

# SOUTH OF NORMAL

My year in paradise



# NORM SCHRIEVER





# Dedication

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Barrio Chino, San Juan del Sur: “*Jamas Nos Venceras,*” — “We will not be conquered.”



# Contents

Chapter 1: Prison

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Shit Show

Chapter 3: Rain, Writing, and a Blind Dog Named Disco

Chapter 4: Black Mold and the Hour of Chaos

Chapter 5: The Gift That Keeps on Giving.

Chapter 6: Wet Towels

Chapter 7: A Serpent in the Garden

Chapter 8: The Electric Cup-O-Soup Special

Chapter 9: The Angry, Unwashed Mob

Chapter 10: Get Local

Chapter 11: The Critters

Chapter 12: Wooden Submarines

Chapter 13: Looking for Antonio

Chapter 14: Negotiations and Love Songs

Chapter 15: 'Gotta Love the Loonies

Chapter 16: My School is the Streets

Chapter 17: Flying Kayaks

Chapter 18: The Side Door to Heaven

Chapter 19: The Letter

Chapter 20: Canadian Bacon

Chapter 21: Casa Ladrones (House of Thieves)

Chapter 22: Buzzards

Chapter 23: The Dream

Chapter 24: Haircuts for Homies

Chapter 25: TamaRUMORS

Chapter 26: Poor Little Wu Fat

Chapter 27: The Streets Are Paved with Honey

Chapter 28: Pistol Scores a Gooooooooaaaaaallllllllll!

Chapter 29: The Scorpion Dance

Chapter 30: Running in Dreams

Chapter 31: Don't Fall Asleep Under The Manchineel Tree

Chapter 32: Sign Here

Chapter 33: Malacrienza, the Baddest Bull Alive

Chapter 34: Got Local

Chapter 35: Blue, Green, Breathe

Chapter 36: The Birthday

Chapter 37: 'Gone Surfing

Chapter 38: The Book Arrives

Chapter 39: Flower Power

Chapter 40: Organ Donors

Chapter 41: The Beginning of the End of the Beginning

Chapter 42: Adventures Past Midnight

Epilogue



# Foreword

**Norm** Schriever, that dude rocks a typewriter! This is my first and only chance to write a foreword for a book, and I never imagined that it would be the opening line. But what the hell, he is unconventional, and I am a bit weird.

It has been 15 years since I heard Norm's voice or seen his ugly mug. Who woulda guessed he'd have turned into such a solid young man? Did I say young? Yes, I did. I guess I suffer from the same self-delusion most 40-year-old guys do.

Norm and I were great friends when we were younger. We lost touch after high school, walking our separate paths, but then we had a chance meeting again through an old friend. It's rare to pick back up at the exact same place you left off, but I'm so happy we did. And so glad to have been surprised by the copy of Norm's first book, *Pushups in the Prayer Room*, that he signed and left for me after his recent visit to my house.

We had a lot to catch up on: I graduated from MIT with a degree in Environmental Engineering, worked an office job for two weeks, then promptly quit. Instead, I packed my dream wagon and traveled the States as a ski bum. I fell in love in Utah (both with the state and a girl), got my heart trampled (only by the girl), and moved on.

Through a weird turn of events, I ended up as an actor. I made about 14 movies and have done over 150 episodes of network television. I've been fortunate enough for acting to fund my true

passions in life...exploration, adventure, and endeavoring to scratch that ever-present itch of curiosity.

I've driven across the U.S. at least twelve times, hiking, biking, and camping. I had a small hut on the beach in Baja for five years, where I learned to surf and speak bad Spanish. I've traversed almost every inch of coastal Central America, at night tying a hammock in front of the home of some big-hearted local family who offered to feed me, but in the process taught me about true happiness. I drove from Los Angeles to Denali, climbing and skiing mountains the whole way. With Crocs Shoes and UNICEF, I was welcomed into an Indian reservation in the central highlands of Panama to donate thousands of pairs of shoes to families in need.

I married a woman from Sweden, and that is where we spend our summers with our two children and her huge family. I've even learned enough of the language so that my own family will never be able to plot against me!

These days I spend much of my leisure time underwater, free-diving and spearfishing for healthy, wild-caught, sustainably harvested fish for my family to eat. At night I dream about the experiences I've had in the habitat of predator and prey.

But the accomplishment I'm most proud of is my role as husband and father, and I'm reminded every day to look at the world through the curious eyes of a child.

So, when I had the chance to read Norm's writing and learn what he had been up to for the last 15 years, it struck me...struck me that each of us who walks this earth does it with a different agenda, with a different motivation. Some do it to take, some to conquer, some to run, and some do it to give.

And then there are a very few who do it to truly learn. To learn with vigor and enthusiasm, to eat up every experience like it is the best one that exists. Because those who have humbled themselves

to the vastness of this world and the brevity of our stay upon it have learned that each moment we share has the power to be the best, the worst, or the most meaningless one we've ever had...our choice. But it is, in fact, the pinnacle of our existence because it is the only one that actually exists. Everything else is just a memory or an idea that hasn't yet seen the light of day.

Norm travels with respect, with love, wide-eyed as if each and every human being is the master of something and with luck they might impart a small piece of that mastery to him. With each human connection, he's evolved and helped those he's touched to do the same. Truly, that is how we should all live.

That is why I recommend you read his work, because Norm has learned what I always say, "Those who haven't failed will never know the limits of their potential because they have been too lazy to strive beyond them." He is not lazy. He has striven. And he is one of the few who is learning his true potential.

Norm has succeeded and Norm has failed, but most of all he has been courageous enough to face the world head-on. He has allowed it to eat him whole, emerging from the fires forged into a better man. By granting the conch to every human he has met, Norm has become a man who has something valuable to share with the rest of us. Some of us who, after hours and miles of walking through a jungle lost in desperation, have shaken a family awake in the middle of the night in their *palapa*, asking for food and shelter, and some who couldn't imagine that act.

I see his work as much more than a fun romp around the darker corners of the world, narrated by a dude whose distinct sense of humor and unique slant on life illuminate its vibrant complexion. I also see it as an inspiration for those who have walked more modest paths, who haven't ventured as remotely, for people who may have only walked their safe backyards and sidewalks out front...

His writing shows us that in our similarities we are all unique. We have as much to learn as we have to teach, we are strongest in moments of weakness, and we succeed the most when we allow ourselves to fail.

I am so glad that Norm found his way back into my family's life, and that I have had the opportunity to swap stories with him face to face. I urge him to keep on rockin' the typewriter, so the rest of the world can learn and share by reading, without having to actually see his face that was destined for radio!

Congratulations are due to Norm for completing his second book, *South of Normal*. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

*-Dylan Bruno*

Actor, adventurer, and longtime friend.





# Introduction

**Some** people come south to die. You can see it in their eyes—they've given up, wishing only to live out their last years in the tropics with a beer in hand and as few people in their affairs as possible. Some come south to save their lives, to rekindle their joy in the sunlight that sets them on fire every dawn. Others migrate toward the equator to surf, to dance, or to escape the frozen winters of their homelands. As for me, perhaps I moved to Costa Rica for all of those reasons? Or maybe I went south to simply *be, maybe* for the first time in my life.

This book is a simple expat story, a tale of a regular guy who was stupid or crazy enough to peer through the keyhole of his normal existence and give it all up for what he saw. It's not about the United States; I've tried to resist making political statements (and believe me, that was difficult), nor is it about Costa Rica. I don't claim to have solutions to society's problems or any secret koans of wisdom to share with you. In the grand scheme of things I'm just another traveler, one of the many adventurers who can't stand to sit still as the big, wild unknown beckons. There are a lot of backpackers, expatriates, and *Ticos* out there who could write better books. They are the *real* adventurers, the ones we should pay tribute to, but the only difference is that I have big ears and

carry a pen.

This is merely a humble story about human beings living their lives together, trying to do the best that they can. Sometimes we sometimes we couldn't wait until the sun went down so we'd get another chance the next day. All I hope to accomplish with this book is to make you, the reader, think a little more, and feel something. But if I had to choose one, I'd like to make you feel something.

The fact that I'm documenting my time in Costa Rica makes a lot of people nervous. I've received concerned inquiries, subtle warnings, and even a death threat. Some of the people involved prefer I keep silent and just pretend that none of this ever happened. To them I will gently explain that this also happens to be the truth, the truth I lived through, and I refuse to apologize for that. But I am no one's judge; we're all guilty and innocent in some way in this story because we're all flawed human beings, especially me. I hold no ill will and sincerely wish everyone the best, even if it's obvious they don't reciprocate that sentiment. I excluded or softened a lot to protect people, keeping in mind they had to go on living their lives wherever they were in the world, especially in that wonderful little fishbowl called *Tamarindo*.

Even my own family and friends look at me funny, questioning when I'm going to settle down and get a regular job and walk the easy path. They scratch their heads at why I'd do something that makes no logical sense. Maybe after reading this they'll understand better. I think the transparency of my journey makes a lot of people uncomfortable because it makes them question whether they're kings and queens or merely pawns on the chessboard of their own lives. Good.

What I've done with my life still makes no logical sense to me, either. It's contrary to every human instinct of comfort, safety, and the pursuit of material gain. So why do I do it? In short, it's the

legacy I have to leave the world. I can't *not* do it. After you discover that, little else matters along the way.

But let's turn to the pragmatic for a moment. How exactly *does* one end up a broke and happy writer living in Tamarindo, Costa Rica? It was a process equal parts research, planning, and the dice game of chance. Certain things went wrong for me in the United States at precisely the right time, which led me to take a hard look at my life and take a vacation in Tamarindo one December. When I returned home I couldn't get back on the hamster wheel of work and stress and bullshit no matter how hard I tried. So I decided to unplug from my life in the States and move south to chase my dream of writing a book. I did just that, and from there the jungle swallowed me up.

Oh, and I forgot to mention I also knew someone down in Tamarindo, an old friend nicknamed Pistol. And his girlfriend, Theresa, too.

Ahhh, Tamarindo. Even saying your name makes me smile. We've been through some crazy times together for sure, huh? Sometimes it was so wild I didn't believe my own eyes. But I promise you I wouldn't change a thing.

As you read on, it may sound like I went through a lot of struggles, and I did, but I've come to realize most of the real struggles were inside of me. There was a lot of good in Tamarindo and a lot of the other thing, too, just like anywhere—like in our hearts. But as you read this, please keep in mind we were all living in a postcard, by the beach, that beautiful woman, the ocean, at our side. The tide came in and the tide went out, and there was always laughter...

But enough of the small talk. Let's start the show. Buckle up and wave your regular life goodbye, because we're about to head...South of Normal.

*In the interests of making life in a Spanish-speaking country more readable, I italicized those words spoken by Costa Ricans (Ticos) and native Spanish speakers, whether they were speaking English or Spanish.*



## Chapter 1

# Prison

**The** walls of the prison looked smaller than in my dreams. The first thing I thought about was how easy it would be for him to escape. The rain-worn concrete was crumbling in sections, and in some places only a chain link fence topped with barbed wire separated the grounds from the surrounding jungle. But even if he could break free, where the hell would he go? I looked around: nothing but snake brush and sugarcane plantations for miles. Clapboard shacks with outhouses, garbage burning in the front yards, barking dogs and skinny cows. One dirt road in or out. He'd get macheted by a local or go crazy with mosquito bites before he made it far.

“Hey—you ready?” Gary said, climbing out of the driver’s seat of the truck and stretching. “Let’s get in and get the fuck out—I want to be in Tamarindo by two.”

“Yeah sure, Gary, let me just put my stuff away.” I wiped the sweat off my face with a hand towel, recently stolen from the

Hilton across from the airport. I put my backpack on the floor of the TrailBlazer and covered it with a yellowed *Tico Times* newspaper.

“So tell me again how this works?” But he was already halfway to the main gate.

“Just grab your passport,” he yelled back. “We check in and go back to his cell. I’ve been here two or three times. It’s nothing.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, let’s do it. Think you can help me with all of his stuff?” But he didn’t hear, or chose to ignore me, so I loaded up with plastic bags and walked after him, crossing the dead-end dirt road to the front of the prison. Costa Ricans in their Sunday best clothing milled about, making a feeble attempt to form organized lines. Those who stood in the sun covered their heads with pieces of cardboard or magazines. Every one of them stopped and looked at us when we walked up. Every one. Two gringos dropped into an ant farm of 300 poor Ticos.

Gary didn’t appear to be self-conscious at all as he jostled his way into line.

“In here, in here. Come on, keep up,” he said to me. He was skinnier than I’d expected and his head was shaved, unlike his picture on Skype. He looked pale and worn out, dark circles around his eyes. His shirt struck me as funny, a red mesh tank top like the pinnies we used to wear in junior high gym class. But who the hell was I—the fashion police? Maybe that’s what people wore when visiting their friend in a Costa Rican prison. And going with him sure was a lot better than having to visit alone.

“Okay, this is it. Have your passport ready and hang tight.” We picked a line seemingly at random and waited, packed in with fat mothers and their teenage daughters in tight jeans, holding grocery bags and pillows. Jesus, it was hot. I wiped down my forehead and neck again, putting the plastic bags on the ground while we stood in place. Every ten minutes we took a step forward and I gathered

them up again. As soon as I put the bags back on the ground, ants swarmed them.

“Tama has changed, man—it’s a big shit show these days,” Gary said. “I had to sell my share of the restaurant.” I had no idea what he was talking about but nodded my head in agreement.

“I hear ya, Gary. Well, I’m psyched to get back to Tamarindo and settle in. It’s going to be fun to finally live down here.”

“Fucking shit show, man. You’ll see.”

“Okay, sure. So what’s going on with Pistol, anyway? His family didn’t seem to know much before I left.”

“They’re pinning him to the wall because he’s a gringo,” he said, eyes twitching.

We stepped forward into the shade, where it felt ten degrees cooler. I touched my passport in the pocket of my shorts to make sure it was still there. We were getting close.

“When he got arrested no one knew what the hell was going on,” Gary said. “His neighbors called me and I went right over but they’d already taken him away. The place was trashed—those bastards went through all of his stuff.”

“This is Lena’s house you’re talking about, the one he was renting?” I asked.

“Yeah. That bitch called the cops on him and now he’s fucked.”

“So it was her?”

“Well, who knows? Theresa was acting crazy when she and Pistol broke up, so some people thought it was her. I saw her walking on the street one time after that and I went off on her. Then I heard she left town.”

“Damn, I can’t even imagine.”

“So anyways, when I found out he got arrested I went to the house and took the air out of his tires so no one could steal his Blazer. Then I trashed Lena’s office, even pissed all over her files.”

“You did *what?! You pissed on her files?! I couldn’t help but laugh, but then stopped myself and looked down at the ground. “So, do you think he’s safe in here? I mean...is anyone fucking with him?”* Thoughts like those had been keeping me up at night.

“Hey, come on—we’re next.” The line moved again and we were at the front. A round-faced Tico sat behind a barred window, looking out at us with sleepy eyes. Gary told him we were there to visit Joseph Francesco. The guard thumbed through his list of prisoners, tracing down each name with his finger. Gary tapped his fist on the counter.

“Joseph—you know, the gringo. *El gringo!*” he barked. The man understood and wrote in his log book and then collected our passports, stamped them, and handed us receipts. We circled around toward the front gate and fell in behind the mothers and daughters who pushed for position. A guard with mirrored sunglasses and a shiny black nightstick stood on the inside of the steel-bar door. Every few minutes he opened it and let a few people in. When he reached for his keys, the mothers yelled and shoved each other, desperate to get out of the sun and into the jail. Gary was pushing right there with ‘em as I tried to keep up.

“Oops, I’m sorry. *Discuple*. Sorry.” I apologized to the mother for stepping on her toes, apologized to the daughter I’d hit with my sweaty towel, and apologized when one of my bags ripped, spilling apples, and I bumped three of them with my butt when I bent down to pick them up.

“Norm, come on, man. We’re in.” Gary pulled me by my arm through the crowd. The man at the door let us in and locked it

behind us. We were in a narrow hallway, one wall covered with bars and the jungle outside, the other side a high concrete counter. Flies and guards were everywhere and the air didn't move. The visitors put their bags on the counter and the guards went through them, looking for contraband. They ripped open bags of rice and cut avocados in half and fished around plastic containers of beans. We put our bags on the counter and waited. The guards helped everyone but us.

“Hey! Perdón, señor! I know we're gringos but come on—we were waiting, too!” Gary yelled at them. “Rapido, rapido, come on, let us through!”

I shied away to show I wasn't with him, just in case they decided to beat us with their nightsticks. A female guard helped two more visitors and then got to us. She took everything out of the bags and lined it all up on the counter:

5 packages of Ramen noodles

2 packages of deli ham

2 rolls of Pringles: one jalapeño and one regular flavor

2 packs of strawberry vitamin C lozenges

2 packs of Oreo cookies

12 apples, half of them bruised and covered with dirt

1 plastic jar of peanut butter

1 plastic jar of honey

1 loaf of bread

2 boxes of granola bars

12 small bags of assorted potato chips

18 juice boxes

1 roll of strong rope

1 towel

2 Whoppers from the Burger King in the nearby city of Liberia

1 Old Spice deodorant

2 books: a sturdy biography of Bill Clinton and a soft-cover on politics

4 magazines: *Time*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Newsweek*, and *The Economist*<sup>3</sup> newspapers: *The Sunday New York Times* and two hometown rags from Rochester.

It was all there, checked off the list that Pistol's mom had emailed me before I left the States. The lady guard unwrapped each item and lined them up. She opened the Pringles cans, and Gary held out one of the plastic bags and she poured them in there. She did the same thing with the Oreos and took the plastic wrap off the juice boxes, Ramen noodles, and even the Whoppers, so they were all mixed up loose in plastic bags.

"What's she doing?" I asked.

"They check everything because they're not allowed to have certain stuff. It's like this every week so try and remember what you can't bring."

"Why are they taking off the wrappers?"

"The inmates roll up the plastic and smoke them to get high off the chemicals." Damn, I'd seen some funny shit, but never heard of someone so desperate that they'd smoke a Whopper wrapper. "The Pringles cans are made of metal and can be shaped into a weapon. No metal and, of course, no glass." The guard put six apples in a bag and then threw the rest of them into a 50-gallon trash barrel.

“Oh yeah, you can only bring in six pieces of fruit. If you bring in more they think the prisoners are going to keep them until they’re rotten and fermented to make alcohol,” Gary said.

She opened the peanut butter and stuck a knife inside. She turned the books upside down and shook them out and checked the bindings to see if they’d been re-glued. Satisfied, she tossed it all back into the bags, including the rope.

“So they’re allowed to have rope but they can’t have apples?” I asked. “What’s that for, anyways?”

“Right? I don’t really know, their rules are crazy. A few weeks ago, when his new girlfriend, Veronica, came to visit, they made her take out her tampon and searched up there.”

“Damn, you’re serious?”

“Yeah, but she got a ride up here with a guy who was smoking weed so maybe they smelled it on her. I’m telling you—it’s a giant shit show, man. I’m glad you’re here to visit him from now on.” He slapped me on the back. I felt little solace that the cavalry had finally arrived—and it was just me. I helped Gary collect the plastic bags and we were ushered forward by an old woman who needed the counter for her pot of *sopa de pollo*, chicken soup, and a clip-on fan.

We walked to the end of the hallway, where a fat guard with a thick mustache said, “Hello.” He had an inkpad and a stamp. Gary held out his forearm and the man stamped it, like he was leaving a nightclub. Then it was my turn. I held out both arms and he took my left one.

“*Is first time?*” he said in broken English.

“Yes. Si, señor. First time visiting my friend here.”

“El *gringo?*”

“Yeah, the gringo, Joey Francesco.” He shook his head. “What’s the stamp for?” I asked.

“*It is get in get out of cell. No sweat off or no get out.*” I looked at his face to see if he was kidding, but I didn’t think he was, which made me sweat even more. He looked at the shiny, white skin of my arm and stamped me six times right below the shoulder instead.

“Suertes,” he said—good luck. I read the stamps on my shoulder, already fading; “D2B.” We walked around the corner into an area the size of a closet and three guards frisked us, looking in our shoes and finally telling us to go on. We stepped out of the back of the registration building into the sunlight. We were in the prison.

Everything was open and outdoors—not like the jails in the States or that I’d seen on “Locked Up Abroad” on TV. Gary hurried down a concrete sidewalk.

“Whooo, that was brutal. Is it always that bad?” I asked.

“Man, that was nothing,” he said. “A super easy day.”

We wound past the cafeteria where a few guys wearing dirty aprons but no shirts stood outside and waved. I waved back.

“So, is he okay in here?” I asked again, swallowing hard.

“So far he’s been cool. My Colombian friends made some calls and put the Colombian Umbrella over him so they’re watching out for him in here. But I told his mom I need more money to visit. They still owe me \$80. I told them I’d visit because he’s got no one else, but I’m not taking the chicken bus to the prison. No way I’m taking the chicken bus, man. That would take all day.”

The Colombian Umbrella? I didn’t know what that was, but it sure sounded cool. I just had an umbrella from TJ Maxx, made in China, but I was glad Pistol had the Colombian kind.

“What are his lawyers saying?” I asked, trying to seem casual but dying for information. It had been three months since he’d been arrested and from my vantage point in the States I still knew very little, even after emailing with his mom daily. I knew his ex-girlfriend, Theresa, from my previous visit to Tamarindo but hadn’t heard from her. And Lena, the local attorney who was renting the house to him where he got busted, well...I knew her all too well.

We walked past the good-behavior cells. Their doors were open and they had yards with grass. The inmates hand-washed and hung their clothes out back or lifted concrete weights on makeshift wooden benches. There’s no way that rickety thing would support my weight, I thought. Prisoners huddled around a small television set, watching a soccer match, but there were no guards in sight.

The sidewalk wound between concrete block buildings, each with a single window. Brown-skinned skeletons pressed between the bars like broken piano keys, shirtless or in white wife-beaters, arms and legs and shocks of dirty black hair akimbo. They yelled and whistled at us visitors as we passed—anything to get our attention, especially the women. When Gary and I walked by they went crazy, grabbing the bars, yelling and cajoling to get a reaction from us gringos, an unheard of phenomenon in the prison...until recently.

*“Hey, gringo! What’s up?! Hola, amigo! Hey! Give me some Colones— throw me a coin, man! Hey, GRINGO!!!”*

Gary ignored them and walked right by. I tried to do the same but the yelling freaked me out, my heart racing. I lowered the big white sunglasses that still rested on my head but I felt ridiculous in those shades, embarrassed by my own existence. I could see myself through their eyes: soft and pale like a whale’s belly, even my simple cargo shorts, Nikes, and sweat-soaked t-shirt appearing opulent in that place. The guys were all so skinny and desperate, reaching out for us even though we were ten yards away like through sheer wild determination they’d be able to stretch and grab hold of us, and

then...

*“Throw me one coin NOW! 500 Colones! Gringo! Hey, PUTA GRINGO!”*

They had nothing but time and could talk as big as they wanted stuck behind those bars. I felt dizzy from the heat and the yelling. I couldn't ignore the question that had been haunting me for three months—what if it was *me* locked in there with them? How long would *I* last?

“It's just up ahead...” Gary was talking to me. “Hey, are you alright?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm fine.” I stood up straight and tried to put some cool in my voice.

“Man, don't worry about them. They just want you to throw a coin. They'll take all night fishing it in from the grass with a string and a hook. They got nothing better to do.”

“Gotcha. So next time bring a coin to throw to them.” I added that to my mental checklist—I was learning fast.

“No! Don't throw *anything* to them. You can get in big trouble if the guards see you.”

I crossed that item off my mental checklist. Once we got past those cells, I exhaled. The path wound through the jungle and onto a bridge over a creek. It was so quiet again that I could hear the water.

We passed an old man in a baseball cap sitting in a wheelchair along the path. He held a beat-up plastic cup filled with coins but he didn't ask us for money.

“*Buenas tardes,*” he said—good afternoon. His eyes were good and he had a kind face. “*Mi amigo, are you on the right path?*” he

asked.

“What’s that? Yeah, I think so—this way, right, Gary?” But he was up ahead. I wished the man good afternoon and walked on. Was he a prisoner? He seemed out of place.

Finally we arrived at Pistol’s cellblock, D2B, the last building in the prison compound. Back in the States I’d envisioned that place for three months but in real life it all felt worse; I realized there was no heat in my nightmares.

The guards looked at the stamps on our arms and brought us through a heavy gate. The sunlight didn’t reach inside and there were no light bulbs. I was locked in a cage waiting for the next door to be opened into the unit. I went to wipe myself with the towel but I wasn’t holding it anymore. Between the bars I could see a buzz of humanity: teenagers and men and guards crossing my field of vision like someone had kicked up a beehive of bodies. Our presence caused a commotion and there were yells for Joey. It was loud, but I couldn’t understand anything that was being said. And then, through the bars, I saw his face.

He definitely looked thinner than when I’d seen him six months earlier, but he wasn’t wasting away like it seemed in the U.S. Embassy’s reports. He’d lost some of his drinker’s belly but the rest of him looked the same—classic Italian good looks, a slightly pug nose, short-cropped black hair. He still had the gait of an athlete even though he hadn’t played sports in fifteen years. I noticed he was wearing his familiar Birkenstocks and a golf shirt with the University of Rochester crest on it; he’d dressed up for the big day.

His mouth turned up into a slight smile as the guard unlocked the final door and let us in.

“Normando, what’s up, bro?!” he said with small laughter in his voice, like we were just meeting up to watch a Yankees game at our neighborhood bar.

“Hey, Pistol! How are ya?” I didn’t know if we were going to hug or shake hands or what, considering the circumstances. I was anticipating bulletproof glass with two phone receivers like in the movies. He gave me a homie hug and I slapped his back.

“So, what’s going on? When did you get in?” he asked.

“You know, nothing much. I got into Liberia last night.” I was relieved to finally see him and see that he was the same person. I’m not sure what I’d expected. “So, how are you?”

He shrugged and nodded to his surroundings.

“Could be better, Normando. It could be better.” The door slammed and locked behind us.

“I hear ya, man. So how are you?” I realized I was repeating myself but I didn’t know what else to say.

“Here, let me help you with those bags. Come on in, let’s go over here.” He led us into the unit, a 50-foot-by-30-foot enclosure with a smooth concrete floor and plain concrete walls. A single phone booth looked out of place in the middle of all that concrete. The only view of the sky was through a chain-link-fenced roof. There was no visiting area—they just locked us in with all of the prisoners.

The courtyard was jammed with visitors and families, sitting together or lying on filthy foam pads along the ground. Young punks with bandanas swaggered around trying to look cool, showing off their muscles.

*“Ellos siguen jodiendo conmigo! JODIENDO conmigo!”* an older man yelled to himself, walking in circles.

Pistol led us over to a concrete ledge that served as the only seats. Two young Ticos sat there but got up and spread out a blanket for us when we approached. I sat down facing Pistol but Gary remained standing behind us, fidgeting.

“So, what’s new, Normando?” He looked at me. I mean really *looked* at me—straight into my eyes, unblinking, like he could read my thoughts, the way he always did. I met his gaze but then looked away.

“Oh, you know, nothing much. Just psyched to be here and see you. So, how ya holding up?”

“Ahhh, I’m alright, though I’ll be damn excited to get out of here soon. You finally made the move, huh? I didn’t think you were going to do it— everyone talks about relocating to Costa Rica but no one ever does. So, how was it leaving Cali?”

“It was good, it just took a while to wrap everything up. I was lucky and sold the Land Rover on eBay Motors my very last day. And the house is up for a sale, but I won’t make any money on it. But it’s good to be down here.” I was talking too much. “Here—I brought you two Whoppers, but they made me take them out of the wrappers. And I got you all of the other stuff that your mom asked. Here are some magazines.”

“Did you bring the money?”

“The money—yeah, I did. I have 30,000 *Colones*—\$60.” I touched the folded bills in my pocket. “Do you want me to take it out right here, or...?”

“Do it on the sly and slip it to me,” Pistol said.

I gazed around, trying to look as inconspicuous as a gringo visiting a Third World jail could possibly look. I palmed the money and slid it over to Pistol, sort of bungled the exchange, and then drew my hand back when he had it.

“Bring more next time,” he said, sliding it into his pocket without looking at it.

“Your mom said they only allow 30,000 in at a time.” “It’s okay—

bring more next time.”“Really? What do you need it for?” I assumed the one and only benefit of being incarcerated was that you had free room and board.

“Everything costs money in here. I have to pay to get my laundry done. I have to buy phone cards to make international calls. It costs to get better food. I pay for laundry—a lot of things.”

“Damn, I’ll ask your mom for more, but I think they’re hurting for money like everyone else.” In the sunlight I could see him better, and, for the first time, his jet-black hair had hints of white.

“Thanks for the food, man. Try to bring some healthy stuff if you can. They don’t feed us much in here and I’ve been eating too much junk.”

“Sure thing. Just tell your mom what you want and she’ll email me a list. What do they feed you?”

“At 6:30 they wake us up and give us two hotdog buns. At noon we get rice and beans, then at 4:30 p.m. we get leftover rice and beans and one more hotdog bun. 800 calories a day, that’s it.”

“Wow, bro, I’ll definitely bring better food.”

Two guys argued over the phone and then walked to opposite ends of the courtyard, but their tension echoed off the walls with no place to escape. One of them walked toward Pistol and gave him a nod. He was short like a bulldog, roped with muscle though I guessed he’d never been inside a gym, his arms and one side of his face crossed with knife scars.

We chatted a little more and Pistol ate a burger while I sweated. We talked about baseball and I told him the Phillies were in first place and looking good. I told him our mutual friend, Reilly, said “hi” and sent his encouragement. He asked me about politics and the economy and the upcoming elections, but I had no idea. After all of that time, months of stress and speculation, I wanted to ask him

so much now that we were finally face to face. What was going to happen to him? Were they messing with him? Beating him up? Or worse? I was relieved to see there weren't any bruises and he seemed at ease with the other prisoners. I didn't know if it was okay to just come out and talk about it, but I was dying to scream the most pressing questions of all: "What the fuck were you *thinking*? And how the hell did you get *caught*?"

"So, how many plants did they get you with, Pistol?"

"Like 120," he sighed. "But most of them were small and still growing indoors. The police didn't even read my fucking rights or give me a translator, just cuffed me and took me away. They made me stand for hours with a machine gun pointed at me and wouldn't even give me water. I had to wait two days before they let me call the U.S. Embassy. It's bullshit because I'm in here with murderers and rapists and coke traffickers and they're worried about me and a little weed, just because I'm a gringo."

I nodded my head, not wanting to interrupt now that he was finally talking about it.

"They're all so corrupt. Right after the police came, Lena showed up at the house with the prosecutor. She's in thick with the judges and the police because she's an attorney and her dad is chief of police in the province. She even used to date the prosecutor. They went through all of my stuff and someone stole my iPhone and my hard drive. It was a brand new fucking phone. Someone used my ATM card that same night to take out \$300. I'm going to file criminal charges and get all of those scumbags thrown in jail."

He sounded like the old Pistol I knew—fired up and throwing punches with little consideration for where they landed, the guy I'd met in Colorado fifteen years earlier, the best spring break road dog you could hope for, the guy I'd visited for vacation right there in Costa Rica six months earlier, before I made up my mind to move

down.

“So, what’s going to happen now?” I asked.

He scanned the prison courtyard but didn’t answer. A guard yelled that visiting hours were over and rapped his nightstick against the bars. People stirred from their seats and said their goodbyes.

“Hey, do me a favor and take this out with you.” He handed me a stack of notebook pages filled with handwriting in pencil. “Hide them on the way out so no one gets their hands on them. Transcribe the pages and send an email to my attorney and the U.S. Embassy and my mom.”

“Okay, you got it.” I took the pages and folded them up and put them in my pocket. “I’ll come visit you next weekend. Good to see you, bro.”

“Try to bring more money,” he said. We got up and hugged again. “And thanks for the Whoppers.” He said goodbye to Gary and we filed toward the door along with the other visitors. I was relieved that it was almost over with, but it was weird that he couldn’t just walk out with me, that we couldn’t just jump in his Blazer and go drink rum and talk to pretty girls by the pool, like old times. I turned back.

“Hey, Pistol, I forgot to ask...what’s the rope for?” He measured me with his dark eyes and took too long to answer.

“It’s for my clothes—to make a line so I can hang them out to dry.”

“Oh, okay. See you soon, bro.” I walked out, but jumped when the iron door slammed behind me.

*Bienvenido al primer día de mi nueva vida en Costa Rica.*

Welcome to the first day of my new life in Costa Rica.



## Chapter 2

# Welcome to the Shit Show

**Gary** and I sped along Highway 21 toward Tamarindo. I was relieved to be headed away from the prison because I'd been dreading that first visit ever since an otherwise quiet morning in May when I got word that Pistol had been arrested. Three months later, it felt weird that I'd finally laid eyes on him. Hell, everything felt surreal since I'd decided to uproot my life and move down to Costa Rica.

We passed lush fields flecked with groves of Guanacaste trees and grazing cows. They were fenced in and each fence had different colored posts. I watched them blur by—blue and white, red and white, blue and yellow.

“Everything in those blue and white posts is land owned by the Estrella Hotel in Tama,” Gary said. We passed a row of shacks where they sold bottles of Coca Cola, hammocks, and inflatable dolphins

for the pool. I saw a lot of one-room houses with people sweeping their front yards, but no pools. It all looked familiar.

“Hey, Norm, look through the glove box to see if there’s anything to smoke out of.”

“Really? Are you sure this is the best time to smoke?” But I rummaged through the glove box and pulled out maps, a flashlight that somehow was still on, an empty Imperial beer can, aviator sunglasses, and a six-inch hunting knife.

“What the hell? He’s carrying around a knife?”

“I’m not surprised—you need one down here. You need something. Some fucking Critters just jumped me outside Aqua and smashed a bottle over my head.” He showed me a scar on his scalp. “Keep looking—I want to smoke.”

I looked through the glove box and then the center console and checked behind the visors. I found a wooden one-hitter, a glass bowl stained with marijuana resin, a baggie with the shake remnants of weed, five lighters, and a half pack of condoms from 2004.

“Jesus, Gary—you didn’t check the truck before we went to the jail? The last thing I need is to end up in there with him.”

“Don’t worry about it, man.”

“Don’t worry? This car needs to be clean if I’m going to drive it around.” Gary had been using Pistol’s truck since the arrest, but Pistol’s mom had serious doubts about his reliability. Several times he was supposed to visit the jail but flaked, and she complained that his math was getting fuzzy when it came to the money she was sending down. Even though I’d never met her, she was pleased that I was moving down and could help with the situation. Other than visiting Pistol she also asked me to hold onto his truck and help out with a few other small things. It was the least I could do. She was so desperate, so worried about her son, and the whole family was

counting on me.

“Hey, Gary—what’s this stuff in the back seat?” I asked, taking the lid off two cardboard boxes filled with children’s toys, art supplies, and games.

“I think he was planning to donate those to the elementary school in Haucas or something. But I guess he never got the chance.” I smiled. Pistol was always doing stuff like that, a real humanitarian at heart. “Do you want to stop and see the new restaurant I’m opening?” Gary asked.

“No, it’s cool. I sort of want to get to my new apartment and get settled.” I had the entire contents of my new life, two overstuffed duffel bags and a backpack, in the back of the truck and felt weirdly vulnerable that someone could just break the window and walk away with everything I owned in the world.

“I’m supposed to meet Tania at the apartment at four but I don’t even have an address—you sure you know where Villa Verde is?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think I can find it.” He balanced the knife in his hand as he drove. “How do you know her, anyway?”

I’d actually never met Tania, who was going to be my new roommate. We had a bunch of mutual friends from my time vacationing in Tamarindo, and somehow we’d found each other on Facebook. Over the months of online conversations a friendship ensued. She spoke perfect English and had a great job at Premier Realty. I had a hundred questions about moving down to Costa Rica, and she had the patience and the English to answer all of them. When Pistol was arrested she helped translate some important documents, arranged phone calls, and contacted the Costa Rican public defender for us. That was really cool of her. She looked cute on her profile picture and we flirted a little bit, but the last thing I needed was another tangled relationship so I left it

alone. I was way smarter than to “go there” with my only remaining friend in town.

As it got closer to my July 13 departure date I started looking around for an apartment and Tania was helpful, as usual. She emailed me pictures of houses and apartments for rent. They all looked okay to me, but I had no idea if the prices were fair or about the locations (there are no accurate maps, street names, or even mailing addresses in Tamarindo). The only nice hotel I knew in town was the Estrella, which would cost me about \$120 a night, so if it took me a week to find a place once I got there I would have spent more than one month’s rent. Considering everything I had going on with my life-changing move and Pistol’s situation, I wanted a nice, safe home base arranged before I got down there so I wouldn’t feel so out of control.

When I first told Pistol that I was thinking of moving to Costa Rica he proposed that we rent a house together. But even then, before he got in trouble, there was no way I was going to live with his crazy ass; he ran way too hot for me. Drinking by the pool and smoking weed all day was fantastic for a vacation, the perfect remedy to my cold museum life in the States, but I’d be a hot mess if I tried to keep up with him over the long haul. Plus I had big things I wanted to tackle. My fortieth birthday was in February, only eight months away, and I’d set three epic goals to achieve by then, the *real* reasons I’d moved down.

Besides, Pistol and Theresa, his long-time Costa Rican girlfriend, fought like rabid wolverines. Day and night I had to listen to them arguing, berating each other, threatening to move out, and throwing each other’s clothes on the front lawn—and that’s when things were good. The more Pistol partied, the more trouble he’d get in when he came home, so he’d just get drunker and stay out longer to deal with it. Then she’d come looking for him, ready to drag him out of the bars and castrate him with a rusty spoon in the middle of the street. Hell hath no fury like a *Latina* woman scorned, or even just

mildly cranky.

When the heat was on he avoided most of our usual watering holes and instead drove out to Tuanis Bar in the middle of the jungle to drink rum and smoke in solitude. There would be hell to pay when he showed up in town again, so why rush? But they always got back together before long. They'd be on the couch eating Chinese food and making plans for Valentine's Day, and we'd all enjoy a couple of nights of domestic tranquility before the whole circus started again. Unfortunately, I was guilty by association, so no matter how nice I was to Theresa I got the evil eye when Pistol was on a bender. It got to be damn uncomfortable and borderline nasty by the time I left.

Tania proposed an idea that could help me with my housing dilemma. She had to move out of her apartment soon and was looking for a place as well. She had a hookup with the owners of a nice unit in the Villa Verde apartments, where a three-bedroom place only five minutes from the beach would cost us \$800 a month. We'd split the rent and utilities right down the middle and have a fun, chill place to live. It sounded fine to me, and she assured me that the place looked great. She could move in before I got there and make sure the little things were ready: Internet, cable, towels and sheets, and food in the fridge.

My only concern was letting her know that I didn't want anything romantic—we were *just* going to be friends and roommates with no funny business. She understood. I said it again because we'd been flirtatious and I didn't want to mess up a good living arrangement. She said she got it. Cool— crystal clear and there would be no problems there. We signed the lease but at the last minute she needed me to float her half of the rent for a week until she got paid. I wired down the money through Western Union, reluctantly but with her full assurances. She'd been great so far helping with Pistol, so I knew I could trust her.

“Actually, I don’t know her that well, just through Facebook and mutual friends,” I answered Gary. “But she seems cool and has been really helpful so far.”

“Good luck with all that. Costa Rican broads are fucking crazy, man.”

“Nah, not her. She’s alright.”

“Okay, whatever you say. But I’m telling you.” He pulled a sharp turn by a bus stop, sending a dozen Ticos scrambling out of the way. “Here we go—only half an hour to Tama.”

I’d driven that route dozens of times before but somehow it all looked different—dirty, more desperate. I remembered clear sunny days and a big party, but now the sky was gray with insufferable humidity. The cows looked skinnier and the mosquitos fatter. Was this the same place? Damn, had I been *that* buzzed the whole vacation?

We followed the one paved road in along the beach, with a view of the Pacific foaming to the west, past Joe’s Beachside Bar and Witch’s Rock surf camp, past Kelly’s Surf Shop, and past the smooth, white, ivy-covered walls of the Estrella Hotel, then onto dirt roads. We took a few turns and then pulled up at the gate of a red stucco condo complex. I was home.

My face was flush and I couldn’t stop sweating. I’d been anxious about moving there and visiting Pistol for months, and now that it was all happening, I felt like I was moving way too fast.

You think about making life changes—maybe you get a new job or move into a different house or go back to school and that in itself is a huge event. But within a few short months I’d completely turned my life upside down; I’d said goodbye to all of the friends I’d made over my eight years in Sacramento, walked away from a great job with a law firm, left behind a nice girl I’d started seeing right before I left, sold my house, my cars, donated all of my

possessions, and hit the road to live in a Third World country, where I didn't speak the language and my only friend was in prison. I'd rattled my own cage so hard I didn't even know which way was up. It all felt like a magic trick where I'd been sawed in half, but now the audience had gone home and there was no one to put me together again.

The previous day I'd woken up at 3:00 a.m. to drive into New York for a 7:00 a.m. flight. After landing in Costa Rica, I managed a few hours of sleep at the airport Hilton and then met Gary and headed to the jail first thing that morning. A big part of me felt like taking the next plane back to the States with my tail between my legs so I could sit on the couch in the AC with a cold beer and watch SportsCenter, but that wasn't an option anymore. Now it was time to complete the journey by meeting my new roommate for the first time—who, by cruel default, was the only person I had in my new world.

We pulled up and climbed out of the truck. A ridiculous thought occurred to me—how would she know it was me? Maybe because there weren't that many other pale, jet-lagged gringos sweating like hostages unloading every-thing they owned at Villa Verde at four in the afternoon? We walked through the gates into a courtyard with a pool and a waterfall, palm trees, and tropical flowers. I saw Tania standing by the door of an apartment with a beer in her hand, wearing some sort of lacey number. I was a little confused why she was outside in her underwear.

*“Nnnnnnnnn! You're finally here!”*

I walked over and said “hi” and we hugged. I apologized for sweating all over her but she didn't care. She was happy to see me and welcomed me to my new home with the hospitality of a Hawaiian girl handing me a lei. I just stood there beaming and sweating like an idiot because I didn't know what else to do or say.

*“Here, have a beer,”* she said, and handed me her half-finished

can, cracking a new one for herself.

“Ummm, thanks.”

“So, *how was your flight? Do you feel like partying?*” she asked. I wasn’t sure if that meant more warm beer, a plate of cocaine and shooting off *pistolas* in the air, or a lingerie pillow fight. What I really wanted was a cold shower and a nap. Damn I was getting old.

“*I can’t believe you’re finally here!*” she said. “*We’re going to have soooo much fun!*” Her voice was surprisingly gruff, like something you’d hear in an anti-smoking public service announcement. She wasn’t un-attractive, but definitely didn’t look like the sun-kissed starlet in her Facebook picture. She was only 24 years old but had a perfectly round beer belly, appearing to be about 35. Then again, in the picture I’d seen she was wearing a sunhat and big shades and leaning over with her boobs hanging out. The boobs I recognized. I was relieved that we’d had “the talk” about just being friends.

“Hey, Gary, could you help me get these bags inside...?” But he was already waving goodbye and then driving off in a cloud of dust.

“*Soooo...what do you think?*” Tania asked as she led me inside. The apartment was small but nice. There was a foam couch in the living room and one plastic chair, but that was about it for furniture.

“Yeah, it’s great. Thanks so much for getting it for us. It’s really helpful to have a place to come to on my first day. Especially after the jail.”

“*Oh, no problem—I’m soooooo glad you love it! Here, let me show you your room.*” She took my backpack and led me up two flights of stairs. The whole third floor was mine, a big bedroom

with tile floors and French doors opening up to a balcony with a great view of the courtyard and the pool. I liked it and was relieved to see a wall AC unit. There was a bed but nothing else. One more trip heaving my second bag up the stairs and I began to feel at ease. I had her show me how to crank the AC up to arctic blizzard level and laid on the bed as she went down to get more beer.

It felt great to finally be there, and I could slow down and breathe for the first time all day. I took a cold shower and changed out of my travelling clothes and went downstairs to say “hi.”

I was hungry so Tania and I walked down to Caracolla’s by the beach for fish tacos. A few of her friends joined us, so I got to meet curly-haired Yazmin and Sofia, and a few others. I sat on the end of the bar and sweated and drank way too fast while they examined me like the newest exhibit in the zoo, comparing notes in Spanish. Eventually I loosened up a little and we all laughed. The fish tacos tasted incredible and I paid our bill and we stepped out into the tropical night. We were right next to the beach so I could smell the salt air and hear the ocean roar somewhere in the blackness. *That’s* what I signed up for!

We walked home and I stumbled up the three flights of stairs and lay in my cold room, my bags at the foot of the bed. I was spinning from the beer and 48 hours with little sleep. Tania came up with two more beers and knocked on the door.

*“Are you asleep yet?”*

*“Huh? No, I’m just chilling. Thanks again for everything.”*

*“Yeah, no problem! It’s fun to have you here!”* she said. *“Do you mind if I hang out and talk a little while?”*

*“Sure...of course.”*

*“Okay, but first let me change into something more comfortable.”*

Thank God. Maybe she would put on some more modest clothes.

She came back wearing the identical lingerie bikini thing, but in black instead of red.

*“That’s much better,”* she said. *“Are you going for a swim this late?”*

*“Of course not, why? Can I sit on the bed since you don’t have any chairs?”* Yeah, what happened to that? My bed was big but she sat right next to me.

*“Do you want a beer?”* she asked. *“That’s the last thing I need.”* We talked a little while, or, more accurately, she talked and I tried not to fall asleep. She inched closer. Don’t go there Norm. Friends. She smelled like perfume. Roommates only, dammit! Don’t mess up the whole dynamic. I tried to pretend like I was asleep but felt her lie down next to me. No way. I was smarter than that. In my 39 years, if there was one thing I’d learned, it was not to spit in my own rice bowl, as the Chinese say. She started rubbing my back. Absolutely not. DO NOT sleep with your semi-attractive beer-bellied roommate on your first night. I pretended to snore. She reached over and started rubbing my leg. Be good. Be strong. Do the right thing. Her hand moved up.

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Three and a half minutes later, I rolled off her, sweating and breathing hard. God dammit. She giggled and opened the balcony door and lit a cigarette.

*“Soooo...all in all, how was your first day in Costa Rica, N?”* But I was already drifting off.

*“It was a grade-A shit show,”* I mumbled.

*“Huh? What’s that?”*

“Just perfect...” I lied, and everything faded to black.



## Chapter 3

# Rain, Writing, and a Blind Dog Named Disco

**M**y first morning in Tamarindo I woke to the rain against my window. For an instant I had no idea where I was, a long-dormant sense of traveler's vertigo, but after looking around I realized I was in my new apartment.

However, there was no going back to sleep for me. I was charged with the excitement of my new life—finally a resident of Costa Rica.

There was a lot I wanted to accomplish on my first day: unpack, get the Internet hooked up, get a local cellphone, join the gym, and buy a desk so I could start writing. I got dressed and walked out of my room into the unlit stairwell, but tripped over something that sent me sprawling to the tile. Whatever I'd tripped over let out a grunt. A black lab snoozed on the floor, a nice-looking dog with a shock of

white hair on her chest and front paws. She seemed confused by my presence but didn't look straight in my direction. We had a dog? Cool! I got down on the floor to rub her head and let her smell my hand. When I got up and walked down the stairs she followed me but Bam! she walked right into the wall, and Crash! she tripped down the last three steps and face-planted into the couch. I touched her head and she looked up; her eyes were clouds of grey, without pupils.

*"I see you met my dog, Disco—she's blind,"* Tania said. She stood by the front door looking out at the rain, smoking a cigarette and wearing an even skimpier poolside/lingerie outfit. Even in the morning?

"Disco?! Seriously? She's blind?"

*"Well, about 80% blind. She can see some light. When she was a puppy she had a bad fever and almost died, and came out of it with a loss of sight. But she's a great dog."*

I ran my hand through Disco's field of vision three feet away, but she just panted. I brought my hand closer until it was only a few inches from her face and then she got excited and wagged. Wow, a blind dog. That must be challenging, especially in Costa Rica in the jungle. I petted Disco's head and she closed her eyes blissfully.

I walked out front and watched the rain, too, wetting palm fronds and red flowers, circles forming when drops hit the pool.

"Damn, it's really coming down. I don't think I saw rain once when I visited last December," I said. Hopefully it would clear up by afternoon because I wanted to hit the beach and work on my tan. "When do you think it's going to stop?"

*"Probably around November,"* Tania said.

"I'm sorry, I thought you just said 'probably around November.'"

Maybe her English wasn't as good as I thought, because it was the middle of July.

*“Yes, this is the start of the rainy season, so it should be on and off until October. That's when it REALLY rains, every day. And then in late November it should start getting nice.”*

“Huh. Interesting. Maybe this wasn't exactly the best time of year to move down here,” I said, half joking. Tania shrugged and went to the fridge, Disco following her every footstep, and then sat down on the couch. She cracked a beer and guzzled half of it. That struck me as odd behavior for 8:00 a.m. on a Thursday morning.

“What time do you have to be to work today? Gary's supposed to drop off the truck, so I can give you a ride if you want.” It would be nice to have the house alone for a few hours to settle in.

*“Oh, I'm not going to work.”* She took a long sip of beer and put her high heels up on the couch.

“Why not? Do you have the day off?”

*“No, I don't work there anymore.”*

“What?! At the real estate office? That seemed like a great job. What happened?”

*“I got fired.”*

“Oh shit. I'm sorry—that sucks.” My mind turned to the issue of paying rent and the money I'd already fronted her. “So...what are you going to do for work?”

*“I'm going to sue Chris, the owner. He's a gringo but he never had the proper paperwork as an employer here in Costa Rica so he can get in big trouble. I'm suing him for all of my back health insurance money—it should be like 4,000 dollars. When that comes in, I'll be fine.”* Well, damn, that might complicate things, but she didn't seem

too concerned, and four large was a lot of money.

“So, what are you going to do today? Look for another job?”

“*No, I think I will take a vacation. Just do nothing.*” And nothing is what she meant, because she seemed content to sit there and drink beer and chain smoke all morning, both her and Disco staring blankly out the front door.

I went to the kitchen and poured myself some coffee.

“*So did you sleep good your first night?*” Tania chuckled, breaking the silence of my thoughts. It all came back to me—that I’d violated my cardinal rule and fooled around with her the night before. *Mama mia*, that made it awkward. I didn’t know what to say.

“Umm, look, Tania, I hope last night doesn’t make it weird for us or anything.” She looked back at me like she had no idea what I was talking about. “Well, it was great and everything, don’t get me wrong, at least *I* enjoyed it—and I hope you did, too. It sure *seemed* like you enjoyed it, though I’m sure you wished you could have enjoyed it a little *longer*, but it’s been a while for me, and you know how that goes...but dammit, that’s not the point.” Reel it in and wrap it up, Normando. “The *point* is that I don’t want to ruin our friendship. We’re roommates and I just want to make sure we keep it only that...”

“*Stop worrying! It was fun but it didn’t mean anything,*” she said and tossed her cigarette butt out the front door.

“Okay. You mean it—you’re okay? With us just being friends?”

“*Of course. Just friends. Nothing more.*”

“Cool.” I smiled, relieved. No complications, no expectations, no heavy relationship bullshit that I didn’t need. No one else would have to know—just a drunken mistake among friends.

I stepped outside to look around, sipping my coffee. People were out front of the other units, too. No one else had jobs they needed to go to? Not even something part time? Apparently not. But they all sure seemed friendly. One by one they waved and yelled over to me.

*“Tudo bem, amigo! My name is Avellino. You are the new boyfriend of Tania, I hear?!”* said the Brazilian musician next door.

*“Ahhh you must be Tania’ fiancé! I hear you two much in love last night. Que romantico!”* said the little old lady in 12B, holding her Bible.

Even the maintenance man, a pleasant young Nicaraguan named Antonio, took time to put down his broom and greet me. *“Hello and welcome, friend. You help me practice English, yes? Tania tell Tamarindo she girlfriend you.”*

Yes, apparently Tania *did* tell all of friggin’ Tamarindo that she girlfriend me. How the hell could she just ignore everything we’d talked about? I waved back, trying to explain the whole situation by yelling across the courtyard through the rain: “Oh no, you must be mistaken. We’re just friends! Amigos! Believe me, solamente amigos – we had THE talk. Yoohoo, over here!” but they couldn’t make out what I was saying and thought I was either drunk or very passionate about greeting my neighbors or probably both.

I’d moved from the States to *simplify* my life and get away from all of the negative crap, and here I was falling right back into it between Tania and Pistol. It sounded so awesome on paper—give up everything and start over in Costa Rica, where I could live in a little surf town two blocks from the beach and finally chase my dream of writing a book—but somehow it wasn’t panning out to be that easy.

I walked back inside but conveniently Tania wasn’t sitting there anymore. So I went up to my room, stepping over Disco, and shut

the door. I opened it back up, let Disco inside, then shut it again.

I stared at my bags for a moment piled at the foot of my bed. I took a deep breath and unzipped my backpack, taking out a small wall calendar and a red pen I'd bought at the airport gift shop in New York. I flipped through to February and put a red circle over the ninth day, my birthday.

To be honest with you, part of the reason for my move to Costa Rica was the inevitable reassessment of your life that happens as you approach a milestone birthday. 40. What did that mean? I didn't feel that old; I still felt like a confused kid trying to figure it all out. I'd tried to do what I was *supposed* to, what everyone told me to: settle down, put all of your energy into a career, and accumulate as many shiny material things as possible along the way, but each day I'd wandered further from who I really wanted to be.

I hadn't thought about that in a long time, asking myself the supreme question: If I could do *anything* in life, with no limits or conditions, what would it be? It took me a while to answer, but once I did, my path was clear.

When I left California a lot of people thought I was crazy; there were whispers. Hell, I don't blame them—I thought the exact same thing most days. But all I knew was that I couldn't NOT try. I might be crazy, but at least I'd be crazy chasing my biggest dream, on the biggest stage I could think of: the whole wide world.

I had a heart-to-heart talk with one of my oldest friends, Adam, who lived in the foothills past Sacramento. We walked his property one evening with fishing poles in hand, watching the sunset and listening to his two sons play inside.

“Are you having a midlife crisis or something, buddy?” he asked me. I thought for a moment.

“Not at all, Adam. *My* midlife crisis was settling down and chasing money. This is me getting back to my *real* life.”

Four decades on the planet. My God, where had it all gone? The scariest part was that it was going by faster and faster. No matter how I looked at it, I wouldn't be around forever. Whether I died of a heart attack or a broken heart, had one hundred years to live or went the next morning, there were a few goals I wanted to achieve, no—needed to achieve.

I packed light, getting rid of everything in my life that didn't aid my pursuit of those goals. I needed as much space and simplicity as possible. From there, I knew that everything else would fall into place. And hopefully, by the time I reached that red circle on the calendar, I would:

1. *Be in the best shape of my life.* I would honor the physical form I was given.
2. *Be happy.* When people asked me if I was happy, I didn't know exactly what to say.
3. *Write a book.* It's always been my dream to write a book, but not just frivolous fiction, and definitely not to make money. It's because I had this tiny acorn of an idea that had grown into a full sense of social responsibility, and my dream was to spread that message.

Those were my three grand endeavors. I wanted the energy of those accomplishments to reach somewhere far off, to help someone, or, hopefully, a lot of someones. That was the legacy I wanted to leave.

But I had a long way to go. In fact, I didn't even know where to begin. All I understood was I needed to throw a dart at the map of my life and get started, no matter where it landed.

I did exactly that, and somehow ended up in the tropics in Costa Rica, visiting my buddy in prison and with a new roommate who

had a blind dog and a proclivity for leisure. Life sure had a hell of a sense of humor.

I hauled my duffel bags up onto the bed. I hadn't just packed for a vacation; my entire world had to fit into those bags because I was moving down to Costa Rica to live for an indeterminable amount of time (I called it semi-permanent when people asked).

For instance, my brand new printer was too big, so I traded it to my sister for a ride to the airport. Two Bose speakers earned a place in my luggage, but towels and sheets took up too much space so they were left behind. Priorities.

I unzipped my bags and started taking things out, sorting them into piles on the bed.

I pulled out the one book I'd carried with me and turned it over in my hands, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. "*Most people live a life of quiet desperation,*" I said out loud. Disco groaned and rolled over. I tossed the book on the bed and it fell open to my favorite passage, heavily creased and underlined:

*"... I wished to live deliberately...and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."*

Damn, that hit home. "*I did not wish to live what was NOT life...and when I came to die, discover that I HAD NOT LIVED.*" Preach on, my brother. Months earlier I'd asked myself if I was living some lesser version of my own life, and the answer hadn't pleased me.

I took out a beat-up pair of running sneakers, a nicer pair of Nikes, and three pairs of flip-flops.

This seemed like a lot of stuff but only a few months earlier in Sacramento I'd owned a big house, fancy cars, five televisions (including one in the bathroom), three stereo systems, a hot tub,

two wet bars, four fridges, two storage sheds filled with random crap, and plenty of beautiful furniture. To everyone else it looked like I'd "made it." But now it was all gone. I'd sold what I could in the biggest karmic garage sale in history and donated the rest to charity. I only kept my books and my artwork. In some way, all of those possessions were possessing me, but now I was liberated.

*Twelve t-shirts, most of them with brightly-colored surf themes from my local land-locked Old Navy.*

I hadn't anticipated this happening in my life. I'd worked so hard and finally achieved a plateau of comfort, but the realization that I wasn't on the right path crept into my thoughts late at night when I couldn't sleep. I wasn't leading a life of meaning, my true life. I couldn't escape the fantasy of letting it all go, humbling myself to nothing so I could instead pursue my long-forgotten dream.

*Five pairs of shorts, six pairs of workout shorts.*

I wanted to write. Ever since I was a kid, I'd been vexed by literature, the delicious voodoo of the written word. I loved books, the smell of them, the feel of the pages, the worlds they opened up to me. Salinger, Fitzgerald, Hemingway. By putting their pen to the page, these writers became immortal. Vonnegut, Orwell, Lee. There was great magic in showing us their most intimate, unique humanity. When they took off their masks, they somehow awarded us gentle permission to do the same. Hesse, Kerouac, Bukowski. They laughed at death and danced at the latest hour, just when the rest of us were worried the lights might go out. I, too, wanted to add one line to the eternal conversation, and if I was lucky to have one more dance. Schriever.

*Four swim suits.*

My mission on earth is to help people. There's so much that divides us as human beings, so much unnecessary suffering that's caused by our fear, our hatred. So many people are just barely

hanging on, struggling every day with their time on this planet, dangerously close to giving up. I have the chance to reach out and place the mantra in their souls: “It’s not you who’s crazy, it’s the world. Hold on. Keep hope.” I believed I could do that with my writing, the chance to change the world, even just a little bit. That was a great responsibility but one that I would gladly accept, even if it meant living a life of poverty and hardship for myself. Bring it.

*A MacBook computer and a set of oversized headphones.*

But where should I begin? That was a daunting undertaking. Who the hell was I? I didn’t even trust my own voice. And to ascend the peak of writing a book? Well...it was too big to dream. It was easier just to forget, and do what society told me should make me happy...

*A \$10 white, plastic watch.*

So instead I dedicated all of my days to grinding on that hamster wheel of work and paying bills. Little by little my life became consumed with the struggle of this frenetic pace until one day it became who I was. Piece by piece, I’d sold my happiness. That scared the hell out of me. The fishbowl of my life grew smaller and smaller until I found myself swimming in circles but going nowhere. Every day I stressed more and smiled less.

*A set of hair clippers so I wouldn’t have to pay the village barber every week.*

One day I looked at myself and realized I had no hope for my future, I’d given up. I was turning to stone, and soon all that would be left of me was a cold statue.

*Eight workout tank tops and sleeveless t-shirts.*

There had to be something more. A bigger purpose to life. I refused to die like this. I refused NOT TO LIVE like this.

*Two pushup bars, my boxing gloves, and a jump rope.*

So I gave up everything that was comfortable and ‘normal’ and moved down to Costa Rica to give my dream of being a writer one last chance. Undistracted, completely free, one final hurrah to save my own life.

*A toilet bag with travel-sized shampoo, soap, toothpaste, and deodorant to get me through my first week. A pack of fifty condoms, which I thought would only last me a few weeks (though I still have almost all of them to this day).*

It felt so good to take apart my life and then put it back together again exactly how I wanted it to look, to be the conscious architect of my own existence. It was like finding the loose end of a thread one day and tugging it a little bit, just out of curiosity, and right before my eyes the fabric of my reality unraveled like an old sweater. It was intoxicating, so I pulled more...

*A bunch of black Nike ankle socks, ten wife beaters, grey and black, ten pairs of boxer briefs.*

I felt space and time opening up like I hadn’t experienced in a decade. My choking anxiety eased a little, and I could actually sit there and have a conversation with a friend or loved one and be 100% present. I was starting to smile again.

*One floppy beach hat, one Phillies baseball hat, and, of course, a well-worn book, Walden by Henry David Thoreau.*

That was everything in my new life, the only artifacts of my past existence.

I threw the empty bags under my bed and went over to the window. It looked like the rain had finally stopped.

*Here's a bonus chapter, because I had to leave ya laughing!*



## Chapter 5

# The Gift That Keeps on Giving

*“SOOOO, are you forgetting something, N?”* Tania asked. We were sitting in our apartment, waiting for the rain to clear.

“Huh? What?”

*“What about my presents?”* she asked. Oh, that. I ran upstairs, grabbed them, and came back down. There were two dildos, pink and purple, and three bottles of edible lube. Disco perked her head up.

“I swear, Disco, that’s what she asked for.” The blind dog tilted her head at the sound of my voice. “Don’t look at me like that!” She let out a disapproving grunt and put her head back down on the tile.

I handed everything to Tania. “Thank you, N, I looove them!” she said, hugging them like I’d given her a stuffed teddy bear. I’m sure glad she loved them because getting those little bastards into Costa Rica was no picnic.

Back in the States, just when I thought I had my luggage organized, things got weird. It’s difficult or ridiculously expensive to buy a lot of everyday items in Costa Rica, so the best way to get them is to ask visitors to carry them down from the States. Mailing things doesn’t work because even if they aren’t stolen, there is a dollar for dollar import tax. But when someone comes down on vacation they can easily throw a couple of requested items into their bags and then leave them on Costa Rican soil. When someone comes down with luggage space, word gets out.

When I’d visited Pistol in December for vacation he’d asked me bring some strange cargo: bottles of organic fertilizer, parts for his truck, and an inflatable kayak. If that doesn’t say “I’m building a homemade bomb” then I don’t know what does, but the customs officials in Costa Rica didn’t even look twice.

Now that I was coming down again, Pistol’s mom emailed me and asked if I could bring one or two things for him. Of course I said yes, I wanted to help him any way I could. She mailed me a letter she had written and a wrapped birthday present from his sister. Then a battery-powered radio showed up unannounced. I checked with Pistol’s mom and she apologized for forgetting to ask me. No problem, I said, just keep in mind that I have very limited space in my bags. Special rechargeable batteries arrived. Magazines and a hardcover book. A fuel pump for a Chevy TrailBlazer. Whoa! My 50-pound baggage weight limit was in serious jeopardy.

The bags were repacked without an inch of extra space. I had to sit on them to get the zippers closed. Then Tania emailed and asked if I could bring down something small for her. What was it, I asked? A purse? Shoes? Some special brand of cosmetics? No, it was a

vibrator, she said.

She was serious. For some bizarre reason, all forms of pornography are illegal in Costa Rica, so even sex toys are hard....err...difficult to get (though prostitution is perfectly legal—figure that one out!) She needed me to order it and then she'd pay me back once I got down there.

First off, I wasn't sure if people called them vibrators or if the correct term was dildos. I'm not sure I even wanted to know, but sheepishly I logged on to Drugstore.com and placed an order for the "Pipedreams Multi-Speed Deluxe Pearl Rabbit" while looking over my shoulder. In Pink. It cost \$29.99 and would be delivered in three to five business days. Super.

I was staying at my mom's house in Connecticut for a month before heading down south, so I watched the mail intently and avoided eye contact with the postman. Then one day the package came. I whisked it into the basement before it could be discovered, like a grade school kid hiding a bad report card.

Now I had a real sticky situation on my hands....err...I had a dilemma: how to pack it? There was no way in hell I was going to put it in my carry-on bag and risk getting exposed with a pink dildo going through airport security. Should I leave it in the box and original packaging? The box took up a lot of space, so I decided to open it up and roll the little love missile into a t-shirt and conceal it deep in the recesses of my clothing. I tore up the box in fifty pieces and buried them deep in the garbage can beneath coffee grounds and orange peels and offered to take out the trash that Sunday night.

I reported back to Tania that "the eagle had landed." She emailed back that her best girl friend heard I was bringing a dildo and desperately wanted one, too. Could I find it in my heart to bring another one down? If it was a hardcover book for Pistol I'd have to put my foot down, but there was something dashing and risqué

about being an international dildo smuggler, like a sexual secret agent. Bondage, James Bondage. I emailed Tania back and told her that would be fine because, like I always say, what's one more dildo among friends who you've never even met before?

I was becoming a connoisseur in ordering sex toys, so I logged on and ordered another Pearl Rabbit, but this time in a lovely lavender shade. My order of two dildos within a week must have triggered some Drugstore.com auto-preference because all of a sudden I was getting ads for all sorts of new freaky stuff, to go along with my own normal freaky stuff. Delete. Delete. Wait, what was that one? Oh, sorry...delete.

The purple dildo got delivered, taken out of the box, and rolled up in a pair of basketball shorts. I stuffed it into my luggage next to its partner in crime and sat on my bag in order to get the zipper closed again. Okay, Tania, I emailed, I got the second one and was all set to come down in a week. She emailed back that she *really* wanted personal lubricant. Jesus Christ—now it's lube? And does it come in any other kind but “personal?” How *impersonal* can you possibly be if you're breaking the lube out? Well, I guess having a dildo without lube is like going to the movies and not ordering popcorn. I didn't bother Googling the Costa Rican statutes on the legality of lubricants, but logged right back onto Drugstore.com. The size of the lube she wanted was ridiculous—I buy Ketchup at Costco in smaller sizes—so instead I ordered three small bottles of “Aqua Brand Warming-to-the-Touch Personal Lubricant” for \$14.99, ending the whole sordid affair once and for all.

They got delivered by a suspicious postman who winked at me, and then the package was whisked into the basement, wrapped in individual plastic bags and duct taped shut, sealed in my toilet bag in case they opened, and stuffed in my luggage. I didn't confirm with Tania for fear that she might order fuzzy handcuffs or a blow-up doll.

I was itching to get out of the States, the anticipation killing me. Months of planning my great escape, worrying what I'd see when I visited Pistol, had taken its toll. I felt like a boxer about to go into the ring, amped with pre-fight adrenaline. I couldn't relax, I couldn't sleep. It was all unknown, there was no terra firma for me to stop and rest. My last week in Connecticut I paced the house, yelled at my mom for driving too slow, and re-weighed my bags five times to make sure they were under 50 pounds.

People told me that I was brave to give it all up and move to the tropics. I sure didn't feel brave; I felt like a coward. Everything scared me, even the mundane; standing in line at a store, answering the phone, or walking into a room full of people gave me anxiety. Time slowed down. I didn't know what to do, how to act. All of those eyes on me. Sometimes I cowered from its throat-lock, but most of the time I made myself forge ahead. I resolved that this would be one of those times, for I'd put myself in a position where there was no other option.

My sister drove me into New York at four in the morning. The airport was a madhouse and Continental kept changing check-in lines, so I had to sprint back and forth lugging my bags before finally getting checked in. My bags weighed in at 52.8 and 54.1 pounds, further confirming my theory that airlines rig their scales in order to set people up for bullshit fees. But a little small talk distracted the airline worker and I didn't get charged. I sat down in my window seat, put on my headphones, and started to doze as the plane lifted off for a four-and-a-half-hour flight to Liberia Airport in Costa Rica.

Somewhere over Mexico I was jarred from my pleasant snooze by a horrific thought. I'd made it through security in New York but on international flights you had to go through customs once you landed. The last time I visited Costa Rica the customs agents went through my luggage with a fine-toothed comb, making me take every single thing out and placing it on a metal table for examination—my

risqué contraband would be found!

Since pornography was illegal in Costa Rica, I was technically breaking the law by bringing those dildos into the country. The customs agents would go through my luggage and I'd be exposed as a sexual deviant who incorporates Chevy fuel pumps and dildos the color of Paas Easter eggs into his love-making repertoire. That's some Japanese-level kink. Oh the shame, the embarrassment. I envisioned lube-sniffing K9s barking ferociously and the customs officers ripping through my bags and waving pink and purple dildos overhead while yelling for security. Everyone in the airport would see me taken away in handcuffs and my puzzled, excruciated face would be all over the evening news. I was mortified by the thought, sweating in my seat even in the cold artificial air at 30,000 feet.

I looked around for an escape. Maybe I could find a nice drug trafficker on the plane and switch contraband with him before we hit customs? I'd rather take the fall for ten kilos of coke and do twenty years in jail than have a whole airport full of people see I'm one of those double-dildo-edible-lube-fuel-pump freaks. But much to my chagrin, no one around my seat looked remotely like a drug trafficker, though that nun in first class looked a little suspect.

Even Pistol would pretend he didn't know me if I got thrown in jail right alongside of him. What are you in for? *Stabbed a man*. What are you in for? *Stole a car*. What are you in for? Smuggling two dildos and a quart of personal lube into Costa Rica. Dammmmm...you a *baaaaddddd* mo fo!

All of the tourists on the plane were excited to land, ruffling their hideous flowered shirts and passing guide books back and forth, but I beeped the flight attendant and asked if we could take a few more laps over Costa Rica to enjoy the view, delaying the landing for an hour or so. "Sir, please put your seat back up and your tray table in the upright, locked position," she replied.

We landed and walked down a metal staircase and across the tarmac to the open-air terminal. The other tourists talked about how good the breeze felt, squealing with the excitement of being in the tropics, but I didn't share their enthusiasm. I got my bags and took my place in the customs queue. The stern-faced agents were checking approximately every other bag, even looking in toilet bags and turning shoes upside down. I tried to time my approach to coordinate being the next one *not* to be checked. I urged a family from Sioux Falls to go ahead of me and then cut in front of a guy in a wheelchair, but it was still going to be a crapshoot at best.

Finally, it was my turn. My shirt stuck to my chest. My hair was soaked. The customs agent asked me to put my bags on the metal table and open them. I tried not to make eye contact with him but didn't want to fully avoid his gaze either, so I looked directly at the top button of his blue shirt like it was the most interesting thing on earth. He stared at me for what seemed like an hour. He must have known. This was it—the end, the pressure was too much. I was seconds from blurting out my confession and begging them to take me away in handcuffs just to get it over with.

He handed my passport back and smiled. “*Pura vida. Welcome to Costa Rica.*”

I uncrossed my eyes and smiled back and walked out of the airport into a taxi-stand wall of humidity, a free man ready to start my new life.

I was officially an expat.



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Enjoy and thanks for spreading the word!

**-Norm**

[hi@NormSchriever.com](mailto:hi@NormSchriever.com)

