

# Rainy Season

*by Corrine Zahra*

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The sky is bright and the white light wakes me up. It's only 5:30 am. Elevated from the ground, the wooden open house I find myself staying in doesn't have any walls—only one edge is covered with a thin green insect net, and as I lie here in bed, the jungle right beside me, rain pours plummeting like a bucket tipped over with unlimited water — the jungle is not quiet during the rainy season.

Months prior, I had decided to travel to Costa Rica to volunteer at a hostel in Drake Bay, where I would feed some chickens just like I had at my grandma's farm, clean for the hostel, entertain guests, immerse myself into the jungle. With little information provided by the owner, all I knew were the logistics of how to get to Drake Bay. It was June when I traveled from Chicago to Mexico to Costa Rica, stayed the night in the capital city of San Jose, and caught the bus from the north, along the Pacific coast, all the way to the south. The direct bus dropped me and other backpackers off at the fishing town of Sierpe, where I then caught the 4 pm boat to Drake Bay. After I paid the captain, I handed my backpack to a sailor who placed it in a closed storage compartment in the front of the boat.

Running through the muddy river at high speed, there was jungle on both sides of the wide river and we were told not to stick our hands in the water. Alligators. Around fifteen minutes into the boat ride, rain started to pour, heavy rain that I had never experienced before, rain that drenched me, made my clothes stick to my body like a new layer of skin. The raindrops were heavy, hitting our bodies with bullet-like force. I took off my glasses so that the rain wouldn't damage them. My head was lowered between my raised arms, my back arched, eyes closed. The girl sitting next to me looked the same.

The river eventually opened up to the Pacific Ocean, my first encounter with that murderous body of water. The boat rocked and swayed as the rough open waves toyed with us. Wondering if it should capsize us—fear crawled into my body, remained there, boiling inside—I was convinced I was going to die. Winds blaring,

seawater rush splashing into my face, rain plummeting down, deafening my ears. We should not have been out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in those conditions.

When we arrived in Drake Bay, the boat's engines were turned off in the shoreline; legs feeling like jelly, I had to jump out of the boat and into the bay. The sailors carefully pushed the boat in and out with the waves, ensuring the boat didn't hit anyone. Scatter-brained, I thought to myself: *What did I just do?*

The sailors placed all the backpacks on the beach—I didn't have a backpack cover. Everyone had a backpack cover but me. After finding my backpack laying there in the rain, I then found the taxi driver whom my hostel had asked to pick me up. The wipers on the windshield were moving back and forth, fast, water flowing on the glass like a river—neither the driver nor me could see beyond it. My body was heavy, it was hard to move in the drenched clothes. I just sat there, my breath hot, condensation forming on the window beside me.

After the ten-minute drive, the driver dropped me off at the edge of the jungle, and although he barely knew English, I understood his Spanish—he told me to walk down the path, to keep going straight until I saw the house. It was around 5 pm so I followed the brick path through the dense endless trees that sprouted so high, so high you couldn't see the sky above. As I walked through the jungle full of chirping and tweeting, I started to crackle.

When I got to the bottom of the path, heightened panic started to rise from my core to my brain. There was an overflowed river at the bottom of the path—I was lost. I started to feel the air in the jungle thin and my lungs closing in on themselves. My only option was to walk back the way I had come from and then back to the town to ask for help. As I climbed back up the muddy path, lungs dry and my thirty-pound backpack strapped to my dying back, I kept shouting: "HELP!"

The trees cleared and I reached the top, my feet on the concrete road. Relief washed over me when I saw the taxi driver there again, dropping off guests who were going to stay at the hostel. Breathing in and out heavily, my face heated, I tried speaking in Spanish. "Río! No casa."

"Tranquila, tranquila," the female guest said to me, motioning her hands in circles. I don't know why she spoke to me in Spanish because my failed attempt at speaking Spanish to the driver proved I was not a local.

"We'll find the hostel together," the male guest, her husband, added.

They were both in their early 50s, grey disheveled hair, both with green eyes and sagging skin, khaki pants and hiking boots, Americans like myself. She wore seashells around her neck dangling from string made out of floss. They told me what city they were from, but I've forgotten now. Told them I lived in Chicago.

Meanwhile, the hostel manager emerged from the jungle and he too barely knew any English—in silence, we followed him back into the jungle. At one point, I stepped on a brick in the mud and it slipped—I too slipped, fell on wet earth, pain spreading throughout my right knee as I grappled on the ground. I stood up and walked it off, placing each foot slowly on each next brick, down and down the path, pain shooting up my right leg every time I put weight on it.

Arriving at the river again, I had initially been going in the right direction, except the taxi driver had not told me there was a river at the bottom and to cross the river. I followed the hostel manager and stepped into the milky brown water. The river reached my waist as I pushed against its force, grounding my feet steady on the river floor, lifting leg after leg, quickly, to not let the river carry me away downstream. We marched in unison, the river whooshing—the water seemed never to run out. By the time I crossed the fast-moving river and arrived at the main shack, the jungle had turned off its light like a switch—I was surrounded by thick darkness, what looked like a black void.

The couple were seated at the table, backs aching and faces flushed red, drenched wet. The hostel manager took their luggage to their cabin just 200 meters away from the main shack. The main shack had no walls, no doors, just a solid low roof standing on wooden pillars, a kitchen and fridge on one side, tables on the other, and a few hammocks to rest in. The dogs loitered about the shack. They had barked at us when we arrived but quickly warmed up to us once we petted them.

“Now I understand why you were panicked,” the woman scoffed.

“Yeah, that was insane,” the man agreed.

“I told you!” I exclaimed, and laughed.

“This place isn't marketed right. I wouldn't have come here if I knew it was that difficult. I can't go down those steps in the rain. I'm too old. I could've slipped and got badly hurt,” the woman continued, her mouth hanging open, her green eyes wide.

“But we made it,” her husband said, chuckling to himself.

I simply sighed in disbelief.

That next morning, the earth feels cool with the rains and a breeze that brings in some rush of water spray on my face. Rain plummeted to the earth all night long in that black void-looking jungle, a darkness that I slept in, both outside and inside at the same time.

I sit upright in bed and as far as I can see from my non-wall is rainforest. The ground is orange and muddy, full of health. The unpolluted air fills my lungs with pleasure. Big green leaves, bigger than my face, protrude from thick sprouting stems, stems taller than me. The trees are infinite, damp green all around me. I am far from society, far from downtown, far from a grocery store. But we do have wifi here.

The air is light and crisp, the rain has reduced. I can finally hear birds talking amongst themselves. Still upright in bed, under the net, my legs are full of mosquito bites that devoured me last night at the main shack. I didn't bring any bug spray. On my right knee, a bruise has formed, purple and green and yellow, sickening and large. Sighing, I guess I should get up and brush my teeth now.