Vagabond Dreams
VAGABOND DREAMS

Road Wisdom from Central America

Ryan Murdock
I am the arrow of Time’s remembering.
Recorder of half-forgotten dreamsmoke.
Condemned to a solitary life of recollection.
Tormented rememberer.
Simultaneous rememberer.
Recording the memories even as they are lived.
Living the memories even as they are recorded.

—R.M.
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Adventures can begin like this. A blunder, the merest chance, reveals a previously unsuspected world. You’re drawn into that world, and you come into contact with forces you don’t understand. You must find that understanding if you’re to come out the other side. And you never come out unscathed.
Spanish voices babbled around me, ebbing and swelling in a sea of meaningless noise. I stood there sweating in the cloying heat until the machine woke with a groan and began to convulse. Bags thudded down a metal shoot polished by decades of wear. It was the only aspect of the machine that looked clean. The rest was crusted with grease and dirt. My condition wasn’t much better. My tongue was thick with dehydration and my pulse hammered urgently in my head.

After ten anxious minutes of worrying about how I’d make it with only the clothes on my back, my bag finally arrived, shiny and green amid cardboard boxes tied with fraying twine. It looked as lonely and out of place as I must have. I yanked it from the lurching conveyor and dropped it at my feet. It was overloaded with sun cream, duplicate photocopies of passports and traveler’s cheques, a wind-up
laundry line, a rubber sink stopper, a water filtration kit with spare filter, and more. I would eventually learn it wasn’t the only baggage I was dragging around.

I turned to get my bearings and found a girl pressed close behind me, waiting. She stood on tiptoe and covered my lips with hers. Her kiss was moist and warm, and she lingered there with gentle affection, long enough for me to notice how her hair smelled like ripe peaches, and how her breath was haunted by mint. It was so different from the squalor all around us, so fresh and so clean. I wanted to breathe it deep into my lungs over and over, to hold on to that fleeting moment of human contact that can join two lonely people in a land of faceless strangers.

She broke away slowly, with reluctance.

“Good luck,” she said. “Safe journey. It won’t be what you’re expecting.”

“Yeah, thanks. You too.” I smiled to hide my confusion. She was there to catch a sailboat across the Pacific to Australia, her first ride as crew, a grand adventure. I’d spoken to her hours before in the transit lounge in Newark, and I spent the long flight to Panama wishing she were seated next to me. I watched her disappear into the terminal distance, faded blue jeans clinging to perfect curves, and all I could do was stare at her wake.

Must have been the heat, I thought.

In hindsight, she might have been an avatar: a spirit guide with sex appeal. I took it as an omen of good things to come. But what the fuck did that mean, It won’t be what you’re expecting? How could she know?

Outside the terminal, I sucked midnight air into my lungs as if through gauze. My shirt clung to the small of my back like wet crepe. I wouldn’t have been surprised to see fish swim past on their way to the ocean—it felt as though our worlds had switched places and I was wading through a hazy view of undersea.

A swarm of taxi drivers and anxious relatives staked out the exit. They craned their necks and strained against wooden barricades, watched by bored soldiers who pulled at chafing rifle belts. I stood out badly in new clothes and pale winter skin, and in my obvious bewilderment. I saw glances startle on me for a moment, then look past. I put on a mask that I really didn’t feel and plunged into the jostling crowd, knowing and slightly menacing, as though I’d done it all a thousand times before. Just out of sight, my heart pounded in my ears.

My stiff shoulders let go in relief when I saw a driver holding a cardboard sign with my name printed in black marker. I’d arranged a ride ahead of time, just as the guidebook recommended. For a little while longer it would be out of my hands.

At the time I went there, Central America was a place of shady geography for most North Americans: a land of violent revolutions, of Sandinistas and Contras, of military intervention and a kidnapped dictator. Drama for the eleven o’clock news. Beyond that, what? One of the many vague regions where coffee comes from?

When the wars ended, the isthmus quietly sank back into the irrelevance of prior centuries. Stability restored package tourists to Costa Rica and Belize, but unsightly poverty brushed the rest to the fringes of the map. Despite my complete lack of experience, I was setting out to get lost. Those fringes suited me perfectly.

I’d been in a 7 year relationship that ended in heartbreak, betrayal and sadness. It was the kind you somehow just drift into, carried along by inertia and the growing assumptions of others. I wasn’t unhappy but I wasn’t living the dream either. I knew I didn’t want the life that it led to, but I wasn’t strong enough to walk away.

When it finally fell apart I didn’t know what to do. My ideas of the future were also at loose ends. For so many
believe that good intentions and a phrasebook would carry me through.

“Panamá ... very hot,” I said, waving a heat-swollen hand in front of my face. It was my first contact with this new world, and after the long silence of the plane I wanted to engage it.

“Hee hee hee,” said Jose, my driver.

“Canada ... cold. Very cold.” I pulled an imaginary parka around my shoulders and shivered as though caught in the depths of an Arctic winter. I tried not to shout; one often does, in the belief that volume leads to comprehension. But if that were true we’d all understand James Brown. Despite my clever acting Jose just shrugged and went back to staring at the road. He probably thought I had malaria.

I’d set out with such naivety that I’m surprised I wasn’t immediately robbed or killed. I was under the assumption that everyone would be glad to know I was from Canada, and that they would greet me enthusiastically with words about what a wonderful country it is. The doors of hospitality would be thrown open, and we’d all become such friends. That’s what we’re socialized to believe up there in our narrow northern towns, after all. That and the notion that a Canadian flag stitched to your pack is some sort of passport to global goodwill. The truth is we’re largely irrelevant at best, and at worst we’re seen as lapdogs of American foreign policy.

Later, alone in the city, I shifted my view. Paranoia set in, and I thought everyone would see me as easy prey: that they’d want to rob me or pick my pockets. In truth it was both, and neither.

As we turned onto the highway, I thought about those people waiting outside the airport terminal. For the first time in my life I was uncomfortably aware of being a rich
Twenty minutes later, we passed from barrio to city centre. In the empty nighttime streets, graffitied metal shutters were drawn down over shop entrances, and beggars slept in doorways beneath filthy piles of rags. Our headlights bounced and cast a glow into corners better left unlit. Along the Avenida Balboa, the Pacific Ocean lapped at miles of muddy tidal flats, and the smell of brine and rotting seaweed filled the air. We slowed and turned into a bustling commercial district, where darkness couldn’t shut the nightlife down.

The driver let me out at a hotel off the busy market section of the Avenida Central. I fumbled in the darkness and inserted a plastic key into the wall socket. The air conditioner snapped on with a hum, browning out some of the noise outside.

“Doesn’t look so bad,” I said, mumbling to myself as I poked about the room.

I noticed a faint acrid smell of insecticide, so I pulled back the sheets to check for bedbugs. I had no idea what they might look like; I’d only read about them. The mattress had a heavy, sinking softness, like densely-packed or sodden feathers rather than springs. I inspected the shower and toilet and sniffed the fresh towels. They smelled of bleach, and they were thin and worn. I didn’t recognize these things as luxuries that I would soon learn to do without. To me the room seemed minimal. Barely acceptable.

But this was what I’d chosen. I inhaled a deep breath and released it long and slow. “Well, I guess I’m finally free.” I mumbled it aloud to make it seem real. I was alone in an unfamiliar place. No one knew where I was. But I could do whatever I wanted. Isn’t that what it means to be free?

A loud bang in the street made me jump. Even over the air conditioner, I heard shouting voices, racing engines and squealing tires. I lifted the corner of the curtain and

westerner on vacation, of being there by choice. I mumbled and smiled, and tried not to look shocked by the poverty I saw. Even as we drove into the city I was struggling with the realization that, up to that moment, I’d lived my life in a shell. I carried much within me that must be let go.

The narrow highway smelled of steaming vegetation, and a diesel exhaust I would come to associate with poor countries. Our dim headlights parted the darkness erratically, revealing sudden glimpses of a banana tree or a cinderblock house. They disappeared into the night almost before I could register them. My voice was drowned out by the rattle-bang of squeaky shocks on potholed roads, and so I gave up trying to talk and just stared out the window.

Closer to the city, we passed gothic factories that steamed gloom into the floodlights, an insectile radio station bristling with antennae, and acres of automobile lots hemmed in by the chain link fence of the economic free zone. Identical, freshly painted panel trucks filled a parking lot that extended as far as I could see. They were parked so close together that to get into one you’d have to crawl through the windows of all the others, spelunking your way through a shining tunnel of new car smell. For those outside the fence it must have been a first-world version of the punishment of Tantalus: the object of your desire forever in front of you but forever just beyond your reach.

On the fringes of the zone, dilapidated barrios slumped in ragged silence. Jose swerved the van around solitary figures walking on the roadside in the dark. He pointed through the window to the surrounding neighbourhood. “Here, no go. Very dangerous. Even in daytime — pow!”

I nodded and looked back out the window. The night took on a sinister hue, where before it had only been different. I began to feel hunted. My inability to blend in only made it worse.
peeked out at a cinderblock alley wall. The frosted glass radiated heat, and humid jungle air slipped into my room through cracks in the warped frame. I began to feel like I was holed up in unsafe territory, locked away in my tiny white-walled hotel womb.

I let go of the dusty curtain and sat on the bed with my back against the flimsy headboard. The activity—tickets and passports and transfers—was over, and I had to look up. The stink and the noise were a long way away from the naïve pre-trip visions that filled my head. Alone in my room, my bravado crumbled. I felt the sudden shock of a deep end plunge, and I didn’t know if I could swim.

Plans are unreality. Maps and guidebooks are straight lines on clean pages. Reading is so abstract. I was always more comfortable with that. Distant danger had whiffed romance from a thousand miles away. I imagined a dark tan, tropical drinks in rundown bars, a wandering life spent poking around in ruins. It sounded so good in theory. Up close, it wasn’t like that at all. I hadn’t planned on the smells, the noise, and the discomfort. Or the loneliness that crushes your will. Perhaps I was there to get out of my head?

*It wasn’t supposed to be like this! I want to go home.*

I punched the pillow in frustration, but it only released my hold. Time skip-framed and accelerated my downward spiral. It swept me along in a wave of growing anxiety, of rejection that quickly built into despair.

*I’ll fly home tomorrow, cash in my ticket, or after a week just so it looks like I tried. I’ll take a bus right to Belize nonstop. It’ll all be over soon.*

Gripped by panic, I flipped through the guidebook and grasped for a way out of what was beginning to feel intolerable. As my thoughts grew increasingly desperate, I flashed back to the build-up, to all my big talk. If I bailed out so soon, how would I ever live it down? Even in my desperation it was obvious I’d trapped myself, and following through was the only way out.

I already fancied myself “a traveler,” though I’d only ever been around the United States and to a couple Caribbean resorts. Too many careless remarks about taking off to crazy places had finally come back to bite me on the ass. I either had to admit it was all just talk, or shut up and hop a plane. I’ve never been very good at backing down. I called up an agent and purchased an open-jaw ticket—into Panama and out of Belize, so I’d be forced to overland the 2,400km in between. It was the only way I could go through with it. Once the ticket was purchased I no longer wanted to travel, but it didn’t matter anymore. Changing my mind was no longer an option.

When I got there—alone—I realized there was nothing waiting to meet me but the long empty road. There was nothing to sustain me except an unrealistic idea conceived on a whim, an idea even I had no real faith in.

Sitting there on that heavy bed, my head pulsed with denial, rejection, and thoughts pushed away with blindly locked arms. I struggled to breathe beneath the smothering weight of the miles and the months to come. It all seemed so utterly hopeless.

Then came despair. I felt abandoned. Lost. I imagined identical days and months spent alone: killing silent time by day and the cracked plaster walls of sleepless nightstares every night. It was more than I thought I could endure.

I shut off the light and stared into chthonic darkness. I fought the sheets that constricted my legs. I swallowed three Tylenol to calm the throbbing in my head. Exhaustion finally overtook me, and I slept.

I learned to accept solitude in Central America, but that came much later, and it was different from the suffocating
I woke a little embarrassed by the tortures of the night before. My situation didn’t look as bleak bathed in the gentle light of morning. I’d prepared so well in the lead-up to the trip. I studied maps and guidebooks, made notes, bought all the right gear. I even trained against machetes, multiple attackers, and every other danger I imagined Latin America had in store for me. I had no reason to expect that things wouldn’t go according to my rigid little plan.

I rechecked my ticket and repacked my things, rolling up my clothing to cram everything into the smallest possible space. Then I strapped a money belt around my waist, stuffing it into my underwear so it wouldn’t hang out from beneath my shirt. It contained my most important possessions: passport, a stack of traveler’s cheques, and my return ticket home. When everything was squared away, I took my despair of that first night. That was black and it felt of death, the death of the self. My future was without form. Never in my life had I felt so alone. But the alternative was far worse: death in life.

My only choice was forward. In movement lay salvation.
knife from the bedside table and clipped it to the inside edge of my right front pocket. In a sense that knife was my security blanket. A reminder that, no matter how bad things got, I could protect myself from physical harm. I practiced slipping it out and flicking it open in one smooth motion. Then I practiced it again in front of the mirror, angling my body so I couldn’t see the movement of my arm, letting the knife appear only at the end of my forward reach. My movement was flawless and the knife’s appearance was startling. I clipped it back into place.

Satisfied with my preparations, I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant and ordered breakfast: a plate of eggs and a slice of crusty white toast soaked in cheap oily margarine. The bitter black coffee dried the insides of my mouth and sent a brief jolt of energy to kick start my tired brain.

I was still gripped by the constricted chest of those about to drown, but this morning I could control my breathing. I was determined to latch on to the faint stirrings of optimism the new day had brought. It was my adventure, after all. I knew that if I could just allow myself to be swept up by curiosity, I would move from self-consciousness to other-consciousness. Then it would at least be bearable.

As I mopped my plastic plate with bread, soaking up every trace of congealing yolk, I tried to remember how I’d first heard about the Darién Gap. The Gap marks the southern limit of Central America where it borders Colombia, and so it was a natural starting point for my south-to-north journey. It’s an unbreached span of jungle in the Alaska to Ushuaia Pan-American Highway, containing some of the world’s last truly unexplored territory. It’s also a place of legendary reputation among adventurers: a lawless frontier swarming with Colombian guerrillas and drug smugglers — thieves, murderers and bastards of the worst kind.

I knew that going there would give me bragging rights and instant “credibility,” because I’d be braving its reputation and bringing back stories of a place few people had ever seen. If I wanted to turn myself into a traveler, there was no point starting small.

Of course it wasn’t nearly as cool or cutthroat as that. I simply emailed the Panamanian Tourist Bureau, and they hooked me up with a small family-run outfit who could take me in for a price within my budget, if we trimmed away the luxuries. I saw it as a way to ease into my journey, to let someone else control the agenda while I adjusted to the shock and got my bearings. I’d be among strangers, but I wouldn’t be entirely on my own.

A short time after morning broke, I sat in the shabby lounge of the city’s domestic airport. I kept my nose in a book to avoid the uncomfortable stares of the others, seeking anonymity through immobility, like an animal caught in the open. They were clearly fascinated by my sudden appearance, and wondered what I could possibly be doing there — at least I thought so, ‘I’ being the lead actor in my own self-centred drama.

I thought back to the first time I stepped off the fringes of my personal map. I must have been five years old when I wandered away from my yard one summer afternoon with two other neighbourhood kids. We made our way street by street to the farthest side of my town, a place I’d never been and didn’t know how to get back from. Until then, the limit of my independent world was the single block around my house. But that world had suddenly grown larger. I never forgot the strange pleasure that fluttered in my stomach as we walked. And that it had grown stronger the farther we went.

And now here I was, on the fringes of what really is unexplored territory. It couldn’t be anything but a continuation
of my childhood, the life I was born to lead. I romanticized myself in my own mind, and I wrote the scene even as I was living it, existing in a book entirely of my own making.

“Excuse me, Señor Murdock?”

I looked up to see a Panamanian, late twenties, jeans and plain black t-shirt, standing over me. He had a kindly face, etched with the afterimage of a smile.

For a moment I couldn’t answer him. It shattered my fantasies to hear my name spoken aloud. I was snapped back to the seedy little lounge and its cheap plastic chairs, and it left me feeling dislocated.

“My name is Germán. I’ll be flying with you to Jacqué.”

I tried to clear my head of the fog. “But I’m not able to afford an interpreter,” I said, assuming that’s what he was because he spoke such good English. I was stumbling to catch up. “Just a local guide. I explained all that in my email to the Tourism people.”

I was afraid someone was trying to rook me; that they were jacking up the bill by adding on extras.

“My father is the owner of Anamar Lodge,” he replied, smiling. “I’m flying down to take photos for a brochure. I’ll be joining you on your trip.” He walked over to the door and looked outside, then stooped to pick up his small soft-sided duffle. “Come, the plane is here.”

My perceptions wobbled as the single engine 12-seater clawed us into the skies and turned in a steep bank. The city centre momentarily dipped to fill the window, and my head and stomach dipped with it. We levelled off.

“How long have you been in Panamá?” Germán shouted over the propeller drone.

“Flew in late last night,” I shouted back.

“Vacation?”

“I’m traveling through Central America for a few months. From Panamá to Belize.”

I said it with a confidence I didn’t feel. It was a small show of bravado, a testing of my outer face. It still didn’t seem real.

“Doing what?”

“Just traveling.”

He seemed confused by that.

“But why Central America?”

I realized I hadn’t ever thought about it before then. “I guess it just seemed like a good place to start.”

It really had been a random choice, a geographical feature with an obvious south-to-north route. I suppose it conformed to my tidy notions on a map. Central America was also a place no one else was interested in. I knew this had a lot to do with the vague feeling I was following, but I couldn’t say that to him.

He turned to look out the window. In a country where people are poor and hungry, striving for material success, quitting your job to go on the bum would be unthinkable. In a culture where the family is your social lifeline, to take off on your own, unmarried and childless at 28, would indicate bizarre maladjustment. I realized that, in my bid to look cool, I’d gotten off on the wrong foot.

It wasn’t as though I never tried. I did everything society expected of me. I worked for two years with a carpenter after high school, and then went off to university, where I graduated with Highest Honours—a double major in Anthropology and Political Science with a minor in History—but I didn’t really learn anything. After that, I took a series of dead-end temp jobs simply to get by. And I always felt at loose ends. Robbed somehow. The romantic visions of my childhood were still there, but they were impractical and unrealizable. I knew I didn’t want to work, but I didn’t
know what to do instead. I wasn't lazy or lacking in ambition. It was simply that I just didn't care.

“What do you do in the City?” I asked in an effort to shift the conversation.

“I work at the university. In the President’s office. My wife works for the Canal Commission.”

“You don’t look old enough to be married,” I joked.

I was shocked to discover that he was 28 too—we were the same age. He pulled out his wallet and showed me photos of his children.

“You said that airport back there used to be a base?”

“The Americans returned it to us just before the handover.”

“The Americans have so many bases in other people’s countries, but you don’t see Panamanian bases in the US. I wonder why that is?”

He smiled at my sarcasm, and I could see he was re-evaluating me, sensing a kindred spirit.

“With the return of the Canal it’s like we are independent for the first time. You know, the Americans have been here since Panamá broke from Colombia in 1903. Before Colombia, we were a colony of Spain. We’ve never been truly independent until now.” He squinted at the back of the threadbare seat in front of us. “Everyone says the Canal will fail, that it’ll fall apart without US engineers, or that some foreign power will swoop in and buy it up. But Panamanians have been running it all along, even when the Americans were here. Nothing will change. We will prove them wrong.”

We banked out to sea, and the sparkling turquoise of the Pacific ripened to a deep blue. Far out in the Gulf of Panamá, its emptiness was broken by a scattering of verdant islands fringed with shining white sand. From above they looked untouched, and I couldn’t identify the slightest sign of man. They hinted at vanishing acts, at voluntary withdrawal and traceless tropical exile. They called to me as strongly as the Sirens had called Ulysses, and I stuck my head against the glass to watch them until they melted into the horizon.

During the last twenty minutes of the flight, the land re-emerged and we flew parallel to the coast. My first glimpse of Darién was a view pulled right from the pages of the explorer’s journals that captivated me as a child. Pre-Andean jungle-choked mountains plummeted into a wild foaming sea. Inland, a hazy outline of overlapping ranges climbed higher and higher, dissolving into the silver distance. And the entire scene steamed as though it were seething.

As the small plane bucked and dropped through turbulent air, I really did feel like I was plunging into a Rider Haggard novel.

We dove in suddenly with a stomach-spinning descent, and within moments were bumping across a springy grass airstrip that had been hacked from the jungle, our propeller practically cutting a swath. I hadn’t even noticed the village from the air. When the brakes locked on and shuddered us to a rocking halt, we crab-walked down the aisle and emerged blinking into tropical sunshine. Jacqué lay just beyond the thatched roof and picnic table that functioned as the airport terminal.

There were no cars or roads. A man in a t-shirt and ragged workman’s pants pushed our bags down a dirt path with a wheelbarrow. Germán and I followed at a distance, our heads bowed in conversation. I caught peripheral glimpses of darkly tanned locals and ragged Colombian refugees sitting on the steps of concrete block houses with rusting metal roofs. Only their eyes moved to track our passage through the debilitating heat. It felt uncomfortable to be stared at,