

VAGABOND  
DREAMS

# VAGABOND DREAMS

Road Wisdom  
*from*  
Central America



Ryan Murdock



Polyphemus

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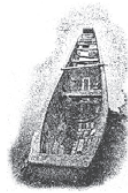
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*I am the arrow of Time's remembering.  
Recorder of half-forgotten dreamsmoke.  
Condemned to a solitary life of recollection.  
Tormented rememberer.  
Simultaneous rememberer.  
Recording the memories even as they are lived.  
Living the memories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

—R.M.

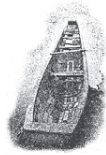
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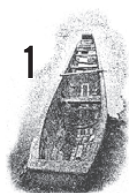
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PART ONE  
**INNOCENCE**



*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.*

# THE DREAM BEGINS WITH A KISS



**S**panish 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 heart-break, 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

years I had wanted to be good at fighting. To move with barely perceptible speed. To throw at will and not be thrown. To become invulnerable by turning weakness into strength. For 15 years I pursued that goal with single-minded devotion and success. I took all the right steps to turn those skills into a career—as an intelligence agent or a bodyguard, perhaps—one in which I would live my life based on uncompromising warrior values. Only to discover that I didn't want it anymore. I no longer believed in that world. And I had no idea what to replace it with.

There were fears in there too, of course. Fear of ending up with a conventional life. A feeling that I'd never really lived. And the fear that unless I did something about it, I would forever live my life in the third person, reading about other people's adventures without ever having any of my own.

I wasn't afraid of physical danger—I'd already proven myself in that arena. No, it was the introvert's fear of contact with others. Of having to reach out and ask for help. Of not being in control. I was too easygoing, too willing to compromise, and too quick to avoid confrontation. I had to go to a place that would harden me. A place where I couldn't rely on my reputation or the niche I'd carved out for myself. Where none of those identities mattered—martial artist, troublemaker, one of a circle of friends.

I was afraid of being rejected and abandoned, but I no longer knew how much of my life was true and how much I'd just accepted because it was easy. It was necessary to risk everything to find out. And so I burned the rest down and walked away. There couldn't be anything left to run back to.

I rode from the airport to Panama City in a small tourist van. Apart from a couple false starts with a book and a tape, I didn't speak any Spanish. I was foolish enough to

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

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.

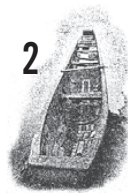
Closer to the city, we passed gothic factories that steamed gloom into the floodlights, an insectile radio station bristling with antennae, and acres of automobile lots hemmed in by the chain link fence of the economic free zone. Identical, freshly painted panel trucks filled a parking lot that extended 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.

## DROPPING OFF THE MAP



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

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 duffel. “Come, the plane is here.”

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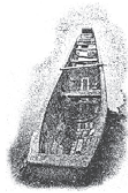
My perceptions wobbled as the single engine 12-seater clawed us into the skies and turned in a steep bank. The city centre momentarily dipped to fill the window, and my head and stomach dipped with it. We levelled off.

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

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

“Vacation?”

## About the Author



**M**y single-minded pursuit of travel literature has taken me to some of the world's most unforgiving places, including Mongolia, Tibet, Nicaragua, and North Korea, by Russian jeep, motorcycle, dugout canoe, horse and camel. When asked, I say I'm drawn to such settings because I have a keen interest in marginal regions, in nomadic peoples, and in places where cultures meet and sometimes clash. In truth, I'm not sure why I feel so compelled to go there. It starts as a tightening deep in my stomach, and the urgency builds until I find myself boarding a plane. As the trip gets closer I never want to go, because I know the journey will be a difficult one and that I'll come back changed.

I chose travel literature as a medium because it can be so many things: history, anthropology, adventure, memoir,

autobiography, narrative, and even a catharsis... The best travel writing is all of these at once. My "lyrical, poetic prose" has been described as "creative non-fiction at its best..." This embarrasses me because I'm uncomfortable with compliments. I work hard to ensure that my travel writing draws larger connections to our lives as a whole, and I hope each piece leaves my readers with meaningful insights which continue to resonate long after they've turned the last page. Travel writing without meaning bores me.

As Editor-at-Large (Europe) for *Outpost*, I travel regularly on assignment to write major features for the magazine. My work and writings have been featured extensively in print and visual media, including Toronto's *Eye Weekly* and on the primetime CTV television show *ETalk*, Canada's top-rated entertainment program. I also write and publish fitness ebooks through Shapeshifter Media, Inc, and in 2006 I was inducted into the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

You'd think that all this work would keep me out of trouble, but somehow it doesn't. From run-ins with communist militaries, to physical altercations with the secret police of a certain Asian country, to survival situations on the Mongolian steppe with two Swedish girls and a very small tent, mischief continues to stalk me despite publishing deadlines and a rather dull day-to-day life. I'm thankful for that, because if it wasn't for writing I'd be unemployable.

Stay up to date on my latest adventures through my website and blog [www.ryanmurdock.com](http://www.ryanmurdock.com)