

Javier Salazar Calle

NDURA

SON OF THE FOREST



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Ndura. Son Of The Forest

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Calle J.

Ndura. Son Of The Forest / J. Calle — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

Best youth novel of 2014 in Spain! A person without special knowledge, he sees himself alone in the middle of the jungle after his plane crashes and he has to learn fast in order to survive all the challenges that come his way. A story that teaches you what can be done when you are pushed to the limit. Chosen as the best youth novel of 2014 by El Economista! When an ordinary person, any of us, suddenly finds himself in a situation of life or death in the middle of the jungle, would you know how to survive? This is the simple dilemma that is offered to the protagonist of our story, who, returning from a relaxing holiday in Namibia, a typical photographic safari, is involved in an unexpected extreme survival situation when his plane is shot down by rebels in the Ituri Forest, Republic of Congo. A place where nature is not the only enemy and where survival is not the only problem. An adventure with a classic aroma, this book is the perfect escape from reality and you truly feel the anguish and despair of the protagonist at the challenge presented to him. This book naturally blends the excitement and tensions of the personal challenge of survival, the psychological degradation of protagonists throughout history and an in-depth study of the environment; its animals, plants and people. It also teaches us that our perception of where our limits are is usually wrong, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

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Ndura.
Son of the forest.

By
Javier Salazar Calle
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Translation: Pamela Daccache
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Dedicated to all those who, like me, live adventures and travel without moving from their place; because they let the power of imagination prevail in this world.

Special dedication to my best friend, who passed away many years ago and to my son Alex, who inherited his name and for whom I have high hopes.

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DAY 0

I am in the middle of deepest Africa, sitting, leaning against the trunk of a tree. Fever has taken me over, my body is convulsing and chills are becoming more frequent, a non-localized pain is all that I can feel in my organs. I can't stop shaking. I'm on top of a hill. Behind me, there is a forest, a lush, wild and ruthless forest. The view in front of me, disappears just like magic, a few scattered stumps and remains of intensive logging, provides a glimpse of what was once there. At the bottom, I can distinguish the first houses of an emerging city. Mud intermingled with leaves and bricks. Civilization.

I am thousands of miles away from home, from my people, my family, my girlfriend, my friends. I even miss my work. The comfortable life, to be able to drink by simply opening a faucet and to eat just by ordering food in any bar. And sleeping in a bed, a warm, dry and safe bed, but mainly safe. Oh how I miss that serenity! When the only uncertainty was knowing how I was going to spend my free time in the evening after work. My previous preoccupations seem so absurd to me now: the mortgage, the salary, arguments between friends, food that I don't like, a soccer game but mainly, the food...

It is clear that the need for survival changes the point of view of people. Anyway, this is what happened to me. What am I doing so far away from home, dying, at the border of the Central African forest? How did I get myself into such a Dantean and apparently irremediable situation? What is the genesis of this story?

I mentally review the dire circumstances that led me to be on the brink of death, at the entrance of the transit freeway to the beyond, to the more than probable extinction of my story from the book of life.

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DAY 1

HOW THIS AMAZING STORY BEGAN

I checked my watch. Our plane back to Spain takes off in two hours. Alex, Juan and I were already in the shopping area at Windhoek's airport, using our last coins of the local currency and, incidentally, buying that gift that you always leave till the very end. We had already eaten. Shopping was the only thing left for us to do. I bought a knife for my father with a wooden handle and carved with the name of the country, Namibia. And for the others, all types of animal figures finely carved in wood. For my girlfriend Elena, in particular, I bought a beautiful hand carved giraffe from a typical village in the African savanna. Alex bought a blowpipe and many arrows. According to him, it's to play with on his dartboard and spice things up, to give it a, somewhat, more tribal incentive. We wandered from one place to another for an hour, with our backpacks on our backs, enjoying our last moments in that exotic country. Until the boarding started. Since we had already checked our luggage we went directly to the indicated gate and it didn't take long until we were in our seats in the airplane, an old four engine model with propellers, after taking a few photos of the aircraft first. Our fifteen day safari in an off-road vehicle in the wild African savanna was coming to an end and, although we would miss these lands, we really longed for a shower with hot water and good food, Spanish style. In any case, it was a shame to leave at that specific time because we were told that if we had stayed a few more days we would have witnessed one of the most stunning sun eclipses in decades in the area of Africa where it was best to see it clearly.

I was the boldest and the most adventurous of the three and I ended up convincing them to come with me, to this place. It's one thing to have an adventurous spirit, it's another thing to go without company. At first, they were reluctant to abandon their relaxing holiday plans in the North of Italy, for an apparently uncomfortable photographic safari in a place with temperatures above 40 degrees all day long, without a trace of shade to shelter yourself. Now that the experience was over, they did not seem to regret it at all, on the contrary, they would do it again without thinking twice about it.

The machine was taking us more than 1,000 kilometers to the North to another international airport, where we would connect with the modern and comfortable European airlines, to return home.

After takeoff, we occupied ourselves by looking at the photographs from the trip on Alex's digital camera. There was a super funny picture of Alex and Juan running terrified with an ill-tempered wildebeest chasing them. While they finished looking at the photos, between laughter and memories, I was lost in my thoughts looking out the window, watching the clouds passing by around us. It felt good to be returning home with my two best friends, whom I knew from school, from a wonderful adventure in an incredible country. It was like being in a National Geographic television coverage, like the ones I loved watching on TV while I ate. A safari in a 4x4, following the trail of the great migrations of wildebeests, photographing the herds of elephants or watching the famous lions from a few meters away in the heat of the wild African savanna. We had seen fights between hippopotamus, crocodiles waiting anxiously in search of a prey, hyenas eager for some carrion, vultures flying in circles over some corpse, some strange reptiles, and all types of insects. We had camped in tents in the middle of nowhere, had supper to the light of a campfire with a clear sky full of stars... a wonderful experience. Especially the visit to the Etosha National Park.

Down there, in contrast to what we had seen so far, there was an enormous green stain, we were crossing the equator area. The forest covered everything, an endless green luxuriance. The aim of our next trip would be to do something like that, a boat ride along the Amazon River, with stops to enjoy the hugely diverse forms of life in the place. We had already seen the immensity of a deforested savanna and now I wanted to see the magnificence of a sea of vegetation and overflowing life. To

be able to advance by machete blows in the almost impassable forest, to learn to find food, to get to know tribes that have nothing to do with our civilization, to see exotic animals and plants... but well, that would be for next year if I managed to convince my friends one more time. And, in any case, the North of Italy is not such a bad plan.

A loud noise, like an explosion, followed by a very abrupt airplane maneuver, yanked me out of my world of fantasies. The aircraft moved from side to side and soon it felt like I was in a roller coaster. I found myself lying on the floor in the middle of the aisle, over a lady. I immediately stood up and returned to my seat, trying not to fall again. Panicked screams resonated from everywhere. Confusion reigned.

“Fire, fire, the wing has been hit!” Somebody shouted from the opposite side of the aisle.

“The right one!” Another passenger indicated.

At first I did not know what he was talking about, but when I looked through his side of the window I could see a concentration of smoke that made it seem like it was night time on his side, a tragic night. The airplane's movements were becoming more abrupt. Some people started shouting. We heard the nervous and hardly audible voice of the pilot, coming from the loudspeakers, informing us that we had been hit by a missile shot from the guerrillas that were in the Congo, which we were flying over, and that we were going to make an emergency landing. A woman had a hysterical attack and two stewardesses with the help of another man had to forcefully keep her in her seat. The three of us quickly sat down, we tightened our seatbelts and we put ourselves in the position that the stewardess had indicated when we first got into the airplane, with our head on our knees, watching the less than reassuring metal floor. We were terrified. While I was in that uncomfortable position, I remembered that one time on the news, they had talked about these rebels who were rich because they controlled some of the country's diamond mines or even the precious coltan, a mineral that contains an essential metal for making cellphone cards, microchips or components of nuclear power plants. It was something like a bloody civil war, in which all surrounding countries had economic and military interests, and that had lasted for more than twenty years now and did not seem to have an end.

The blows were so strong that they jerked me forward, repeatedly, with such vigor that the seatbelt tightened around my stomach leaving me breathless and my head hit the seat in front of me. I felt that the airplane's nose aimed towards the ground, beginning a vertiginous tailspin. The noise was infernal, like thousands of engines unleashing their full potential simultaneously. Just before reaching the ground, the pilot sent a last warning by loudspeaker, informing us that he was going to make an emergency landing in a clearing that he had located. The last thing I thought about was that we were all going to die in the crash. After that, everything was complete chaos, loud sounds, blows, darkness...

When I recovered consciousness, I had an intense headache. I put my hand on my forehead and noticed that it was bleeding a little. On top of that, I had bruises and scratches all over my body. But worst, a big blister on my exposed flesh where the belt had been pressuring me. I ran my fingers over it and I felt a sharp sting that made me clench my teeth tightly. I looked at my friends, Juan seemed to be in a state of shock, he sort of growled in complaint and moved a little, Alex... Alex did not move at all, his once vital and happy face was totally pale, displaying a stiff expression, blood flowing abundantly from the back of his neck. I desperately called him, again and again. I touched his face, it was very stiff. I took him between my hands and shook him gently, calling him, begging him. Alex was dead, dead. That word resonated time and time again in my head, as if it was its own echo. Dead.

Anguished and overwhelmed by the situation, I tried to react. A bum-bum-bum sound resonated in my head, possibly because of the blow.

“Just a minute,” I thought, “it wasn’t in my head.” Somewhere in the distance I could hear the pounding of drums in a repetitive melodic tune. It seemed like someone was communicating from a distance.

“Shit!” I thought.

I stood up staggering, an idea springing into my head. If the guerrillas have crashed our plane, they will come here and take us prisoner or even kill us. We had to leave immediately. My first reaction was to warn Alex, but when I turned my head and saw him again, I was, once again, reminded of his death. I stood still for a few seconds until I was able to move again. I came closer to Juan, who remained in his seat and had moved a couple of times, like someone who's sleeping and having a nightmare.

"Juan" I stammered "we must leave."

"And Alex?" He muttered without opening his eyes.

"Alex, Alex is dead Juan" I answered, trying not to collapse. "Come, Alex is dead and we will be too if we don't leave. He is dead."

I looked for my backpack, stumbling in the middle of the chaos until I found it. I took it and I went to the back of the airplane. In that part, one side was burning and it was really hot. The airplane was full of people scattered in the most unusual positions, some wounded, others trying to move, others dead. I heard shouts, moans and murmurs coming from everywhere. I arrived in the kitchen and put everything I found in the backpack: soft drink cans, sandwiches, boxes of unlisted things, and a fork. When it was full, I returned to where Juan was and I took his backpack, which was on top of a woman. In it, I put some airplane blankets. Then I remembered the medicine kit and I returned to the kitchen, there it was, on the floor, opened and with everything in it scattered around. I gathered the things that were close to me, as much as I could, then I went to get Juan.

"Come on Juan, we're leaving."

"I can't." He whispered. "Everything hurts. "Come on Juan, you have to get up or they will kill us all. I am going to leave the backpacks outside then I'll come back to get you."

"Alright, alright, I will try." He answered, shaking a little in his seat.

I grabbed the two backpacks and I left staggering a little still affected by all the commotion from the crash. I had to keep myself from not stopping to help the rest of the people, but I did not know how long I had and I only wanted to live. Live one more day to see another sunrise. We were on one side of a glade in the woods. By the look of it, the pilot had tried to land here taking advantage of the absence of trees, but he strayed a little. The plane lost its left wing when it hit the big trees. A long stream of smoke trailed from the plane towards the sky, allowing anyone to see it from miles away. I entered the woods a bit more and I left the backpacks at the foot of a big tree. Then, I turned, with the intention of returning to the airplane, but, at that moment, a group of armed black guys burst into the clearing, on the opposite side of where I was. I quickly crouched, hiding myself behind a trunk. I felt a stabbing pain in my stomach. The guerilla men, some wearing camouflage and others in civilian clothes, surrounded the airplane aiming with their weapons and shouting non-stop. I did not understand a word of what they were saying, but from the area where we were, it had to be Swahili or who knows what other language.

"Nitoka!" They shouted time and time again. "Enyi! Nitoka! Maarusi!"^[1]

Soon after, some baffled and confused passengers began to leave the airplane. They started unceremoniously pushing them down to the ground and thoroughly searching them. More rebels arrived. One of the passengers, a man who was sitting in front of us, got nervous and stood up trying to run away. The guerrilla men fired multiple shots with their machine guns and he fell down dead almost instantly. During that moment of confusion, Juan left the airplane and ran in the opposite direction from where everyone was paying attention.

"Basi!"^[2] Basi!" Some rebels shouted when they discovered him.

"Nifyetua!"^[3] The one who seemed to be the boss shouted out, when Juan was on the verge of reaching the edge of the clearing.

Then, two of them fired at him from behind without further delay. One of the bullets whistled in my ear as it passed next to me. I lowered my head and I closed my eyes tightly, with the stupid

belief that this could save me from the bullets. He fell to his knees just ten feet away from where I was watching and, before collapsing entirely, he managed to look at me, crouched, and dedicated his last smile to me.

“Nitoka, maarusi!” They kept shouting towards the airplane.

I did not have to make a great effort not to scream, because I was completely muted and paralyzed. I don't know how long I stayed this way, but when I was able to move again, I knew with certainty that I only had one door left: to run for my life. I took the two backpacks and I walked into the lush forest trying as much as I could to be extremely stealthy, which I didn't succeed to do, since I was stumbling and my entire body was sore, I was incapable of having complete control over it. It didn't know where to go, but it was obvious that if I wanted to have the best chance at survival, I had to distance myself as much as I could from those savages.

I walked for almost two hours, spurred by the fear, fear of death, until my legs couldn't take it anymore and I fainted and fell to the ground. It seemed like the backpacks were loaded with stones. I felt a deep pain in my left knee; ever since I injured myself playing soccer, my knee hadn't absolutely healed and I still had problems with it from time to time when forcing it. I opened my backpack and I took a soda out. It was still a bit fresh and I drank it with avidity. I was sweating abundantly, drops of sweat fell torrentially from my chin, as if it had been raining or I had just come out of a swimming pool. I needed air, so I opened my mouth trying to take in deep breaths. I choked while drinking too fast which got me into a severe sneezing fit. I felt myself drowning. When I was able to cool down a little, though I was still panting, I realized that there was less light, it was getting dark. Alex dead in the accident, Juan riddled with bullets; my two best friends lost in just a small moment by the stupidity of a civil war that I did not understand and that I could not care less about. Why don't they kill each other? Why us? Why did it have to be my friends, Alex and Juan? Bastards! If it was up to me I'd let them expire altogether. Because of them, I was now alone, in this shitty, humid, overwhelming and asphyxiating place, without my friends. Why me? Why them? Juan's death, machine-gunned by those savages, replayed in my head time and time again as if it was a movie. The extinguishing light of his eyes in that last look he gave me. I tried not to think about it, to hide it in some deep fold of my brain, but I failed. Just a few hours ago we were together, laughing while remembering the anecdotes of the trip and now...

I cried for a while, I don't know how long, but it was very helpful. When I managed to stop, I felt much better. Well, I was calmer at least. It was obviously getting dark, the dim forest was submerging in the world of darkness. I had to look for a place to sleep. I was afraid to sleep on the ground, mainly in case the rebels found me, but sleeping in a tree didn't reassure me either, with snakes, those howler monkeys or whatever fierce and hungry beast there could be. I had to make up my mind. Snakes, or armed and furious men? Snakes seemed to be the lesser of two evils, at least they still hadn't done anything to me. I looked for a tree that seemed accessible for me to climb, difficult for the snakes and with some space where I could settle down to sleep.

It was at that moment that I noticed there was an incredible number of types of trees and plants. From the smallest plants, almost tiny, to trees that measured more than 160 feet whose trunk surpassed the others and where you couldn't even see the end. A huge amalgam of different classes of flora sprinkled everywhere; including super high palm trees with painted frayed leaves several feet tall with compact and dense groups of flowers^[4]. There was a superior layer of trees about 100 feet tall and ones that went even higher up, then, a second layer about 30 or 65 feet tall with an elongated shape like the cypresses of our cemeteries and a third layer 16 to 26 feet tall where only a small amount of light penetrated. There also were some shrubs, young samples of different types of trees, although only a few, and a layer of moss that almost covered all the shrub in some parts, as well as a multitude of lianas climbing on all the trunks, hanging from all the branches. Flowers and fruit everywhere, mainly on the highest layers, but unattainable to me. You could also see all kinds of animals, it was not easy to see them, but I could hear an innumerable variety of bird calls, monkey

chatters, branches being shaken above my head with the passage of one of them, insects humming around flowers everywhere, even some terrestrial animal whose footsteps I could hear as a distant noise. Butterflies and the rest of the insects churned all around. If I wasn't in the situation I was in, I would have enjoyed such a beautiful place, but at that moment, everything was a potential obstacle to my survival. And everything scared me.

After a brief search I found a tree that seemed to be suitable and I climbed it with the two backpacks on my back. It was incredible how heavy they seemed to weigh and my knee begged me for a time-out. When I was sufficiently high to feel safe, but not too high that I could kill or seriously hurt myself if I fell at night, I squeezed myself as well as I could between two heavy branches that went together, almost parallel and I covered myself a little with one of the small blankets that I had brought from the airplane and I used another one as a pillow. I was able to catch a glimpse of an incredible amount of big dark-brown bats, flapping around in the sky, in that special way they usually do, churning erratically and using their impulses^[5]. I didn't know how to count them, but there must have been thousands, making stops mainly in the palm trees, eating their fruit, I imagined, or hunting the insects that ate the fruit.

I must have slept about two hours in small intervals of fifteen or twenty minutes. The noises harassed me from all directions, I couldn't stop hearing footsteps, voices, cries, squawks, acute shrieks, humming sounds, whispers, and a constant murmur that increased and decreased incessantly. I even thought I heard the agonized cries of a child several times and elephants trumpeting. I didn't know if it could all be true or if it simply was all in my head. From time to time I heard a disquieting roar that made me imagine that some wild beast was devouring me in my sleep. At times, the anguish prevented me from breathing, I felt a pinching sensation in my heart until it almost hurt for real. Each sound, each movement, each thing that happened around me was like torture, a sensation of immediate suffocation. As soon as I managed to fall asleep, something occurred, forcing me to wake up scared. Sometimes I saw eyes shining in the gloomy night and, in an effort to cheer myself, I imagined that it was only an owl or something from that family of birds that could be found in this area, but those attempts to try and maintain a positive attitude only lasted a little while, then I always ended up seeing felines with unscrupulous intentions or some dangerous hunting serpent. Other times, I heard shots nearby, intermittent bursts, but if I listened carefully, I wasn't able to hear a thing.

“Javier” I heard Alex calling me.

“Yes, where are you?” I said waking up startled.

“Javier” I heard again.

I looked in all directions, distressed, eager, and anxious to see my friend. Until I realized that Alex was dead and that I was alone and without any help, in the middle of the forest. That scared me, not to be able to count on anybody for help, someone with whom I could share my current pain, my desperation. I couldn't let panic take over, I had to expel the bad thoughts from my head to be able to survive, but I was incapable. A suffocating sensation of loneliness forced me to be even more overcome by fear.

“Javier, Javier.”

All during the night his call was constant, inquisitive, inviting. I would have gone with him, if I had known where to go.

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DAY 2

HOW I DISCOVERED THE WONDERS OF THE FOREST

"No, don't kill him!" I shouted, convulsively shaking which made me fall off the tree and hit the ground with a thud.

I shook myself from one side to the other, fleeing from my own ghosts, ignoring the pain caused by the fall. I looked all around me totally disoriented and I remained momentarily still, crouched, moaning like a wounded animal. While I rubbed my sore back I realized that it was only a nightmare, a very real nightmare, since I had dreamed that I was reliving Juan's death, the airplane crash, and again I held Alex's inert body in my hands. Drops of sweat fell from my forehead, my hands were shaking. I took deep breaths for a while then I decided to move on. I only wished to move as far away from the airplane as I could, where I had lost a part of my life. My past was terrible and my future looked grim.

My back hurt a lot probably because of the position I had slept in, or the fall or both at once and I felt a little under the weather. I climbed back up the tree while I was still whining, to get the backpacks and I realized that the backpack that had the food was missing. The jolt from the surprise almost knocked me off the tree again. Without that backpack there was nothing to do. I was scared, I looked for it between the branches and, when I thought that I would never find it, I saw that it had fallen on the ground with all its content sprawled around. I had probably thrown it myself, dragging it in my fall or when I moved at night. I got down carefully with the other backpack on my shoulder and gathered everything that I was able to locate: three soft drink cans, a cold cut sandwich, and some half eaten cookies, full of ants, a box with packets of salt to use in salads and the two boxes, which turned out to be quince. The rest had disappeared, I supposed that the animals had taken them. I came to a conclusion that it had fallen during the night.

I decided to make an inventory of everything I had, to see what could be useful and throw away the things that weren't. It made no sense to be carrying useless weight and I needed to know what means I had at my disposal. In my backpack, apart from the food, I found the knife that I had bought my father, all the wood figurines, a travel guide of Central Africa, a pack of tissues, 8x30 binocular, a khaki cloth cap and an "I love Namibia" t-shirt. From the medicine kit I still had a half-empty aspirin box, a whole box of anti-diarrheal, a bandage, three band-aids and a few anti-motion-sickness pills. And documentation of course. In Juan's backpack, there was also his documentation and, in addition, the three airplane blankets and one pillow, a small book with Swahili sentences, his sunglasses, a hat, chocolate bars, an almost empty one liter plastic bottle of water, a fork, a big wood figurine of an elephant and several smaller ones, an almost full pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

I couldn't take the two backpacks, so I put everything in mine, which was in better shape, except one of the blankets, the pillow that occupied a lot of space and all the wood figurines, useless in this place; I buried and covered them with trash. While I was throwing some of the things, I remembered the people who they belonged to; to Elena, to my family, my friends, Alex, Juan, it didn't take me much to start crying again, I would never see them anymore, none of them. Well I would see Alex and Juan soon, in heaven or wherever one goes after death.

The chocolate bars were completely melted by the heat, I ate them at once, cleaning the wrapper with my tongue until there was no trace of it left. They tasted like heaven. I also drank what little water was left in the bottle. At that moment, I realized that I had to stop for a minute to think about what my next step would be. Some questions arose in my mind: Do the rebels know I survived? Where do I have to go now?

I had no answer for my first question. Perhaps they had obtained a confession from one of the passengers who had seen me, maybe they checked the area and found my trail or the can that I threw on the ground after drinking it (that had been a huge mistake, even though at that moment I was only thinking about running away), perhaps they were on all sides and they would find me anyway, or maybe they didn't know a thing. Anyway, from now on, I had to try to be more careful and to leave the least possible trails anywhere I went.

Regarding the direction where I was headed, I seemed to recall that from the airplane, during the vertiginous landing, I saw that there was a town in the horizon, in a huge clearing in the woods. What I didn't know was if it was the rebels' base or what, but it was very probable that it would be, since it was very close to where they had attacked us from. Since we were going from the South of Africa toward the North, I reasoned that if I kept going North, I would arrive at the end of the forest, to another country, and I would have more possibilities of finding help. I really missed my friends a lot right now! Alex's overflowing enthusiasm, optimism and joy would have come in handy just about now, and Juan's cold analytical capacity, his serenity and his decision making skills when confronted with a situation. Oh how I needed their company right now, to give me enough courage to confront this unavoidable unsought challenge that presented itself to me! This would have been much easier with them, even an adventure that I would tell upon my return; but they were dead, assassinated, exterminated without mercy, like annoying flies, annihilated in the best years of their lives... and I had to survive despite everything. Assholes, sons of...! Relax, Javier, relax, I had to try to keep calm, it was my only option to have some chance. Alright, the Sun is supposed to rise in the East and set in the West, so if it had risen more or less from this side... it would have to set in that direction. If with that system of orientation I arrived somewhere, it would not be through ability, but a miracle. Anyway, to be sure, I carefully climbed up one of the highest trees I could see.

It was easy, since it had many branches to use as stairs, although the more I climbed, the smaller they got and more flexible too, so I was extra careful to only step on the base of the branches, which were the widest and most resistant parts. It overshadowed most of the trees and when I almost arrived at the top, the landscape that unraveled was frightening. A green sea stretched in all directions like a tapestry, going up and down, following the outline of the ground, imitating waves, a vast extension of life. Only some lone trees much higher than the rest stuck out in the immensity of that tapestry formed by the frond of the infinite number of treetops in the forest. I only saw treetops everywhere I looked, it was endless. Even with binoculars I didn't see a thing on all sides. The truth is, that wasn't very helpful in my search for a direction to follow. I got down from the tree and I hid Juan's backpack with everything I had left in it, half buried underneath a fallen trunk. At the last moment I decided to keep the giraffe I had gotten Elena, if I ever saw her again, I wanted to have a gift for her. I looked around one last time to verify that I hadn't left any clear signs of my presence and, when I was moderately convinced, I began to walk without too much hope. I really needed my friends!

During the hike, I found some colorful birds with showy red chests and the rest of their body greenish^[6]. They fluttered around between the branches of the trees with incredible agility, in flocks of about twelve or fifteen birds. As soon as I made a little noise they disappeared in a jiffy. Those beautiful animals took me away for a second from the overwhelming sensation of solitude with which the forest struck me relentlessly, an oppressive world, hostile, merciless, permanently gloomy, in which oppression, depression or suffocation were no more than normal road companions.

The way was difficult, I constantly had to make detours or jump over obstacles. Sometimes there were small clearings, but I skirted them for fear of being too visible. I was incessantly sweating and I was very thirsty, but I didn't want to drink another soft drink because I only had three left. It must have been about 80°F with a high level of humidity, which accentuated the sensation of oppression and heat. I took off my shirt for a while, but I got bitten by so many mosquitos that I had to put it back on. At times the landscape thickened too much and I had to open my way through with a stick I had picked up and that I used as a machete. In such cases, I basically wasn't going forward, because

with the stick the best I could do was separate the branches from the way while I went through, and not cut them. In addition, my lower legs and my forearms were covered in wounds because they were rubbing against the plants on those parts of my body where the clothes didn't cover my skin. Even my face itched in several places, which led me to believe it was also cut.

Sometimes the ground was full of demolished branches or trunks, other times the ground was soft, full of fallen leaves, and I had to walk carefully so I wouldn't twist an ankle in some hole or slip, because that would be fatal. In some areas, the treetops were so tight that they prevented the light from coming through, creating a very gloomy shaded atmosphere; or they formed several floors of lights of different shades depending on the heights. I passed those parts scared because it gave me the impression I was constantly being attacked by ghosts, that in fact were the highest branches of the trees moving to the sound of the wind that must have been in the green ceiling of the forest and that also made them produce a frightening perennial howl that harassed me from all sides. On several occasions, I found the forest to be so thick it was absolutely impassable and I had to make huge detours to keep going forward. I never thought it was possible to have so many different plants all together. I no longer saw the romanticism of walking in the forest like explorers, even worse, I wished to leave this place as soon as possible. In addition, as in general I was making too much noise, I walked with a sinking heart thinking that if they were following me, it would be very easy to locate me.

At night, there was incessant noise coming from everywhere, it wasn't the same noise, but I heard insects humming, strange bird songs in the treetops, some screams that I supposed came from monkeys or something similar. At least the disquieting roars were not heard, they must have come from some nocturnal hunter, or at least that's what I wanted to believe. I didn't exactly see many animals, but I could feel them all.

I checked the time on my watch. It was ten in the morning. I had been walking for an hour and I couldn't walk any longer. My knee had already started to send warning signals, I noticed that it was a little swollen. On many occasions I felt as if my ligaments had moved from their place and I had to put them back again, massaging them smoothly but firmly. I sat down on the ground to rest a little, leaning on a trunk of an extra tall tree and I rubbed it with my hands. The heat was a little comforting for my knee. I was in a rather clear area. I had been sitting for a while when I saw a bird that looked like a parrot on the branch of a tree. It had matt bluish plumage, whose only difference of color was its red tail, the white halos around the eyes, and its black beak that emitted almost human screams^[7]. It practically turned its head in all directions without moving the rest of its body, which reminded me of the girl from *The Exorcist*. It swayed its way to a tree fruit and began to peck it. The fruit was reddish-orange, as large as a hand and in the shape of a pumpkin.

"Surely you know where you are," I said to myself, "of course you do."

I rested for almost half an hour and then I started walking again. Whenever I skirted a clearing and had to retake the supposedly correct direction I was even more convinced that I could be spinning in circles for years without ever knowing. It all looked the same to me and the sun was no longer helpful. I checked its position in the sky, I verified it with the time on my watch and reached the conclusion that I had no idea what I was doing. I maintained the same pace all morning; I walked an hour and then rested awhile. During my breaks, I read the book of Swahili sentences or the travel guide to keep my mind busy with something, maybe it could be of some help being able to communicate with somebody in a hypothetical encounter. With each stop, it became harder to stand up and keep going, my knee made me limp and around 2 p.m. I was worn-out.

I was to blame for everything, I was the one who had dragged my friends to this infernal place, it is my fault they had died. If I had done as they had suggested, we would now be on our way back from Italy with a lot of pictures of Venice and some postcards from Tuscany. My fault, it was all my fault.

I was thirsty and my stomach wouldn't stop growling. I was facing a dilemma: Should I eat well to recuperate or save it, given the food shortage I suffered and risk having something happen to me? I expected it would be easy to find food and water in a forest, or at least that's what I thought

at the time, and I was very hungry, so I chose to drink one of the soft drinks and to eat the already bitten cookies, blowing at the ants to chase them away, and the sandwich. It alleviated my tenacious appetite a little. I kept the quince thinking that it would last a bit more time before going bad. Then, I fell asleep because I was worn out and because I couldn't sleep the previous night.

When I woke up I heard a hissing sound close by. There must have been a snake nearby. I remained completely silent trying to sharpen my hearing to discover where the sound came from. Fear tied my stomach in knots and it became harder for me to breathe. I once saw a documentary on snakes that was called "The Two Step Snakes" because when they bit you, you could only walk two steps before falling dead. Given the situation, this didn't feel like such an awful idea, but what if I got bit by one that would make me agonize for hours, losing control bit by bit, before getting to the paroxysm of madness... I was so scared of suffering, and I panicked at the thought of pain. If I had to die, I wanted it to be fast. I almost wished for it, so I could free myself from the situation I was in. I deserved it. I felt the hissing sound was getting closer by the second, I could also hear the leaves crackling under its weight, it was coming my way, I was sure of it. I could almost feel it creeping over my body, sliding on my leg in the direction of my neck, it was almost there, and it was going to bite me. I closed my eyes for a second and I took a deep breath trying to calm myself down. Then, I opened my eyes again and without moving, not even an inch, I rolled my eyes in all directions trying to locate it. I finally saw it. It was still, coiled on a branch ten feet away to my right, about six feet up from the ground. It moved only its head from side to side, as if it was watching over something. It was green with a slight bluish touch, a bit yellow on the sides, with a long tail, a little over 3 feet tall, and a thin body, as if it was laterally compacted, almost invisible between the leaves^[8]. When it slid on the branch I could see that it had an off-white belly.

I stayed there awhile longer, not moving and listening, until I was convinced that it was this one that I had heard and that the rest was all in my head. I rose slowly and carefully scrutinized the ground in search of another snake, but the one I saw was the only one. At least the only one I had found. At first, I thought about making a detour and distancing myself from it, but then I remembered that people always said that snake meat tasted like chicken, that it was very good. Or at least that's what grandparents told as jokes about the Civil War and the hunger they endured. It seemed like a good opportunity to obtain food and, if on top of that it tasted good, then that was even better. I looked for a long wooden stick with a "V" shaped tip to try to hold its head. I also took out the knife from my pocket, I opened it and stuck it around my waist, against my long shorts. I found a suitable fallen branch and I gave it the shape that I wanted, trimming one of the ends in a "V" shape and without ever losing sight of the snake. The preparation process seemed endless and it exhausted me, although in fact it didn't require that much physical effort.

When I was ready, I stealthily walked toward the snake. It didn't seem to notice my presence or it was ignoring me, anyway, it didn't pay any attention to me. When I was about 2 feet away from it, I raised the stick and I hit it in the head with all my strength. With the first blow, it was still half hanging so I gave it two more blows until it fell to the ground. Then, I hooked the head with the tip of the stick and squeezed it firmly against the ground. The snake was shaking convulsively, it didn't stop hissing, and I was terrified. If I loosened my grip so I could hit it from a distance with the stick, it could attack me, the other option was to get closer and to nail it with the knife. I gathered my courage, I came closer to it and I forcefully stepped on the tail, crushing it against the ground in an attempt to keep it still. I crouched down and I nailed the knife right under the head of the reptile, glued to the stick, keeping it thrust into the ground. Even like that, it wouldn't stop shaking, so, I unnailed the knife and I sawed the neck until the head was cut from the rest of the body. Then, I took a step back, ignorantly afraid that it might still be able to attack me. The tail wouldn't stop moving, spitting blood from where the head previously hung. I hit it a couple of times with the stick, but it didn't change a thing, so I decided to leave it awhile. In a matter of seconds, it gradually stopped

moving until it remained completely still. I touched it a couple of times with the stick but it didn't move. It was definitively dead. I was finally able to breathe calmly again.

My first triumph in the forest. The man had dominated the beast. I felt totally euphoric, for a moment, all my problems dissolved like sugar in a glass of hot milk. Now I knew that I would survive and that I would leave this place. I was an authentic adventurer, a born survivor. Now, nothing could keep me from finding the exit in this green labyrinth and returning to my house, my home. Mother Nature had challenged me and I had demonstrated my worth, my capacity for adjustment and survival. Now, I knew I was the winner of this unequal combat against myself and the hostile elements.

I grabbed the snake and opened it in half with the knife, removing as much of the guts as I could, not without feeling quite disgusted. For that reason, I took it by one end and I spun around in circles at full speed, making fast laps, the guts flying off all over the place. But then I thought that this went against my plan of being discreet and not drawing attention, but there were already snake remains everywhere and I really didn't feel like gathering them. I finished cleaning what was left with the knife, which gave me an urge to vomit, it was disgusting. Then, I skinned it. When it was ready, I suddenly thought of a problem. I couldn't make a fire to roast it because they would discover my existence and my location, so I would have to eat it raw. I looked at the bloody meat reluctantly. I cut a big chunk and I put it in my mouth. If animals ate it raw I could do it as well. I chewed a couple of times then I spat it all out. It was revolting! It had the consistency of plastic, as if I was trying to eat one of my sisters' dolls or a half worn out cartilage. I had always liked my meat to be well done, I could never eat it rare and, as it happens, even less if it is completely raw. What had always repulsed me the most were things with the consistency of that meat: barely cooked chicken skin, bacon, tripe...

I took the remains of the snake and those of my food and I buried them, feeling completely disappointed. Then I threw some leaves on the hole to better disguise it. What good is it to find food if I cannot eat it? Risk getting bitten and killed by a snake, for what? On top of that, there was the problem of water. I had to find something because I couldn't quench my terrible thirst and I only had two sodas left. I dropped to the ground, sweating abundantly because of the effort made to capture the snake. Defeated, I drank one of the two sodas and I threw the can away. Let them discover me, after all it is better to die riddled with bullets than to die of hunger, its faster. Anyway, I had scattered the guts of the snake all around in a six foot diameter. Farewell to the winner, farewell to the born survivor, all hail the failure who was going to die in a wild garden. I deserved it, so I couldn't complain. I had killed my two best friends. Anyway I knew that I had seen something on the television about water in the forest, I remember them saying that it was easy to obtain in one place, in a particular way, but I couldn't remember where.

I was there, for I don't know how long, seated on the ground, with my arms on my knees, head down, my mind completely blank, letting myself go. Resignation, conformism, abandonment, giving up on life. The plane crash with the death of Alex, to see how they riddled Juan with bullets, the euphoria after the snake situation and the ensuing deception, the fatigue, the sleepiness... too many things in practically twenty-four hours, too many intense emotions. Why did Juan have to be so stupid and start running that way? Why did he leave me alone? At least we would have both been here and everything would have been different; but no, he had to try to flee that way, so... so... I wanted to return home, to close my eyes and when I opened them I'd be in my bed and all of this would have been one big realistic nightmare, more realistic even than they usually are, a bad dream like any other, an anecdote to tell in the evening when I meet with my fiancée and my friends. I started crying, but there were almost no tears falling from my eyes.

Lost, discouraged, disillusioned and feeling faint, fatigued and sleepy. I did not know what to do. In the end by a simple act of automatism I buried the can that I had thrown away and I stood up to keep walking, although now at a much slower pace, letting myself go, almost dragging my feet. I was walking and stopping intermittently until eight o'clock at night. My breaks were longer every time I stopped, and so the walking distances became shorter. I used the stick that I had used with the

snake for support, that way I unloaded some pressure from my injured knee, although at that time I already couldn't feel my legs. To walk for the sake of it, without at least trying to set a proper course, after all, I didn't know how to do it with certainty and I could almost say that I didn't care. Why did I have to convince them to come here, why? I never listened to anybody, I always had to have it all my way. Look where my desire to control everything, to command, had landed me. Juan, you're an idiot. Why did you start running that way, committing suicide? That was all your fault, I had nothing to do with that. Your fault. Yours.

When I couldn't resist anymore, I ate one of the boxes of quince, entirely, and I drank the last soda that was left, hiding away all the rest, including one of the two blankets I had left. What did I want two for? The less weight I carried the better. In addition, they gave out too much heat and when I carried the backpack, I had the feeling that my back was roasting, since my t-shirt was permanently stuck to my body from the sweat, which produced an uncomfortable sensation. I also started to feel a constant sensation of dizziness, possibly because I was dehydrated from the lack of water. It didn't surprise me, I knew that refreshments seemed to quench your thirst at the moment you drank them but they did not hydrate much. The yoyo effect a companion of mine from school called it, because of the sugar it has he said.

As it was growing dark and I didn't feel like sleeping so uncomfortably in a tree I looked for a sheltered place, where the ground was dry, I made a meager mattress from leaves and green branches, I curled up covered with the small blanket and with the backpack for a pillow, I fell asleep. I had spent my first whole day in the forest and I was already more than sick of it, I was very tired and I hoped that this would end in any way possible.

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DAY 3

HOW MY SUFFERINGS BEGAN

Something was attacking me, my whole body was itching. I jumped up immediately, shouting, my head totally cleared out. I looked at my hands and they were covered with red ants with big heads, my body was coated in them. They stung me everywhere, repeatedly. I took off my clothes, almost ripping them off, and I started swatting my body with my hands, jumping, moving and squirming around like the tail of a lizard, shouting and moaning from pain. Some went into my mouth, forcing me to spit over and over again, others went into my nose, my ears, everywhere. It was like an entire swarm of bees had decided to attack me at the same time. Little by little I was able to get rid of the ants, but it took me about ten minutes to realize that there were no ants left on my body. An endless column of ants^[9] crossed the area where I had slept. My entire body was red from the beating I had given myself to get the ants off me and it was full of red dots even redder than the bites those damn insects had inflicted on my body. It all itched so much that I didn't even know where to start scratching. Although there were no ants left on me anymore, from time to time I felt like something scampered on my body and again, I would start shaking convulsively.

When I dominated my rage and my frustration a little, I took my backpack and I also shook all the ants off of it, I did the same with the blanket and the clothes I had scattered around on the ground. I only put my sneakers on and I packed the rest in my backpack. I took some stones and branches and I threw them on the neat column of ants with fury while I insulted them. For a little while I lost control, anger took me over, yes, ants were guilty of everything, I had to end the ants, they put me in this stupid situation and they were going to pay for it. I stepped on them over and over again, furious, frenetic, as if I was possessed by an unstoppable destructive fervor. Some climbed on my legs, biting me again, but I no longer felt a thing, the pain had ceased to exist for a moment. I only had one thought in my head: kill the ants. I stomped on and kicked the ones that were on the ground and with hard slaps, I squashed those that were on my body, crushing them against my legs, my arms or my chest. For a few minutes, that was my only war, my only world: stomping, slapping with my hand, shouting with anger, frustration, bottled in for too long. A furious Gulliver destroying the world of Lilliput. Then I moved away a few steps, I crumbled on the ground and I stayed there for a while, gone, totally surrendering to my fate, blind to what was happening around me, oblivious of any other thing that was not nothingness and inner emptiness. I finally came back to my senses. At night I thought I had heard the murmur of a nearby stream, so I went looking for it, naked, careless, shaking, and my entire body itching, the stick in my hand and my backpack on my shoulder. Leaving behind me a myriad of squashed ants and many more scampering around in their particular dance of disorganized madness.

Indeed, my hearing had not deceived me. A river of about sixteen feet wide made its way through the middle of the forest, before my eyes. My first intention was to take my shoes off and to throw myself in the water, but I remembered something about leeches, so first, I carefully inspected the water on the riverbank letting caution take over my desperation for a moment. The sheer thought of having one stuck on my body, hooked, absorbing my blood, made me shudder. When I touched the water with my hand I noticed that it wasn't too cold for me to be able to stand it for a while. I didn't see anything, except some precious small colorful fish, some more colorful than others, that were too small to eat and too pretty to kill. Their body was long and flattened, their tail divided in three parts, the middle one looked like a bird's feather, their eyes were proportionally big in comparison to their head, they had an iridescent blue color, but when the rays of sun reflected on their body, an incredible range of colors from blue to violet blurred on their scales^[10]. I looked for some other

things like piranhas, crocodiles or something similar and I didn't find a thing. So I decided to soak a little after drinking a bit of water.

I walked a little into the water, first making sure with the stick that the ground was steady. I kept my sneakers on, because I was afraid to get bitten by a bug or to have something nailed in my foot. The first contact gave me the chills because of the contrast between the temperature of the water and the outside temperature, although I immediately got used to it. Some dragonflies with vivid colors flew around me, with their long shape and their fast and confident way of flying. There were also a large number of insects, either flying or scampering on the surface of the water as if it were a skating rink.

When the water reached my knees, I stopped and I got all my body wet with my hands. The refreshing effect of the water over the infinite number of ant bites and scratches on my swollen knee was an indescribable sensation of relief. Being in the water for a while, forgetting everything, enjoying every second, put me in a state of deep relaxation. I closed my eyes and I submerged my head in the water holding my breath as long as I could, feeling the coolness all over my skin, surrounding it and smoothly caressing it. For a brief moment all the problems, the preoccupations, just vanished. I also drank big gulps of water, until I felt completely satiated. When I got out of the water, determined to survive at all costs, my spirits were reinforced and my mind ready to fight.

I heard a noise in a nearby tree and I quickly hid in the bushes. They had found me, naked and off guard, they were definitely going to kill me, to assassinate me without any mercy, to sacrifice me like a vile animal. I did not want to die, could I have thrown them off track? Didn't I deserve a little serenity? Hadn't I had enough with the ants? The images of Juan riddled with bullets by the rebels popped in my head like a succession of short flashes. Alex's lifeless body seated in the airplane after the crash with blood dripping from his forehead tormented me once more. I imagined myself bleeding from several holes in my body inflicted on me by the shootings of the rebels, lying on the ground at the foot of a huge tree, they laugh at me while I'm in agony. The pain... I scanned the leaves of the trees and I finally discovered the origin of the sound: a monkey about two foot tall with a tail as long as its body, a bluish face, it had a tuft of dark hair on each side between eye and ear, and a white oblique one over the eyes, most of its body was yellowish brown, except its throat, chest and belly that were white^[11]. Perhaps I wasn't predestined to die that day. Little by little, more monkeys appeared, until there were five of them, jumping from branch to branch and squealing. They must have been playing or something, they perched themselves on a branch and they shook it energetically while they shrieked. Perhaps they were in their mating season, I had no idea, but it was a huge show. Little by little, my heart started beating at a normal pace again. The last thing I saw was one of them picking something up from the ground and eating it, from where I was standing it looked like a centipede.

On the other riverbank, I saw another monkey of similar shape but with different colors. This one had a black face, white sideburns and a beard that spread over its chest and parts of the arms. Its color was more blackish and it had an orange reddish triangular spot on its back. It was bigger than the other one and it was relatively more robust^[12]. It drank a little water raising it to its mouth with its hand then it disappeared. I watched the others play and jump for a while, it was a unique experience that I never thought I'd ever see. Once again I remembered my two dead friends and how they would have enjoyed seeing this, especially the cheerful Alex, always so curious about everything. Now with whom would I talk about these moments, with whom would I share them? Nobody who hadn't lived it with me could have understood it. No! I shouldn't think about that, it didn't help me keep going forward and what I needed now was to garner as much energy as I possibly could to be able to survive. Leaving this damn forest had to be my only goal. To escape this green hell.

I took off my sneakers, I twisted them a little to drain the water and I hooked them on the extremities of some branches to dry them out. Then I took the bottle and I looked for a small stream to fill it, I thought I read somewhere that it was worse to take water from sites where the water was stagnant because there were more possibilities of it being insanitary or having some type of bug. Good thing I remembered that before drinking. My entire body wouldn't stop itching, although with

less intensity than before. I felt a throbbing pain in my thigh and when I looked at it to check if I had a bruise, I saw a leech stuck on my leg, sucking the blood out of me. It was some sort of a slug, thinner maybe. At first I got scared, then I calmed down and thought about a solution. If I remembered well, you could remove leeches with salt or by burning them. I took out the lighter and burned it with the flame until it shrank, I took advantage of that moment and removed it with the knife. It left a red spot in the place it had been before, a drop of blood oozed on the edge. I heated the tip of the knife with the lighter and I carefully cauterized the wound. I had no idea if leeches infected the wound they created or not and I preferred not to risk it. It hurt so much that I had to make a huge effort not to scream at the top of my lungs. I checked the rest of my body in case I had another one, but there were none. Now on my leg I had the shape of the tip of my knife tattooed by the burn. I was going to have a tremendous blister. Perhaps I shouldn't have done such an outrageous thing.

Laziness took control of my body and I decided to take the morning off. So many consecutive emotions were tiring, I was exhausted and my body weighed a ton. I looked for a spot in the shade and when I was dry I put my clothes on and I used the souvenir t-shirt from Namibia that I had in the backpack, to cover all my head with, including my face, to avoid contact with the annoying and abundant insects that lingered on the riverbank. Before lying down, I checked out a shrub that was close to me, I had already seen many like it, with a showy carmine fruit with small bluish seeds^[13]. Could it be edible? I crushed a confused ant that I wasn't able to shake off of my clothes. I closed my eyes and I let myself go into a state of drowsiness, dozing off, the heat and the humidity weighing on my muscles and willpower.

A shot, then a burst from some automatic weapon, more shots. I immediately jumped to my feet. I heard the shots on the other bank of the river, although distant. Now I was sure I wasn't imagining it, they were going to find me at any moment now. Suddenly, it came back to me that my situation did not allow me to just relax. Not maintaining all my senses in constant alert was my road to perdition.

I quickly gathered all my things, I shoved the shirt in the backpack, I put my socks and sneakers on and I picked the stick up. They were still wet, but at that moment, I didn't have time to concentrate on such nonsense. I decided that the best way possible to get somewhere, was to walk along the riverbed, but it seemed quite dangerous to me to follow along the riverbank, so I ventured into the forest once again to try and go unnoticed between the foliage and walk thirteen or fifteen feet away, parallel to the river. It was a small world, I looked in all directions and didn't find more than an impenetrable green wall without any exit. At most, I saw 13 or 16 feet in front of me. I soon lost the river and, once again, I was on my way to nowhere.

I walked at a fast pace at times and a slower one at others for the entire afternoon with little moments of rest. Just enough to catch my breath a little and to listen for more shots in case there were others. I had to permanently put up with the sound my sneakers were making with each step I took, similar to the one produced when you step into a puddle, and the sporadic cramp warnings in my calf. The density of the foliage increased incrementally, plunging into the shadows in some places. There were mosquitos everywhere, they wouldn't stop harassing me as if we were in an endless battle. Sometimes they reminded me of the Japanese kamikazes of World War II, swooping down on their target without any regard for their lives. The mosquitos were the same, continuously throwing themselves at my body, regardless of the casualties I caused with my hands, using them as antiaircraft artillery. Some were so big that they looked more like giant bombers rather than fighter aircrafts, whose mere presence could make the enemy apprehensive. When I saw them approaching I immediately tensed up, ready to avoid them. There were always some hungry ones, I had plenty of bites on my arms and legs, in places where my clothes did not cover my body. Some were even on the same bites the other ants from this morning had left me. I was fighting a losing battle, a banal, futile, useless fight, since they had no end and I was increasingly tired. They bothered me so much that I decided to cover the parts that my clothes didn't with moist soil, creating an impenetrable

barrier between them and my naked skin. That fleeting idea saved me. It was uncomfortable to move, especially when it dried, but the continuous attacks were worse.

Thanks to this trick I was able to forget those ruthless insects for a good while and, although I couldn't claim victory yet, at least it was a temporary truce. It also had the surprising effect of stopping the itching where the ants had previously been. Finally, a lucky break.

I didn't stop looking around, I had the constant feeling that I was being followed, that I was getting increasingly cornered, in a limitless forest. I even thought I heard steps and voices behind me or saw fleeting faces of guerrilla men watching me with ferocity from between the trees, constantly monitoring me. The truth is I didn't really see anything with clarity, I didn't find a single trace of their presence in the area. I had the impression that the trees bent over my head, imprisoning me more and more in a living wooden cell. I didn't know if I was becoming paranoid or what, but I had to calm down if I wanted to survive in this unfamiliar and deadly forest.

While I was madly wandering, I came across a gruesome scene. What seemed to be a family of primates, as large as a chimpanzee or similar, were lying in a glade without hands, feet or heads in the middle of large pools of blood, parched and surrounded by thousands of flies and all types of insects and scavengers. The stink coming from them was unbearable and I couldn't avoid instantly having vomit come up my throat. I gathered my strength and looked again. There were two that must have been adults and a smaller one. There didn't appear to be any young ones, what I didn't know was why they hadn't slaughtered them too, was it because there were none or because they had taken them to sell them on the black market. I knew that there were particular parts of animals that were easily sold as aphrodisiacs in the Asian countries: rhino horns, tiger bones and other things like that. Perhaps this was for something of the sort. I decided to get away as fast as possible from that damned place. This discovery not only confirmed once again the cruelty of the human race, but it also demonstrated that I was walking in areas frequented by furtive hunters, surely not very friendly with strangers.

I was very affected by everything that was happening. At a certain point, I finally felt a strong cramp in my calf of my right leg and it forced me to stop and stretch it while I squeezed my mouth shut from the pain and writhed on the ground. I had to stay seated for a while before I was able to move again and it kept bothering me non-stop for the rest of the day. Several times I thought the cramp was back and I had to stop to stretch my leg. When it started growing dark I was completely exhausted and I hadn't advanced a lot because I was forced to walk at a slow pace. My legs were especially exhausted from all the walking, my knee and calf were sore and my feet were almost numb. Looking at it from a positive point of view, if I ever left this place, I would have eliminated the incipient beer belly that was starting to show. It's still something. I shouldn't lose my sense of humor that could perhaps save me. It was the only thing I had left, that and my desire to live. Elena, what would I give for one of your hugs right now, for a smile! Or for one of those tasty dishes that you prepared!

I sat on top of a fallen trunk, I ate all the quince that I had left and I took a big sip of water. I only had around a fifth of the bottle left and no food. I would spend this third night in a tree, after the ants experience I didn't think I'd be able to sleep, since the ants are on both the ground and on the trees, but what I least wished for was to get captured asleep by the scoundrels who fired the shots. Like the first night, I looked for a suitable tree and when I found it, I climbed to the chosen branch with the help of a creeper. As soon as I put my hand on it, I had to take it off because I felt a sharp prick. The creeper had thorns. I rubbed my injured palm and I looked for another tree to climb on. When I found it I carefully climbed it and I prepared myself to spend another night in hell. I took my sneakers and socks off and I prayed they would be dry in the morning, although I highly doubted it, since the air was almost permanently humid. My feet were wrinkled and had a light brownish green color. I dried them as well as I could, but the uncomfortable sensation persisted anyway. I tried to get warm, but I couldn't, neither with the blanket nor by rubbing my body. The ants and mosquito bites incessantly bothered me, but there was nothing I could do about it. The only thing that relieved this discomfort, was when I rubbed the humid mud on my body to avoid the bites, at those moments the

constant itching was replaced by a comforting sensation that I wouldn't know how to describe. I felt a constant pain in my legs that I couldn't pinpoint, and in my back too. My right arm was numb from exhaustion from giving imaginary machete blows with the stick all day long.

I was so exhausted that I immediately fell asleep. My last thought was about hoping to wake up the next day to a breakfast with a huge glass of milk with honey and some toast covered in butter and strawberry or blackberry jam.

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