Fed up with my wreck-strewn, chaotic life, ricocheting between New York City crises, I decided to liquidate my few urban assets and flee to a Central American rain forest. Rather than face the task of changing my life, I took the easier route. I was lured by the romance of live volcanoes overlooking black sand beaches and banana trees.

For two hours, as my Jeep snaked its way through the basaltic mountains of Costa Rica, I had little idea what to expect at each precipitous curve of the road. My destination was a birthday party, for a ninety-six-year-old woman named Adivina, on a coffee-bean farm. I was apprehensive about spending an entire day at a cabin in Alumbrar with no phone and no electricity. Yet, I was curious how a nonagenarian lived in a desolate, undeveloped country.

I turned off the gritty road, onto a dirt trail with three strands of barbed wire, stapled to palm trees, running along each side. A field of mountain goats comprised the front yard of a white stucco house. Two barefoot boys chased a squawking chicken through the grass while the goats grazed. At the end of the dirt road stood an unpainted cabin, its plank walls deeply darkened by weather. Behind the sloping porch, the front door stood open, revealing a dark interior. The windows had no glass, protected only by worn shutters, which then stood open.

Ahead of me drove my neighbors from the beach, Playa de Coco. As we neared the rancho, my anxiety ramped up. A gringo, I was unfamiliar with the customs and the dialect of Costa Rica. I often found myself smiling and nodding while lost in Spanish conversation in restaurants, stores and homes. The sound of our cars drew a few more children and two women wearing colorful aprons from within the dark cabin. They observed us with caution. Alvaro, Adivina’s grandson, and his wife Isabela stepped out of the car ahead of me with their two sons, Stefan and Paulo. The boys ran off to the goat field and joined the pursuit of the distraught chicken. Like a typical gringo, I grabbed my camera bag and joined the group assembling on the porch.

Adivina emerged quietly from the cabin, smiling broadly, wearing an aqua dress with a red apron. Only five feet in height with pure white hair and olive-green eyes, she reached up with both hands to welcome and touch the faces of her visitors.

As she approached me, she exclaimed, “Ay, qué bello!”—How handsome! She invited me to sit on the wood plank bench. Alvaro
and Isabela sat next to her. The two women in flowery aprons were Adivina’s daughter, Luz, and her neighbor, Juana. The house looked out upon a deep gorge. Across the chasm, coffee bean trees cascaded down the mountainside. The beans grew on narrow terraces dug into the mountain so that workers could find footing while harvesting the coffee. On the precipice below the house stood giant hibiscus and red and yellow hanging pendulas three feet in length. The tops of palm trees, just below the level of the house, stirred in the hot breeze, called bochornos. The rainy season had ended about a month before, so the day was warm and humid.

Adivina stood, wrapped her small, deeply-veined hands around my left arm and said, “Venga, venga.” She led me into the small house with low ceilings. The walls were unpainted and only slightly lighter in color than the weathered exterior. An entourage followed us on the tour of the dwelling, which consisted of four rooms—a small living area, a much larger kitchen, and two small bedrooms. The kitchen had two wood-burning stone hearths, but no oven and no refrigerator. The floor and hearths were constructed of blue basalt. The kitchen window looked out at the field of goats. Adivina’s great-grandchildren had given up their pursuit of the traumatized hen, and the other fowl had cautiously returned to feeding. The sparse living room had one upholstered chair and a table that seated four. The only adornment was a daguerreotype of Adivina and her husband, Geovanni, taken on their wedding day. In stiff collar and dark jacket, Geovanni stood behind a seated Adivina. Their expression was solemn, but Adivina’s eyes had a luminosity enhanced by the silver laminate of the photo. More visitors could be heard on the porch. Adivina’s son, Pietro, his wife, and their three grandchildren, who lived just two doors away, had arrived. Pietro’s wife joined Adivina and Isabela in the kitchen to prepare dinner. I sat on the porch, camera in hand, and took photos of the great-grandchildren chasing hens that I finally understood were to be part of dinner. Pietro offered me tequila made from agave plants grown on the farm. Without leaving the porch, he pulled two large limes from a tree alongside the cabin. He sliced open the lime with a penknife and squeezed the fresh juice directly into the shot of tequila. I tasted it. The bite of the warm tequila and fresh lime teared my eyes. Pietro smiled, “Qué rico, no?”

I was reminded of sitting on my own porch back home in the States. At the end of the day, with a goblet of cabernet sauvignon, I would watch the sun set behind the park. Tensions would ease, troubles fade. My neighbors would emerge from their homes to relax, walk their dogs, ask each other how things were going.

I had met my neighbors, Alvaro and Isabela, while enjoying a
Central American sunset. Wading on the beach, I saw them walking their Alaskan Malamute, Laska. I said hello to practice my Spanish. We chatted. I sometimes walked Laska while they cared for their sons. Eventually, we all became amigos.

As the sun descended toward the mountain peak opposite the gorge, two iguanas clung to a palm tree, motionless, absorbing the last rays of the day. A vibrant red and blue macaw stood on one leg in a banana tree while eating an almond clutched in its talon. Unseen howler monkeys screamed from deep within the gorge. A coffee bean picker in a wide sombrero dragged a heavy burlap bag up a steep incline in order to reach the next level of bean plants.

I talked with Pietro about el rancho, the farm nestled in the Alumbrar rain forest that surrounded us. Eight cabins scattered on the mountainside housed four generations of Adivina’s family. Of her twelve children, four of her sons lived on the farm, raising their own families. Three of Adivina’s children had died before their first birthday. Pietro, seventy years old, had lived on the ranch his entire life, picking coffee beans in the hot sun and raising sugar cane, almonds and limes to support his family.

Intrigued by the diversity of the farm, I left the porch and wandered down a level dirt path that circled the valley. I came across a small wooden house, a casita, painted aqua. Log stilts held the house perched on the mountainside. It commanded a spectacular view of the ravine. A narrow river snaked through the dense vegetation. I walked back toward Adivina’s house and soon came across Pietro.

“Venga. Le enseño matar pollo.”

I declined his invitation to teach me how to slaughter chickens, but walked with him to Adivina’s. Along the path, he showed me a small tree. “Huele,” he instructed. I smelled the leaves of the tree. They had a sweet, intoxicating odor, like vanilla.

“Incienso de los magos.”

At first I thought he said that wizards used the leaves as incense.

“Regalos a Jesus.”

Then I realized that it was a frankincense tree, a gift the Magi brought for the birth of Jesus. We continued walking slowly. The sun had descended behind the mountain and a hazy cloud covered its peak. The cloud passed through the valley toward Adivina’s cabin, noiselessly slipping through the coffee beans and palm trees. I followed Pietro into the house. Four women were busy chopping vegetables and adding logs to the two fires that burned brightly in the hearths. Three generations of women occupied the kitchen. Adivina oversaw the operation, inspecting, tasting, and stirring. I left the women to their simmering preparations and returned to the
porch. As I passed through the living area, Adivina warily observed me from within the daguerreotype. Outside, the grandchildren taunted a black scorpion with a stick until it leaped. They scattered, screaming and then cautiously brushing their shoulders and hair. Isabela’s husband, Alvaro, offered me another shot of tequila and lime. Thirstily, I drained it.


“Venga,” Alvaro said and took me around to the back of the house.

Pietro and two young boys were plucking feathers from bloodied chickens. Behind the boys, a distant peak was shrouded by a reddish aura.

“Qué está allá?” I asked Alvaro.

“El volcán Arenal. Ya esta en vivo.”

Mount Arenal, a live volcano, drew many tourists. At night, with clear weather, molten magma slowly oozed from its peak. The sky above the volcano reflected the deep, red lava. Costa Rica’s Pacific region included many volcanoes, about a dozen of which were very alive. Hot springs at their bases supplied spas.

From the kitchen window, Adivina pleaded, “Pietro, el pollo, ahorita.” Pietro gathered the denuded chickens and handed them to Adivina through the kitchen window. I sat behind the house and watched lava slip from Mount Arenal until rain clouds obscured my view. Ball lightning silhouetted the peak of Arenal.

I returned to the front of the cabin and found the yard filled with over twenty members of Adivina’s family. Great-grandchildren, daughters-in-law, sons and daughters had gathered to celebrate her ninety-sixth birthday. Long wooden tables were set for dinner with a mismatched collection of plates, glasses, ollas, and bowls. Alvaro and Pietro played their guitars. Adivina was surrounded by great-grandchildren who vied for her attention. Tequila and homemade wine were passed generously. The wine was sweet, made from guava, mango, and melon.

Isabela showed me to my seat. Adivina’s family took their places at the table. Pietro sat at the head, with Adivina next to him. The great-grandchildren sat at a separate, noisier table. We passed platters and bowls of black beans, saffron rice and fried plantains. Tamales—polenta with meat and cheese and garlic wrapped in banana leaves—sat piled in the center of the table.

I tried the pico-de-gallo, a blend of finely chopped tomatoes, onions, garlic, cilantro, and cucumbers. I discovered baked yucca, which tastes very much like baked potatoes, but with a denser, meatier texture. I couldn’t keep up with the Spanish conversation at the table, but I felt included in the fiesta. Adivina’s family explained
each dish and made sure my plate and cup stayed full. The animated conversation, the laughter, and the gusto with which the family ate reminded me of Sunday dinners at my Italian grandmother’s home. The women, firmly in control of the household, served the meal; the men ate, drank, and sang; the great-grandchildren created chaos at their own private table.

After the meal, we sat in the yard illuminated by torches and kerosene lamps. Adivina’s children and grandchildren had electricity in their homes, but Adivina refused it. She felt it was dangerous. Adivina led me by my hand to a small table on the porch.

“Leo su futuro, bello,” she said mischievously. She went into her cabin and returned with a deck of Tarot cards. She asked me to cut and shuffle the deck several times. Then she placed six cards from the deck face up on the table, in the shape of a crucifix. “Isabela, ven acá. Traduzca, por favor, mi hija.”

Isabela sat next to me and translated the reading. She said to me, “You are the center card, the four of cups. Above you is the Empress card, which is your guide. The Empress is a woman close to you, who watches over you. Have you lost someone very close to you?”

“My mother passed away a few years ago.”

“She is your guide, your protector. The card beneath you is the nine of swords. It is at your feet. The nine of swords represents problems, difficulties. As this card is at your feet, it means that you will be entering a difficult period of your life. The cards to the left and right of you represent a timeline of your life. To the left is the ten of cups. It represents stress and turmoil. The card on your right is Mercury, the messenger. It represents the bearing of news, information, knowledge. Have you thought about being a teacher?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Perhaps you will teach English here. Costarriscences are very studious. They enjoy learning English. Now, pick one card from the deck, and place it face up on the table.”

I picked a card from the center of the deck. It was a drawing of a man in a long, white robe with a staff and a large jewel.

“That is the philosopher’s stone. It too represents your future. You will tutor others, maybe write. Perhaps your work will be published, which could reflect Mercury, the messenger. Perhaps you will write a book. Others will read your work. That is the mission of the philosopher.”

Adivina wrapped her small hands around my right hand, looked into my eyes, and smiled. The reading was over. She picked up the Tarot cards, and placed the deck in a purple velvet bag. The
great-grandchildren called to her, “Abuelita, venga, venga.” Adivina placed her hand on my cheek, “Ay, qué bello.” Then she joined her great-grandchildren at their table.

I sat and listened to the guitars and the singing. The torches cast long, dancing shadows in the grass. I helped myself to another shot of tequila and lime, and reflected on Adivina’s reading. But in view of my comprehension of Spanish, I dismissed the notion of teaching in Costa Rica. Here, I was a student, not a professor.

Isabela and Pietro said they wanted to get the kids home before it got too late, so we bade our goodbyes. I wished Adivina a happy birthday, “Feliz cumpleaños.” She held my hands for a moment, searching my eyes. Then she said, “Cuidete”—take good care of yourself. We headed back to the Pacific coast.

Five months after that birthday party, while I was walking on the black sand beach at 6:00 a.m. in front of my casita, my past caught up with me. Bewildered fishermen looked on from wooden rowboats as members of Interpol, the U.S. Justice Department, and Costa Rica’s Fuerza Publica arrested me. I was taken to the capital, San Jose, to face charges in the United States. At a hastily convened hearing in a magistrate’s office, I stated that I intended to fight extradition to the US. That legal wrangling consumed sixteen months of my life while I languished in Costa Rica’s San Sebastian jail.

San Sebastian sits on a mountaintop in Costa Rica’s central region. From the prison yard, I could see an extinct volcano rise one kilometer above the city. Often, in the mornings, the volcano’s peak was hidden by diaphanous clouds. In the afternoons those clouds fed the lush vegetation surrounding the jail. Through chain link and razor wire, undulating palm trees beckoned me. I passed many rainy afternoons in the prison’s academic school.

Due to the nation’s poverty, the jail was spartan. Most inmates slept on concrete with no mattresses. Food was scarce, and electricity limited to four hours per day. Yet the school was blessed with a multilingual library. The *Harry Potter* series assuaged my anxiety as a *gringo* in a non-English-speaking jail. Fortified by a hefty Spanish-English dictionary, I tackled my first novel in Spanish, *The Old Man and the Sea*. I chose it solely because of its size, a mere eighty-nine pages. Yet the thin novella had a profound influence on my tenacious battle for survival. There were only fifty-five jobs for 1,270 inmates in San Sebastian. I secured a job teaching English four days a week. Between classes, I tackled *El Señor de los Anillos, The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*. My Spanish vocabulary depicting swamps, marshes, fens, and littorals grew exponentially. In the prison dormitory, I spent many cacophonous nights kept awake by shouting crack
dealers while I read *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in Spanish. When sleep finally overtook me, I dreamt of Hemingway’s Pilar and Maria. In the mornings, I looked forward to the classroom, talking with my students, chalk in hand. We often discussed my propensity for American literature while the students enlightened me as to Spanish literature and authors. I experimented with Mario Vargas Llosa, but the idiom stymied me. The symbiosis with the students relieved the boredom of a daily diet of *arroz y frijoles*, white rice and black beans, for both lunch and dinner. In the dorms, there was no hot water and one shower for fifty men. At night, I read by the light through the bars from the guards’ desk while I lay on the concrete floor next to snoring inmates.

On a Monday, at 5:00 a.m., I was awakened by guards and informed that I had lost my extradition fight. By 5:00 p.m. I was in New York, on Riker’s Island, awaiting trial. I was deeply disappointed to find myself in a wealthy city jail with no library and no school. The only jobs available were sweeping and mopping the floor. To relieve the oppressive boredom, I honed my vocabulary with crossword puzzles. I slowly learned the art of letter writing with pen and paper instead of email. The few friends I had left filled me in on the publicity about my case, which took place while I was in Costa Rica. The vitriol of the fourth estate fueled national stories of my depravity. I retreated to the haven of my cell and comforted myself with prison paperbacks until sleep overtook me.

After eighteen months of reading James Patterson’s drivel and Robert Ludlum’s Bourne Trilogy of Tripe, the press hailed my twenty-year sentence as a vindication of their annihilist tactics. The day after my verdict, at 3:00 a.m., I was shackled to another prisoner and sent during a spring blizzard to Antioch Correctional Facility. Other than a remedial GED program, there was no school there either. But there was a library. I tackled Gabriel García Márquez in Spanish and Albert Camus in English. I got a job orienting new inmates about Antioch. I prepped inmates returning to society about job interviews, parole, and recidivism. And confronted with the stark reality of prison illiteracy, I returned to teaching English. My career as a teacher, which began in Costa Rica, gained momentum.

Despite the prison’s lack of educational opportunities, community volunteers donated their time offering classes. I enrolled in a creative writing course. I studied dialogue and character development. I learned image and voice. I practiced editing and revision as I wrote short stories. With a little coaxing, I entered writing contests and mailed literary works to magazines. And I anxiously waited for the last piece of Adivina’s Tarot card reading to fall into place.