

## ARENAL

*No!* Rebuffing the outfit Marina had chosen for her, Lola held out a pair of shorts and a tee-shirt with a grinning frog. This, the three-year-old insisted as a pout emerged, signal of a pending tantrum where Lola would fall to the floor, screaming. Then Carlota would rush in, asking what Marina was doing to that *bebe*. Marina disliked living in her mama's *casa* with her accusing glances, regular reminders of the dishonor her only daughter had brought into the family.

*Settle down*, she said and began to help Lola put on the shorts. Lately, and to Marina's dismay, Lola had begun showing stubbornness and impulsiveness, reminding Marina of Lola's father, Hector, a father Lola hadn't seen. After learning he had impregnated Marina, he made a cowardly exit from La Fortuna. Marina heard stories that Hector was engaged in drug dealing, that he was working on a cruise ship, that he was in prison. Now she heard her mama humming in the kitchen as she prepared breakfast even though Marina wouldn't have time to sit and eat. Soon Marina would board a bus for the ten-mile ride to the hanging bridges and her new job as a tour guide. Her friend Angela, before giving her notice and quitting her tour guide job, had enthusiastically recommended Marina as her replacement. How lucky she was to get this job!

Inside the adobe hut, through the window streamed with bird droppings Marina could see Arenal volcano looming. To Marina, 20, this giant cone of ash and smoke that reached over five thousand feet high in the sky was a hovering reminder of the fragility of life. After being quiet for 400 years, its first eruption in 1968 shocked the world. It had taken the lives of her maternal great uncle, Alberto and other family members living in the nearby village of Tabacon. Huge volcanic rocks exploding from Arenal had killed them all. Over a hundred people were killed in the eruption that destroyed two villages. As a child Marina fantasized that a mysterious monster lived inside the volcano. The monster could at any time explode a spew of rocks and ash, followed by fiery flowing lava. On clear days she could see smoke floating up from the inside of Arenal and it fed her childhood fear. Being shy and an only child, Marina was sometimes so lonely that she made up an imaginary friend she called *Chelo*, a name that meant consolation.

When she turned thirteen tragedy struck. Marina's father, Jose suddenly died. Until the massive heart attack he had worked as a foreman at a banana plantation. Jose was a good family man, and always made the payments on the life insurance policy that the plantation owner subsidized. Marina missed the sound of Jose's laughter, the way he played his guitar and sang, the way he greeted her with *Pura vita! Pura vita!* and hugged her with his muscular arms. His presence filled the house and made her feel safe and her mama happy. After Jose's unexpected death, her mama was sad for a long time. At night Carlota took pills to fall asleep. To fill the emptiness she ate too much and got fat. Then one day, to cheer Carlota and Marina, a friend gave them a birdcage with a Noble mini-macaw inside. She said, *Teach it how to talk; it will be good company for you.* They named the bird *Feliz*, for happy is what they wanted to be. Marina taught the bird to say *Pura vita! Pura vita!* And then one day

Carlota emerged from her cocoon of depression and became more her old, cheerful self, and gradually the fat disappeared.

Unaware Lorena was nurturing her daughter's fears; she sometimes talked about the cruelty of life, about the volcano and the possibility of another deadly eruption, and how one day you could be happy and alive, and the next dead and gone. And Marina would say, *Shut up, Mama*. And Lorena would say *I miss Jose, I hope you can find as good a man to marry*. And Marina hoped she had, when years later she met Hector. Like in a romance novel he swept her off her feet. Hector introduced her to marijuana, beer and *guaro*. He was not handsome, had a tattoo on the back of his neck, made her laugh and called her *Kochanie*, making Marina feel she *was* lovely. Marina just *knew* she could change Hector after he married her, like he promised he would. So one drunken night, high on weed and cheap beer, she gave to him her virginity. The next day, the event that would change her life seemed like dream. Did it really happen?

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Still when Lorena fell into an occasional spell of depression, she would invoke all the tragic events of her life, especially the deadly eruption of Arenal in 1968 and pass on those fears like osmosis to her daughter. When once Marina mentioned to her friend, Angela the anxiety of living so close to a volcano, she was told by Angela, that to be afraid of Arenal was dim-witted. For now did not seismologists from the Smithsonian Institute keep vigil, monitoring the volcano? Any signs of imminent eruption detected and warnings would be issued. *Think of Arenal as a friend* Angele said, *and be thankful we have major tourist attractions like Arenal and the hanging bridges that bring many colones to the Costa Rican economy. And I have good news for you, I'm getting married and moving away! I recommended you as my replacement, there's a good chance you can have my job as a tourist guide at the hanging bridges!*

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Angela had given Marina helpful tour guide hints, a paperback book on wildlife and flora in the rainforest and her own rubber boots. *Take these, said, I don't need'em anymore.*

*Why would I want your old, ugly boots?*

*To protect you from poisonous snake bites, silly.*

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On her first day as a tour guide Marina felt happy and hopeful as she rode the bus. She had studied the literature Angela had given her and before her cracked mirror practiced speaking aloud about the more common wild life, flowers and butterflies they might see. She had tagged along observing Manuel, another tour guide, as he led a group of hikers on the trail, crossing all six hanging bridges. Perhaps someday she would meet a nice American man in one of groups. She would be the friendliest, best guide. She would charm this rich man. Then he would change his travel plans, hang around in the area in the hopes they could get to know each other better, and then they would fall in love! This imaginary man wouldn't even have to be handsome, just not ugly, and he would be kind and loving. They would fly away to America! She would shop at Wal-Mart and never wash a dish again, for surely she would have a dishwashing machine. The fantasy ended abruptly for the bus had arrived at its destination. *Watch your step.* The bus driver opened the door and Marina got off. Marina, dressed in shorts, white blouse, rubber boots with a walkie-talkie hooked to her belt, arrived to the two groups of tourists assigned to her. She greeted them with, *Hola, I'm Marina and I will be tour guide today.* The tourists mostly over

fifty, over weight and over eager, cheerily returned her greeting. Most had come prepared for bugs and rain with repellent and hooded jackets. So that all the tourists would end their hike around the same time and be ready to board the bus, Group one consisting of those planning to complete the longest hike over all six bridges began first. Led by a buff, young man named Fernando, they started up the trail into the rain forest. After a few minutes, Marina's hikers, Group two (there were only three) and Group three (eight) followed. As they walked Marina told them about the history of the hanging bridges and said how happy she was that they had come to Costa Rica. She pointed out the tiny parade of cutter ants carrying bits of lime-green leaves across the trail, lizards, howler monkeys, orchids and rare butterflies. After crossing two bridges, a few at a time monitored by Marina, she assembled the group and told them it was time for the first group, three seniors, to head back on an adjoining trail. *Do not worry* Marina said, *you have gotten a good sample of the hanging bridges tour. This is Manuel, your guide back down the trail.* The young, man neatly dressed in long khakies with a red Nike tee-shirt smiled broadly and greeted Marina with a wink and *Guapa como estas!* Not wanting to encourage him, she smiled slightly and ignored his flirtatious comment. *We don't need a guide,* one of the seniors said. *It's just for your safety,* Marina responded, thinking *This tour guide job is a piece of cake!*

Suddenly a heavy down pour came, drenching and cooling the hikers. They put on their jackets, raised the hoods then kept walking, for there was no escaping the downpour.

Quickly, it stopped and the sunlight filtered through the canopy. First day on the job and out of shape, Marina felt tired. She sorely regretted just sitting around watching TV and eating her Mama's tamales and pork burritos all day long. Marina led them up the trail, pointing out beautiful orchids, and telling them the orchid was her country's national flower. They saw a Coppery Headed Emerald bird and rare butterflies.

The return downward trip was easier and they laughed and chatted happily, their thoughts already on the next adventure on their country wide tour of Costa Rica, the Baldi Hot Springs. Marina thought of what she would do with the first paycheck; maybe buy a toy for Lola, and for herself, a lipstick in a fashionable new hue and save the rest. Of course, she mustn't forget Carlota- A sudden loud thud followed by the sound of moving gravel and a frightened scream interrupted Marina's dreamy thoughts. She whirled around. It was the nightmare she had hoped would never happen on her watch. The man in the purple shorts had fallen and kept sliding. His wife kept screaming. Marina put the walkie talkie to her mouth and called for help. With heart hammering she pushed through the group. Had she forgotten to warn the tourists about the drop-off on each side of the trail like she had been told to do? Had she cautioned them to hang on to the rope railing?

After having accompanying the first group back, Manuel relaxed and sipped a cool drink, but upon hearing Marina's frantic call for help, immediately grabbed a first aid kit and ran at top speed all the way up the trail where everyone was gathered around a man on the ground. He squatted down next to the scraped and bloody face and knobby knees of the downed senior who was protesting with, *What's the fuss, I'm okay, just give me my cane and let me get up!* Manuel's steady and soothing voice calmed the elderly man. *Let me take a look at you, what's your name?*

*George, what's yours?*

*Manuel.*

Before Manuel could stop him, red faced, angry and embarrassed George (who had been handed his cane by Agnes, his wife) scrambled to his feet, *I'm alright! My foot slipped on that damn gravel! Just slap on a couple of oversized Band-Aids and I'll be on my way!*

With deep concern on her face, Marina looked George over. *Do you hurt anywhere?*

His voice was cantankerous, *Wouldn't you be if you had just slid fifteen feet down gravel on this durn trail?* And then he saw her pained and horrified face and began laughing. *It's okay, Sweetie.*

*How do you feel, George?* Manuel asked. He was trying to take his pulse.

*Just Hunky Dory, young fellow!* There appeared a twinkle in his eyes.

*George, if you want to, you may lean on me. And if you like I will get another male employee and a wheel chair and we'll roll you down. We'll even carry you if need be.*

*That won't be necessary,* Agnes said. *I can tell he's not really hurt.*

*How the heck would you know, Woman?* George snapped at his wife of forty-six years.

*Well I never.* Agnes whirled around and headed back down the trail, alone.

Manuel stepped closer to George. *Your wife will be alright. Now just lean on me if you need to.* By this time all of the other hikers had gone on ahead. The drama was over, no one was dead, or badly hurt.

Manuel had taken a chair and George into the *Hombre* bathroom and cleaned him up. Several minutes later Agnes followed. Manuel applied antibiotics and two big gauze bandages and several Band Aids. *You'll be fine,* he said.

*I know I will, but how the heck can I go into the hot springs at Baldi our next stop?*

*Oh shut up George,* Agnes said, not caring that she was in the men's room, *we'll sit at the bar*

*and drink Margaritas. I don't want to go in that hot water anyway.*

Marina and Manuel watched the bus drive away. *Do you think I'll get fired?*

*No, it wasn't your fault. Those old, Americanos should watch their steps.*

*I think I forgot to tell them about the rope hand railing.*

*No you didn't, Manuel said. I distinctly heard you tell them about the railing and the drop offs.*

*How about we get some lunch in the restaurant, my treat?*

*I have an energy bar—*

*Save it for later.*

He would lie for her, Marina thought as they entered the restaurant and sat down.

Manuel ordered two burrito plates and soft drinks. There was a CD player on a shelf behind the

Bar and Bruno Mars was singing *I'd take a grenade for you,*

*fall on a blade for you....*

She took a deeper look at Manuel. His physique reminded her of Jose. And, he had beautiful eyes. There were no off putting scary tattoos visible. She could tell from the way Manuel had taken care of George that he was kind. If he asked Marina for a date, she knew she would say yes. But that didn't necessarily mean she would marry him.

They stepped from the restaurant and out into the heat. They each had tours to lead at 2 o'clock.

Marina could see Arenal in the distance. She knew there was no mysterious monster

inside the volcano, but if there were, it was laughing at her.

End