



Going Home

THE FOLLOWING DAY WE WOKE AT DAWN, PACKED, AND walked with Eduardo down the footpath. It was hard to believe that a week had already passed. The boat wasn't waiting for us, as we had hoped, when we arrived at the pond on the tributary. We assumed that it would be coming soon, so we found a little clearing by the waterfall and waited. Sarah was tearful at the thought of parting with Pepita, whom she had become rather fond of. The little monkey had accompanied us down the footpath, and waited with us. Sarah fed her peanuts from her backpack, talking softly to her. Pepita chattered right back to her, as if they were carrying on an important conversation.

"Finally found someone you have something in common with, huh?" I remarked, jokingly.

"Funny, Dad," Sarah retorted. "She's smarter than you!"

"She'd be great in soup," Michael said, only half joking. Pepita had a particular penchant for Michael's belongings. On our return trip, his pack was decidedly lighter, and not at his own choosing. He was obviously not as taken with the furry little primate as Sarah.

"Shut-up! She's *sweet!*" The monkey gently took another peanut from Sarah's outstretched hand.

Eduardo had a little surprise farewell gift for each of

us. He asked us, one at a time, to hold out our left hand. Tying a section of a soft, brown cord around each of our wrists, he explained that the cord contained the spirit of the jungle, and that it signified we would be taking the spirit with us. He said the plants that he stripped the fiber from on our hike the day before were very special ones, and that they had given of themselves for our benefit. He instructed us to wear the bracelets until they fell off on their own, which, he assured us, they would in time. When he tied Michael's bracelet to his wrist, he looked Michael straight in the eyes and said, cryptically, "The spirit of the jungle will wait for you here." Michael just looked at Eduardo and nodded, saying nothing.

After waiting about an hour, we started to worry that our ride wasn't going to come. Eduardo suggested we throw our bags into the dugout canoe that was tied there, and then row down the tributary toward the river. He said it would be a lot faster than taking the boat out, and maybe we'd meet the boat on the way. We all thought that was a great idea, offering us one last chance to enjoy the jungle splendor before our return to Lima.

We rowed the two miles down the placid, black tributary, ducking down in places where the overhanging jungle crowded the river. The canoe was remarkably easy to row, especially downstream, and we made good time. When we arrived at the river, there still was no sign of the boat, so we rowed on up the churning Mother of God River to Tambo, hugging the shoreline. This rowing was much more strenuous. By the time we reached Tambo, we were all sweaty and completely exhausted, all except Eduardo, who was apparently accustomed to this sort of exertion.

We anchored the canoe to some bushes at Tambo, and climbed out onto the bank. Annie, Sarah, and I sat under the shade of a tree and watched the swollen, muddy river drift by. Eduardo and Michael made small talk with the residents. Before long, we could see the white roof of our long-awaited boat making its way down the river. Soon our smiling guide was tying his little boat beside the canoe.

Michael threw our bags from the canoe into the boat, and we all said our good-byes to Eduardo. We had made a friend. Even Annie, for a split-second, was reluctant to say farewell.

“Only a couple days away from a hot shower,” she sighed as she stepped onto the bow of our boat, as if to remind herself to focus on her destination. “Puerto Maldonado, here we come.”

“There aren’t any hot showers in Puerto Maldonado,” Michael reminded Annie.

“I don’t care, I can wait,” she said haughtily.

“There weren’t any at Nellie’s either,” he said, rubbing it in.

“There is a hot shower *somewhere* in this world, Michael, and I will find it!” Annie assured him with daggers in her eyes.

We were off, churning upriver in the little boat with the wind blowing through our hair, and the turbulent Madre de Dios dancing beneath us. Our shaman friend stood on the bank with a dark shape perched on his shoulder and watched us drift away until we were out of sight. The rainforest, Eduardo, Pepita, and what seemed like an entire universe, disappeared into the distance behind us.