

Whispers of Abuelo

"What do you want to see most during this tour?" I asked my new flock of eighteen adventurers, most old enough to be my parents.

"The Pheasant cuckoo," came from Al at the back of the room.

"A live volcano," yelled Gregory, wearing a jungle hat.

"The cloud forest," whispered Alice, reminding me of an ex-librarian.

As I went around the room, my phone recorded it all in preparation for the week. I've been a Costa Rican tour guide for twenty years and thought I'd seen it all. But this time, I discovered a secret that few have lived to talk about.

The group's excitement was infectious, like children on a field trip. Each dressed in comfortable shorts and bright summer shirts.

Except for Alfred.

Slumped into a chair in the back of the room, he wore jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved black Harley Davidson shirt. His deeply weathered face placed him in his seventies, yet he was remarkably trim and wiry.

When he stood to speak, he stretched to about six-foot-two. Avoiding eye contact, he said to the floor. "I'm Alfred. My wife and I made a deal; this trip for Daytona's Bike Week with my buddies." The room fell quiet.

His wife, Judy, was a petite cutie who must have been *preciosa* as a young girl. She introduced herself as a retired nurse who'd recently taken up birding. Standing, she placed her hand on Alfred's shoulder and smiled awkwardly as if to apologize.

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Early the following morning, we loaded into our bus for the two-hour ride to Tortuguero National Park. Outside our big city hotel, a scarlet sunrise revealed rows of modest homes protected by razor-wire-topped fences. The group's first question was about our crime rate.

I answered, "There will be no razor wire where we're going. Our urban areas are far and few between."

As the bus threaded up narrow mountain roads, the switchbacks afforded passengers on both sides a birds-eye view of the lush jungle canopy covered in patches of gauzy, low-hanging clouds.

Alfred folded his copy of our day's schedule into a paper airplane. Judy snatched it away with a look of disapproval.

I inched my way back to them. "So far so good?"

Judy's crystal blue eyes sparkled, and she nodded.

Alfred growled, "Like I said, this trip's for *her*."

"What would make this more fun for you?"

He sighed, "Just some peace and quiet."

"Suit yourself," I said, heading back to my seat.

"Folks, we're transitioning between our two seasons—rainy and less rainy. The park's swollen waterways will be perfect for our riverboat tour."

A short drive from the park's entrance, we departed the docks on an open-air tour boat. Cameras and phones clicked away at scenery straight from the movie "Amazon Queen." The river cut through dense jungles with mist-shrouded mountains in the distance. Our photo-savvy captain navigated to give both sides a view of intensely colored birds and troops of monkeys.

From my forward seat, I aimed my laser pointer at shy sloths camouflaged in high-hanging branches. As we passed a tiny island, I announced, "Check out those crocodiles sunning on the shoreline, ignoring the cranes and egrets brazenly sitting right next to them."

Alfred stared vacantly into the murky water, silently muttering. He looked behind the boat repeatedly, as if we were being followed. Judy elbowed him and hissed something. He elbowed her back—hard. I braced myself for a situation, but he moved to an empty seat in the next row.

Over lunch at our rustic lodge, I described my country's fight against climate change, which had stunted jungle growth. I was in mid-sentence when Alfred groaned and pulled out his room key. He grunted to Judy and stormed off toward their villa.

After the meal, Judy said with a downward gaze, "He returned from Vietnam fifty years ago, a shadow of his old self. After all these years, his therapist thought he'd be ready for a leisurely jungle setting. Called it Exposure Therapy. But it's backfiring. He's gotten worse since we landed."

I appreciated the gesture and had a new perspective on Alfred. No troublemaker, only deeply troubled. "I'm sorry to hear that. I've heard lots of those veterans are plagued with dark memories."

She bit her lip. "He never said exactly what happened but brought home a ton of guilt. That's when I changed my specialty to psychiatric nursing."

I stared at her scar and ran my finger along my jaw. "Alfred do that?"

She quickly explained, "We had a bad motorcycle accident. I got off lucky. He was hospitalized for three months, convinced it was punishment for Nam."

"Well, at least he has his biker friends for support."

She shook her head. "There's no support. His craziness drove most of his friends away, and the rest have died. Hasn't been to a Bike Week in years."

I could barely push the words out. "We'll talk more later. Go see how he's doing, and let me know if I can help."

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A few of the more active couples hit the bar before taking a swim. Many, exhausted from their hikes, napped before dinner. Judy had joined a trio of ladies frantically snapping photos through telescopic lenses, calling to each other when another rare bird species was spotted.

I wandered behind her room, where Alfred smoked on the back deck, staring at the clouds and pounding his bloody fist into a wooden pillar. I offered to take him to the lobby for some first aid, and he glared at me, cursing under his breath. He *was* getting worse.

I said, "There's no smoking anywhere on the hotel property." He ground the butt out on the deck and went inside.

That night, at my *highlights review*, Judy sat alone in the back of the open-air auditorium. Afterward, I walked her to her door. Imagining a showdown with Alfred, I thought of how I'd safely restrain him. Nothing came to mind.

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The following morning, at six, after a traditional breakfast of spicy beans and rice called Gallo Pinto, eggs, and fresh fruit, we left for a live volcano towering above the Arenal National Park, not far from my birthplace. I was pleased to see Alfred take a seat next to Judy.

When we arrived, the volcano peak was obscured by clouds. At the first observation platform, the sky cleared to reveal steam shooting from the cone into the equatorial sun's glare. Alfred lagged to the end of the line. Again, he kept glancing behind him with a worried expression.

We hiked through the Mistico Arenal Hanging Bridges, a two-mile jungle pathway crossing twenty-two bridges.

"Those hidden tigers you hear roaring are actually howler monkeys. You can see them playing in the trees around our hotel at night." The guests looked relieved.

Five buzzards circling above reminded me how old our adventurers were—a joke I wouldn't share. I smiled as everyone charged ahead with the energy of hikers half their age.

After crossing about a dozen bridges, our group's least fit started lagging. I had an idea.

"Folks were taking a detour down a gentle path to Abuelo. That's Spanish for grandfather. He's a 600-year-old almendro tree, towering almost 180 feet high and forty-six feet in circumference.

Such trees were considered the guardians of the rainforests by The Maleku, the area's indigenous tribe. Abuelo is, by far, the largest of the giants."

Fog dropped over Abuelo's upper branches, and an evil sulfur odor wafted. The group huddled closer together as I told the story. "There've been many legends regarding the magical powers of this tree. The Maleku believed it had a mystic connection to every lifeform on earth. Because of its wisdom, it was often used as a confession booth. It had the power to absolve the worst of sins, sometimes administering dreadful punishments. Abuelo was among the list of suspects whenever anyone went missing."

In my peripheral vision, Alfred perked to attention.

The tree's base had a six-foot wide cavity where couples posed for photos. I identified symbiotic plants and moss that covered its walls and listed some of the insects, frogs, snakes, and even mammals that lived inside. The group gasped when I mentioned sightings of panthers exiting that gap. I added, "But the most bizarre inhabitants of this tree are grotesque species of insects and lizards that thrive on toxic gases from the hot springs in the jungle. Scientists from around the world come to research these."

Whispers spread of a strange energy inside the tree's hollow. Some who stood there felt like they were not alone. I prepared to lead the group back to the hanging bridges tour and counted heads. Alfred remained at the tree, shifting his weight rhythmically from side to side, keeping cadence with a silent beat. I could have sworn the ground vibrated with his sway.

I went back and tapped him on the shoulder. I don't know how he swiveled his neck so fast without getting a whiplash, but he faced me in an instant, eyes rolling back to the whites. I'd never been afraid in this rainforest until then.

I yelled, "Alfred! Buddy, wake up," to no avail.

Judy ran to our side, her face pale, eyes wide.

I asked, "Is he epileptic?"

"No, but last night, he woke me at three a.m. screaming something that sounded like Spanish. He doesn't speak it."

"Do you remember what he said?"

"No. I was too groggy."

She squeezed his shoulder and called his name. Alfred stopped swaying and blinked his eyes a few times. We led him back to the group but watched him closely.

On the path again, everyone put on rain gear under a drenching downpour. Several times along the way, Alfred stopped on a bridge and swayed, mumbling through gritted teeth. The wet decking was slippery.

I edged up to him. "Listen, man, you've got to be careful on these bridges. You're freaking everyone out." He shot me a crooked smile and murmured a lame "OK," staring into the ravine below. "One more complaint, and you're out of here." That got me a wink, but he did stop.

As I strode over a varnished almendro-wood walkway to dinner that night, I passed Alfred, who sat cross-legged on the boardwalk, eyes closed, rubbing the smooth planks. A bit closer to the outdoor restaurant, Judy squeezed past me with two plates of food, heading for her room.

Later, I knocked on her door. Judy whispered, "He's finally sleeping." She motioned me toward a bench by the walking path, eyebrows knit with worry. Her voice cracked as she said, "He wouldn't eat or talk to me. Just laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, muttering under his breath."

I wondered if he had been bitten by one of the mutant Abuelo insects. "If he doesn't improve by morning, I'll drive you to the nearest clinic. They'll get him to a hospital if needed. Call me anytime if you need help."

My phone rang in the middle of the night. I answered to Judy's shaky voice. "Alfred's missing. He snuck out, leaving the door wide open."

Before I began searching the hotel grounds, I asked if she had any idea where he had gone.

With a deep sigh, she said, "A few months ago, we drove the Harley through the pine barrens of New Jersey. I hated it when he smoked on that thing. He flicked the butt to the side of the road, and later that day, we heard of a serious forest fire in that same area. Hundreds of acres were scorched, and who knows what the wildlife toll was. I couldn't bring myself to turn him in, but this trip was like his self-inflicted punishment. Maybe these forests are working on his conscience, too."

My futile search of the hotel's paths ended at the registration area, where a police car was parked outside. In the lobby, a patrolman named Ortezt interviewed the animated manager, who said the hotel van was missing. I told them Alfred was missing, too.

"Any thoughts on where he might be?" Ortezt asked.

"I've checked the property. He's only been to one other place since we arrived in Arenal—the hanging bridges. I showed the group Abuelo, and it had a real strange effect on him." Not wanting to sound crazy, I skipped that scene's details.

I jumped in the patrol car, and we headed for the bridges. On the way, I called to check in with Judy. No Alfred yet.

I was accustomed to those swaying bridges in the daylight, but crossing them in the dark was another story. Ortezt reacted even worse. Sweeping the area with our flashlights heightened my motion sickness. Our beams moving along the jungle walls scattered troupes of dancing shadows. A chorus of nocturnal predators filled the air. We were impinging on their territory and deserved what might befall us.

Two bright yellow venomous vipers lashed out of the brush. One struck my boot. Each rustle of the leaves raised my goosebumps.

As we left the gravel path, Ortezt swung his flashlight ahead. "There's boot prints." Ahead, a tiny squirrel nibbled at the ground. When my light beam landed on the spot, the critter ran. My stomach tightened when the cop said, "Looks like human vomit."

Finally, our lights found Abuelo. We approached from the far side, which hid its cave-like interior. A damp breeze smelling like musk and honey blew by. After a few more steps, lightning flashed above the forest, and a gust shook the trees. I crunched fallen palm fronds with my boot to alert any tenants of our presence. A giant bat flew by my head.

The ground vibrated as it did earlier. Ortezt and I stared at each other, waiting to see who would round the tree first.

He made the first move and walked just a few feet ahead. The loss of his light beam teased out more shadows. Then came the gasp.

I leaped ahead and found Ortezt on his knees, fighting to breathe. He waved me ahead. I shone my beam into the tree's cavity, revealing Alfred, who was balled into a fetal position, eyes closed.

I moved in to check his breathing, calling, "Alfred. Can you hear me?" I called, moving in to check if he was breathing. The last thing I needed was a surprise attack. Vertigo set in, and I froze.

A long, thin vine hung from one of his nostrils. A tiny pink frog's head poked from his empty eye socket, its tongue flicking in and out.

Nausea replaced my dizziness as I imagined hearing a moan.

Tangles of gray, fibrous roots wrapped around his chest, and glistening silk webs, supporting long-legged blue spiders, stretched across his face. Alfred appeared to be tethered to an interior wall of the cavity.

I forced myself to face Ortezt, who shakily tried to stand. I lost my dinner on his pant leg.

After gathering ourselves, we shined our lights on Alfred. A huge black beetle forced its way past his scab-covered lips. A gurgle escaped from deep within him before a slimy, green snake followed, pink entrails hanging from its mouth.

I lit the area, and Cortez reached in to feel a pulse. Alfred's other eyelid flashed open. I couldn't tell who screamed, but in a spray of blood, Cortez flew back, knocking me to the ground.

Shaking, I checked Ortezt for bleeding. "You're OK. The blood must have been Alfred's."

We waited about ten minutes in silence. Cortez slowly approached the tree, leading with a long branch. He poked the body four times before re-checking for a pulse. Alfred's face dropped onto

his chest, revealing a knot of worms feeding on his exposed brain. Cortez managed a weak, "He's gone," and called into his station.

As we reversed our path back to the car, I relived Alfred's last burst of life. There was no way I'd sleep tonight. My shock turned to sorrow. What could I possibly tell Judy?

I called her on the drive back to the hotel. She picked up after the first ring. "Was he there?"

I inhaled deeply. "He'd found his way back to that Abuelo tree. Must have been attacked by something poisonous, probably a snake. By the time we arrived, other animals had got to his body."

A long, painful scream tore through the phone. "I want to see him."

My words came painfully. "He's unrecognizable. We'll recover his remains tomorrow and arrange for your trip home. I'm so sorry this happened."

In the morning, Ortez called. He whispered, "I'm with a team at Abuelo now. There's nothing left but torn clothes and a pile of bones."

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Our horrified group did their best to console Judy as the driver loaded her luggage and a small metal box into a van. I reported the incident to the home office and reassured my guests that nothing like this had ever happened in our company's history.

I drove Judy to the airport. It was a suitably dreary day. The torrential rain reminded me of the day my dad died. I glanced at Judy but saw my distraught mother.

After a half-hour of silence, Judy looked up into the milky sky and said, "Someday, I'd like to come back and see what we missed. I'd like to visit Abuelo in Alfred's memory."

I handed her my card and said, "Let me know whenever you're ready. I'll give you a private tour—on the house. I'm sure he'll be there in spirit."

As we pulled up to the drop-off curb, she blurted, "I remember what Alfred yelled that night...sounded like par-don-i-may."

I answered. "Perdónname. Means *forgive me*."