There are things to learn that you cannot learn in your society. So she came here. I was her teacher.”

“Why you?”

“I am a shaman. A healer. Lucita wanted to learn how to heal, but didn’t know where to start.”

“How did she know about you?”

“I summoned her, like I summoned you. I am bound by an oath to teach the ways of the shaman. If someone can

learn the ways, I will teach them. But they are ways that very few people can learn, and therefore few ever will. For example, can you hear that insect?”

“What insect?” I stopped in my tracks and listened, but heard nothing.

Eduardo stopped, too, pointing above him, off to the right. “Listen closely,” he instructed. “Even though the insect is there and it is speaking,” Eduardo continued, “you do not hear it. You do not know what it sounds like, and so you do not know what to listen for. You can walk past it day after day without hearing it. The voice of that insect is like the way of the shaman. Your people cannot learn such ways for the same reason you cannot hear that insect. Although everything a shaman knows is knowable by anyone else, most of your people will never gain that knowledge because they do not know how to listen. Like the insect, the knowledge could be right in front of them, and they would not recognize it. Lucita was different. She was open to knowledge. She could listen and hear things others couldn’t. That is why I could contact her. Most of your people are deaf and blind. They cannot be contacted because their minds are closed and their heads are already full.”

“What do you mean, ‘my people?’”

“Your people who are destroying the Earth mother.”

“But aren’t your people also destroying the Earth?” asked Sarah. “What about all the rainforest that’s being cut down?”

“They are not my people. They are your people. You are all the same. You think the Earth mother is to be taken. So you take and never give back. Your souls are lost. Your hearts are misplaced. You suffer from a sickness.” Eduardo suddenly stopped and pointed. “There is the water ahead.”

We arrived at the tributary and took a seat on the bank to rest. The little waterfall made a soothing sound like tinkling glass. It started to rain. Eduardo quickly stepped into the jungle and came back with four large leaves. “Hold this over you to stay dry. It rains every day here. Several times.

It will pass soon.”

“I guess that’s why they call it a rainforest,” Sarah said. “Look! There’s a rainbow!” A display of colored light arching across the tributary pond disappeared into the trees.

“It really *is* beautiful here,” Annie said.

“The Earth is beautiful everywhere,” replied Eduardo. “Except where she is being hurt. Then she cries in pain. A shaman feels the pain as if it is his own. The Earth mother is sick. Your people are killing her. You must stop before it is too late.”

“Stop what, exactly?” asked Sarah. “How do we stop hurting the Earth?”

“We will discuss it more later. Now is not the time,” Eduardo waved his hand as if to dismiss the subject.

“How is it that you speak English so well?” I asked, perplexed.

“I was born here in Peru, but I grew up in Belize. I received an education in English there at the university. My father was Spanish, my mother Peruvian.”

“Belize is an English-speaking country in Central America, Dad,” Sarah explained. “It was a British colony for a long time. They have a small English college in Belize City, the capital.”

“I came back here to apprentice under my grandmother,” Eduardo continued. “She was my shaman teacher. She learned from her own grandmother. My grandmother passed into the Great Mystery several years ago. I still call on her if I need her. The spirit of a shaman, like the spirit of the Earth mother, never dies.”

“This is all very interesting. Fascinating, in fact,” I said. “But I don’t see how we can be of any use to you. If Lucy came here over and over again and couldn’t help you, how can we possibly do anything?”

“You will be of no use to me. I will be of use to you, but you must learn quickly.” Eduardo tilted his head back and scanned the treetops, as if looking for something in particular. “We should return now,” he abruptly announced.

We strapped our packs on our backs and marched back

toward the camp. On the way, Eduardo paused at a large ant nest that hung from a tree branch. It looked similar to a hornet's nest. He poked it with a stick, opening a small hole to reveal the tiny ants inside. "These make very good food for chickens," he said, then he started off down the path again. Before long, he stopped at another tree. A vine twisted its way up the trunk. "You should learn to recognize this vine," he said, pulling his machete out of its canvas case strapped at his waist. "If you need water to drink, this vine will give it to you." He gave the vine a solid whack, cutting it in half. Water poured out, and he placed his mouth underneath and drank his fill. "Here, drink." I drank from the vine next, surprised that it tasted just like water. I passed the vine to Annie and Sarah to try. Eduardo removed a skin vessel strapped over his shoulder and filled it with the water. Then he quickly took off down the trail as we followed closely on his heels.

"You must never wander off the path," he warned us.



Eduardo teaches us the ways of the jungle

“It is very easy to get lost. Let me show you. Joseph, walk in that direction twenty paces.” He pointed to the right of the path. “Then stop, close your eyes, turn around twice, and then open them. We will wait here.”

Fine, I thought. I walked the requested twenty paces, pushing my way through the thick undergrowth, counting my steps out loud. At the count of twenty, I stopped, closed my eyes, turned two times, and opened them. I recognized absolutely nothing, and was surrounded by tree trunks, vines, and leaves on all sides. Vegetation crowded all around me. I desperately looked for the group and for the footpath, but I wasn’t sure which way I had come, and I didn’t want to start wandering off in the wrong direction. Back in the woods of Pennsylvania, if all else failed, I could at least look at the sky to gain a sense of direction. Here, any view of the sky was blocked by the canopy of towering trees. Damned if I wasn’t already completely lost. “OK!” I



Visibility was limited to fifty feet or less

yelled into the green thicket. "I'm lost! Where is everybody?!" I could hear Sarah's loud laugh behind me, so I spun around and made a beeline toward her, shoving my way through tall philodendrons and ferns.

"Jesus H. Christ in a chicken basket!" I yelled. "I was lost! I hate it when that happens! Everything looks the same when you walk into this goddam jungle. Let's not do any wandering alone in the jungle, OK? I don't want anybody getting lost, especially me!"

"C'mon Dad, let's go," Sarah laughed as she started down the footpath. "You can hold my hand if you want to."

We eventually made our way back to camp, completely exhausted from our travels and hoping for an early night. Sarah became increasingly worried about Michael as dusk filled the jungle with shadows and mosquitoes began their evening browse. We were wondering if we should go down the footpath with flashlights, when we heard someone trampling through the underbrush. We were relieved to see that it was Michael carrying two plastic mesh sacks filled with fruit and other provisions. He set the heavy bags down with a groan of relief as Sarah jumped into his arms. Annie and I stashed the goods in our hut while Sarah told Michael all about our afternoon in the jungle with Eduardo.

Annie quickly prepared some food for us all and then we spent a few minutes around the campfire swatting at mosquitoes until Eduardo urged us to get some sleep. He could tell we were weary and he said we were in for a long day tomorrow. Relieved, and at the same time slightly apprehensive, we crawled into our hammocks under our mosquiteras. The serene silence of the daytime jungle had been replaced by the increasing crescendo of night sounds. We laid in our makeshift beds, silently listening to the cacophony of insects, tree frogs, and nocturnal monkeys that soon serenaded us into dreamland.