

CANGREJAL

Nothing in my 25 years has prepared me for this: I'm hanging onto the vertical face of a bank of the Rio Candelaria. It's June, well into the rainy season, which explains the raging, boulder-laden river three meters below my perch, which in turn is three meters below the top of the bank. It's 3 a.m., moonless, and I'm two kilometers from Cangrejal.

A year before I walked the 14 kilometers from my room in San Ignacio to Cangrejal, a small pueblo that adopted St. John as its patron saint and on June 24th, gathered for its fiesta patronal. I was sitting at a table eating soup when I felt a chicken bone thrown at my back. Another bone hit me. I stood and turning, faced two men and threw my remaining soup at the chest of one of them.

I shouldn't have thrown the soup.

As the three of us were leaving the shed (to do what?) one of the men jumped me from behind. As we fell to the ground I landed on top and began punching him. His friend stood over me, drew his machete and swung at my head. As the blade came down, Daisy, a young woman from Cangrejal, pushed my assailant's arm and the long knife's blade dug into a wooden table. The fight was over. That night I slept on a newspaper on the concrete floor of the school and the next morning started walking back to San Ignacio. I still believe that Daisy saved my life.

I was clinging to the wall between the road and the river because I wanted to go to Cangrejal to say goodbye to my friends, including Daisy. Or I was clinging to the wall because I was drunk and it was pitch black and I was cautiously feeling my way along the road until there was no

road under me.

The reason I was on the road to Cangrejal is clearer: two weeks earlier I received a letter ("Greetings") welcoming me to the U.S. Army. The Tet offensive in Viet-Nam took place in February. Now, in May 1968, 37,000 men were drafted. I had just quit my job as a case-worker for the New York City Department of Social Services. I decided to spend my last couple of weeks as a civilian in Costa Rica and boarded a flight to Miami where we waited for the President of Costa Rica, José Joaquín Trejos Fernandez, to arrive. He was cutting his state visit short because of the assassination, in Los Angeles, of Robert Kennedy.

So I was going home to Costa Rica, to friends in Desamparados, San Ignacio de Acosta and Cangrejal. Nine months earlier, having completed a two-year tour with the Peace Corps in that country, I took a bus to Panama from San José, bought a 305 cc Honda motorcycle and headed north (by northeast) to Connecticut.

Returning to Cangrejal alone, drunk, in the dark wasn't a good decision. But drinking with friends in San Ignacio gave the plan a quixotic aura. I set out with an improvised candle lantern and an intimate knowledge of the road which rose into the hills around San Ignacio and then curved and descended a long way until it crossed two closely spaced wooden bridges over Rio Candelaria only to ascend to Cangrejal before continuing on to Sabanas, Pozo Azul and Parrita on the Pacific coast.

I stumbled along the rocky path, at one point falling down and sleeping. The candle was gone so I stumbled some more and listened for the river's report above the night noises in the hills of Acosta. I finally came to the first wooden bridge and crossed it. The river below was loud with riverine power and abandon. In another 20 kilometers the current would slow as it

neared the Pacific but now the banks could scarcely contain the spring rains from half a dozen cantones.

I knew that right after crossing the second bridge the road veered up and sharply to the right..

Fueled by rum and the anticipation of surprising old friends, I may have been distracted. My next step forward found nothing beneath it and I fell, suddenly sober, down the bank.

(Why – or how? – did a root sticking out from the bank catch me precisely on the inner thigh three meters above the river, which I'm sure would have happily welcomed me into her arms and delivered my body two days later onto a beach of black volcanic sand? It's been fifty years since that night. Had the root not been there or had it been of insufficient stoutness, all my future thoughts and longings and those of my children, and now, of my grandchildren, would still be waiting to be engendered, afloat somewhere in the cosmos. Have I been living a life worthy of what fate or 'la mano de Dios' or luck or physics gifted me with that night? Have any of us?)

I had no plan B. Plan A was to walk to Cangrejal sober in the light of day. But alcohol trumped my Boy Scout training and what common sense I had. So I waited, trusting that the root would hold. It was la madrugada, three a.m. Saturday. When I heard in the distance the welcome sounds of horses laboring, men talking, saddles creaking and then saw the light of flashlights, I remembered that the farmers of the interior, producers of corn, beans and rice, would travel in a group to San Ignacio to sell their grains at the Saturday market. I had been hanging on for twenty to thirty minutes when it appeared possible that I might be plucked off my perch. As the convoy approached I yelled "Socorro!", "Ayúdame!". Several men peered over the river bank, as surprised by what they saw as I was grateful to be seeing them. They

quickly tied a rope to the saddlehorn of one of the horses and, lowering me the end of the rope, whacked the horse on the haunch. I was jolted off the root, dragged up and over the bank and stood, muddy and lacerated among my rescuers, thanking them over and over again for their help as they laughed and began elaborating the details of the story they would share in San Ignacio.

With the river behind me, I walked uphill to the entrance of Cangrejal. I sat on the porch of an empty building and waited for daybreak. I thought of my foolishness and of my good fortune. It was still dark when a man on horseback passed by. I didn't speak nor did I recognize him. As sunlight crept over the mountains a few more people passed by. But they didn't speak and they kept some distance between us. Now, as sunlight bathed the village, I waited for some acquaintance to come into view. None did.

As my mind cleared, I recalled a story told to me by friends in a bar in San Ignacio the night before. When I left Costa Rica on motorcycle nine months before, the people of San Ignacio asked me what I was going to do when I got back to the United States. I joked that I was going to try to not be drafted. That seed, spoken in jest, germinated, then flowered into this narrative: I had arrived safely in Connecticut, was drafted by the army and sent to Viet-Nam where I was killed. In San Ignacio the school observed a moment of silence to commemorate my death. The word that I had joined the departed spread through the canton de Acosta, whose roads I had travelled for two years. So when I appeared, bloody and in rags, it wasn't me who people avoided, it was my ghost.

Hungry and tired, I started down the hill toward the river and then began the long, twisting

ascent to San Ignacio.

Ten months later I was in II Corps, Republic of Viet-Nam.

J. B. Elder

San Antonio, Texas