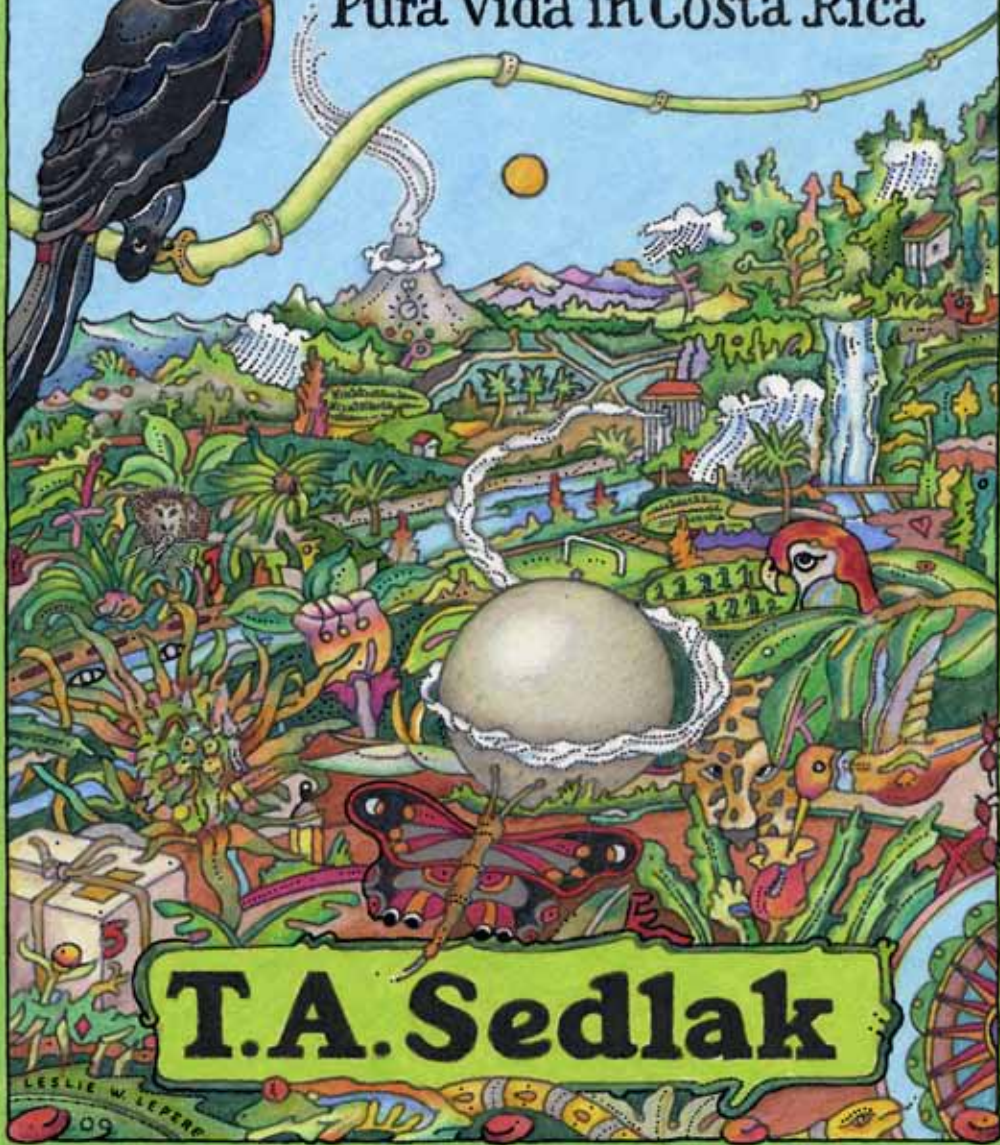


ANARCHO GROW

Pura Vida in Costa Rica



T.A. Sedlak

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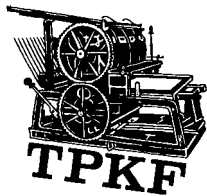
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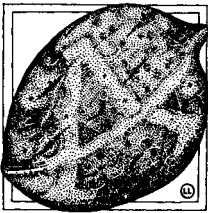
by T.A.Sedlak

Illustrations by Leslie LePere

*This is the grass that grows wherever the land is, and the water is;
This is the common air that bathes the globe.*

—Walt Whitman





It was a bright June day as Ben Starosta strolled toward the exit doors of the Juan Santamaría International Airport. The smell of fried food wafted in. He was hungry but not hungry enough to settle for fried chicken and pizza. Ben fingered visa papers in his pocket giving him permission to teach English in Costa Rica for the next four months. As far as he knew, the U.S. government believed he was an honest teacher who enjoyed traveling in Latin America.

His leisurely stroll seemed to fit him, but there was a slight hitch in his gait. His shoes squeezed his feet with every step. He had just picked them up in Lima. Every other thought was about taking them off. He wore a beige suit with a burgundy shirt. His brown leather belt matched his shoes, and the hat band on his beige Stetson matched the color of his shirt. He was a bit over dressed for a simple English teacher, yet his garb was too sharp for a businessman. He felt like a fop.

Once outside, Ben was bombarded. “You need taxi?” “Hotel?” One man got so close that Ben could smell the cilantro on his breath. Ben walked over to an orange airport taxi. He was dressed well and felt he should travel professionally.

“*Where are you going?*” asked the driver. He was clean cut. Gray pants and blue button down dress shirt.

“*Heredia,*” said Ben. “*Close to the Café Britt plantation.*”

“Let’s go.”

The driver held open the rear door. Ben slid into the seat and began loosening his shoes.

In a taxi of another color, Ben would be riding in the front, and he would already have negotiated the price. In this car, the windows were rolled up, and the air conditioning flowed. Ben missed the aromas, but he couldn’t deal with the heat in his suit.

“You here on business or vacation?” The driver looked at Ben in the rear view mirror.

“Just visiting,” said Ben.

“That’s nice.”

Ben gazed out the window, happy that the driver wasn’t trying to sell him on a hotel.

“What do you do for a living?” The driver flew through a red light.

“I teach English. Just finished in Caracas. I’m visiting friends here before heading back to the U.S.”

“Oh, so you spend a lot of time in Latin America. Your Spanish is very good. Most North Americans speak none.”

“I committed to learning it.”

“It shows.”

The driver went quiet, and Ben was happy. A different driver would be asking if he were going to meet up with any ticos. In fact, the driver may have insisted on it, even as a statuette of the Virgin Mary blessed his dashboard. There was no Virgin Mary on this car’s dashboard. It was polished. If Ben were closer, his reflection would have shone back.

“Any big plans while you’re here?” the driver asked.

“What?”

“Plans? Do you have any plans while you’re here?”

‘Oh great,’ thought Ben. ‘This guy’s going to try to hook me up.’
“No, not really. Just hanging with friends.”

“That’s cool.”

The driver again went quiet. Ben stared off the highway at the

tiny homes covering the valleys below. They were cheap houses, more tin than concrete. ‘My people,’ he thought. Eventually, they came to the intersection crowded with American restaurants. He was only a few miles from his destination. Hits from the eighties played on the radio, a pop love song. ‘At least he hasn’t brought that up,’ thought Ben. He couldn’t count the number of cab drivers who had wanted to discuss their musical tastes. He remembered one telling him how in high school he and his friends had gotten their hair cut like the members of New Kids on the Block. Not one of them had heard of Bob Dylan. Bob Marley, but not Dylan.

Soon they arrived at a modest house on the outskirts of Heredia. Like most homes in Costa Rica, a thin layer of concrete had been applied over cinder blocks, giving the walls a smooth finish. It was painted a pastel color, reminding Ben of Easter. The roof was tin. Even the roofs of the old cathedrals in San Jose are tin. The windows were screenless, and there was a black steel fence surrounding the lot.

Ben paid the driver and left him with *“¡Pura Vida!”* Though Ben could speak Spanish well, he had problems with this phrase. He couldn’t flick the “r” well. Though he constantly used the phrase, he was aware he couldn’t say it as well as the ticos. This frustrated him. Ben knew the phrase is more than a salutation. He understood *Pura Vida* is a way of life—a way that is more relaxed, honest, and pure.

“Mierda.” Ben stepped into a puddle upon exiting. ‘These fucking shoes,’ he thought. Ben opened the gate and yelled into the doorway, *“¡Hola, Estéban! ¿Donde estás?”*

A portly tico in his forties approached the doorway. He was shirtless and wore faded blue shorts. He’d been watching soccer on television. The man grabbed an old white t-shirt off a chair inside the door. He raised his arms over his head to slide on the shirt. His body looked like a map with pale patches of skin, vitiligo induced, scattered through the sea of his bronze flesh. *“Hey, gringo,”* he yelled. *“You must be lost! The coffee plantation tour is two miles south of here.”*

Ben opened the gate. *“Aren’t you supposed to be picking beans?”*

"I'm not a Nicaraguan," Estéban scoffed.

"Could have fooled me."

"Hijo de puta."

"It's good to see you, too," said Ben.

They shook hands. Estéban's were small but thick. He could have crushed Ben's narrower hand. A black digital watch covered his wrist. His vitiligo was hidden behind his shirt except for a small patch on his right hand and a few scattered below the legs of his shorts.

Estéban offered Ben a seat on the porch. *"It's good to see you here safe again,"* he said.

"It's good to be here again," replied Ben. He took off his hat and hung it on a nail jutting out from a porch beam before easing into the chair.

"You're going to Quebrada Grande tomorrow?" Estéban leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

"Of course." Ben pulled off his shoes and groaned.

"You're always on the move."

"Just got in from Caracas." Ben pulled off his dry sock, then peeled off the wet one.

"I thought you were going to Bolivia?"

"I did."

"So, you went on a mini-motorcycle diaries trip, eh?"

"Nah, my motorcycle diary trip occurred a long time ago. Finishing gathering material for my warfare book." He wrung his sock out over the concrete porch.

"What the hell did you do?" Estéban squinted at the sock.

"Stepped in one of your puddles."

"It is the rainy season."

"Yes, I can feel it." The bottom two inches of his pant leg stuck to him.

"And how is everyone in South America?"

"Could be doing better in Peru. I was there during the election when Humala was edged by a couple points." Ben stretched out his bare feet.

"Do you think it was rigged?"

"It's possible." Ben's eyes widened. *"I don't assume, though, like with the U.S."*

A group of small children ran by. Their little voices grew as they drew closer and faded as they passed.

"It does seem there are more people watching the elections down here," said Estéban.

"No doubt. But it's what the Democrats get for choosing a mark as their head corporate sponsor." Ben drew in a long breath of humid air and let it out slowly, staring at the small houses lining the street.

"So, where is Benjamin Starosta teaching now?" asked Estéban.

"Peru."

"You still have him in a country with a conservative government, eh?"

A man began to mow his lawn with a weed wacker two houses down.

"Unfortunately, I do." Ben pressed his toes against the concrete. *"Speaking of teaching, you still have close to ten library books from Quebrada Grande."* He was forced to raise his voice over the buzz of the weed wacker.

"I'll get them back. Almost finished with 'em."

"I know you'll get them back because I'll be taking some of them tomorrow. You think your library would have enough books."

"The library of Heredia doesn't have shit. Don't get me wrong, it's got some classics, but the rain puddles out here go deeper than their reading collection."

A fine mist started to fall. The man shut off his weed wacker and went inside.

"I really wish Humala could have won that election," said Estéban. *"It was like the Ticos had just lost a cup. Humala next to Morales, Ortega, Correas, and Chavez. Could have been five countries with good-hearted leaders."*

Ben laughed. *"Good people can't rule, Estéban."*

"Hogwash." He folded his arms.

“Look around,” said Ben. “Hard to find one who’s not a monster.”

“Most. Hugo and his comrades are different.”

“Eh, Shakespeare and Twain made me skeptical of them all.”

“Ha, Shakespeare and Twain. Fuentes says we live in the place of natural man.”

Ben squinted, focusing on the words.

“You remember those lines? From a book you chose for the library of Quebrada Grande.”

Ben paused. *“Because the memory of the good society lies in our origins... It also lies at the end of the road.”*

“That’s right,” said Estéban.

“I just find it hard to believe that it can happen through elected leaders, but I’ll wait and see.”

“I’m sure you will. Anyway, what was the main reason for your trip to that part of South America... I mean, Ryan Westby’s reason? That is the name you use, no?”

“Ryan ran out of tea.”

“Ah, tea of coca leaf.” Estéban licked his lips. “You’re not suffering from high blood pressure are you?”

“No, just like good tea.”

“What type of person travels to another country just to buy tea?”

