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Bruja Crocodilo—the Crocodile Witch

By Julia Drake

5:32 a.m. Sunrise. From the terrace of our room I watch the languid flow of the Tamarindo estuary. The mangrove trees at its banks claw their roots into the muddy water. Through the prison bars of the rain, I spot the old woman in her canoe. Every morning she rows upriver, like clockwork. I wonder where she is going.

In our tiny room, my boyfriend Jared lies in bed, scratching bug bites in his sleep. He'll sleep in till late afternoon. What else is there to do, except to regret our decision to spend our long-anticipated surf vacation in Costa Rica?

“Costa Rica has the best surf in the world!” our surfer friends raved unanimously. “It'll be perfect for the romantic getaway that the two of you need.” We did. Both working full-time jobs while finishing our education, we hadn't taken a day off all year to spend time with each other. Instead, we'd been saving for a special year-end trip.

After researching different regions in Costa Rica, Playa Grande—located in the northwest of the country, crystallized as our destination of choice. Hailed by surfing experts as “the best overall surf spot in the country,” due to its consistent action and great mix of lefts and rights, Playa Grande also brought another bonus: It lay protected in the Tamarindo National Wildlife Sanctuary. Jared and I had never been to a Wildlife Sanctuary, but we imagined it meant sunbasking on uncrowded, pristine, white beaches, and being enveloped by untouched, tropical vegetation. As if by destiny, we landed a

cheap deal on a beautiful hotel right by the beach, that (judging my pictures) fulfilled our expectations of the romantic little surfer's getaway we'd been longing for.

The last hurdle to our perfect trip was that due to our work schedules, we had to travel during October, Costa Rica's rainy season.

"Even better," a friend and veteran Costa Rica traveler assured us. "Hotels are cheaper, besides, it never rains for long, and when it does, the rain is soft and warm."

Just like bathing in a tropical cocktail, I mused, as Jared and I lugged our board bags through customs at the airport in San José, Costa Rica's capital. Outside, our mini SUV rental car already awaited us, and boards locked and loaded, we hit the road to Playa Grande.

"This is going to be our best trip ever," Jared said, and we kissed, when it started to rain.

We acknowledged the first few drops with a chuckle. But as the rain grew stronger, the pothole-spiked mountain road morphed into a dangerous slip and slide, forcing us to mud-wrestle with daredevil *Chico* truck drivers.

After a strenuous 5-hour survival trek (not the leisurely 3-hour romp we had anticipated), we finally reached the town of Playa Grande at darkness. Only there was no town. Not even a village. There was nothing but jungle. Pitch black jungle.

"Well, at least we'll have our peace and quiet," I said, as we bumped along in the night. By accident, Jared spotted a sign to our hotel and we high-fived.

"All right, let's get the party started," he said, and pulled into an empty parking lot. When I opened the car door, the roaring, screeching darkness sent the tiny hairs on my arms up on alert.

We checked in with José, a happy-go-lucky *Chico* in his 30's, who introduced himself as *el director* of the hotel.

“How’s the surf’s been?” Jared asked him.

“Costa Rica has the best surf in the world!” José exclaimed. Then he flashed us a mystifying smile. “But don’t forget about our famous estuary.”

He was referring to the Tamarindo estuary next to the hotel—a 400-hectare saltwater jungle, forming the heart of the Tamarindo National Wildlife Sanctuary.

“You can rent a boat or canoe, and see many animals, birds, and trees. If you get lucky, you might even spot a crocodile—“

“Thanks, but we came here to surf,” Jared interrupted him.

“Yes, that’s the plan,” I confirmed. *What could be so exciting about a saltwater jungle?*

Jose laughed. “*Pura Vida!*” He flashed us another puzzling smile before returning his attention to the soccer game on TV.

All night, tropical lightening and thunder shook the earth, pounding against the walls of our pretty, but tiny room, as we sweated under the mosquito whirr of the giant ceiling fan.

It still rained the next morning as we shouldered our boards and walked to the beach: endless, white, but populated by huge, unfriendly crabs. For the first time it dawned on us that a Wildlife Sanctuary not only meant less people, but also more animals. As for the surf, the ocean rumbled like God’s washing machine, and the wind blew triple overhead waves into every shape imaginable, just not the nice, round barrels we had expected.

“Let’s come back later,” I said.

We turned around and ate breakfast. Then we read, played cards, checked the surf, read, played cards, checked the surf. In vain. Lightening, thunder, and rain kept pulsing like static in our ears.

During a candlelight dinner, we struggled to put our best face forward when José appeared. “*Pura Vida!*” He flashed his signature smile. “How’s the surf been?”

“We’re waiting on it,” Jared said.

“While you’re waiting, you can always check out the estuary,” José said.

“Thanks, but according to the forecast, the weather will be better tomorrow,” I said.

José laughed. “*Pura Vida!*” and walked off.

It rained the next six days straight. The unmaintained roads were completely flooded, so we were stuck at the hotel. With only four days of our precious vacation left, we finally surrendered to our gloom. Perfectionists that we were, we retreated into our respective shells, first blaming ourselves, and then each other for our failed venture.

My watch reads 5 p.m. I realize that I’ve been sitting, staring out at the estuary all day. It’s still raining. Jared’s groggy face pokes out the terrace door. “I need a drink.”

We spend another candlelight dinner, together, yet apart, when José arrives.

“*Pura Vida!*”

“*Pura Vida?!?*” Jared cries. “We’ve been sitting in the rain for six days straight. The surf sucks. We have more bug bites than we can count. Give us something else, please. Anything!”

José flashes his signature smile. “Have I told you the story of the American couple?”

Jared and I shake our heads.

“There was a young American couple once, just like you,” José begins. “They took a canoe up the estuary. At night they didn’t return. The next morning, they found the girl, drifting alone in the canoe on the river. When she came to, she told them that a big crocodile had attacked the boat. To save her, her boyfriend had sacrificed himself and jumped into the water. The crocodile swallowed him whole and swam away.” José’s eyes wander out to the estuary. “Until this day, every morning at sunrise, the woman takes her canoe upriver to search for the crocodile that ate her boyfriend.”

“The old woman in the canoe? I see her every day!” I say.

“Why is she looking for the crocodile?” Jared asks. “To shoot it?”

José smiles. “No, no. To feed it. You see, she believes that if the crocodile lives, her boyfriend lives too.” He looks at us for a long moment. “The locals call her *bruja crocodilo*, the crocodile witch. They say she helps those in search of love.” With that, he smiles, and walks off.

“Tomorrow morning we’ll get up and follow her,” I say.

Jared shakes his head. “It’s just a damn folktale.”

The next morning at sunrise though, we both hide in the bushes, our eyes scanning the dead estuary. It’s not raining. Yet.

A splash in the water, then the tip of a silver canoe pokes through the mangrove curtain of a river side arm. Another paddle stroke, then we see her: *bruja crocodilo*. A large straw hat obscures her face. Her thin, sunburnt arms wield the heavy oar with ease.

She wears a faded, beige cotton dress that belongs to a girl. An 80-year-old girl, on her way to feed the crocodile that ate the man she loved.

We watch the old woman glide past us, entranced. As she disappears around the first river bend, we push our canoe into the water and start to paddle.

“We’re losing her!” Jared gasps.

We dig our oars into the water. Sweat pours from our faces. The mangroves seem to claw for our canoe, the jungle taunts us with millions of eyes, whispering, laughing, buzzing, louder and louder—but slowly our oars synchronize and we make way.

Around the bend, suddenly all sounds stop. There’s a moment of stillness, of pure beauty in this dementia of green, and then, a torrential downpour. It’s a transition at once orchestrated and natural, ordinary and fantastical. I turn to Jared. Our eyes find each other, and here, in the womb of the jungle, everything falls off of us. Our anger, disappointment and failed expectations just wash away.

The cry of a howler monkey breaks the trance.

We look around. Bruja crocodilo? She has disappeared. It doesn’t matter. Our eyes find each other again and we know the witch has already done her magic.