# The Ideal Village

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OUR PARTY had of course long known of the existence of the village; yet there was fear that our pilots, Fidel and Miguel, would be unable to locate its clearing in the vastness of the jungle. Not a month before, dusk had overtaken a supply plane aiming for the landing strip of some Lutheran missionaries still farther to the south, and the pilot had panicked and made a run for the lights of the coast. His fuel had carried him as far as the Montes de Ferro, where the scar of his crash was (we saw from the air) indistinguishable from a mining tip. And our second plane, piloted by Miguel, did drop from radio contact in the clouds—those strange clouds that in this part of the world form directly above the vaporous rivers, so that the sky seems to be full of enormous snakes—but it later developed that he had merely tuned in to the band of reggae music ceaselessly transmitted from the large rebel encampment in the Montes del Oro. (The encampment lies just over the border and seeks, of course, to overthrow not our exemplary and democratic government but that of the neighboring country, with its deplorable regime.) Fifteen minutes after we landed, Miguel’s Cessna materialized in the sky as a speck no bigger than a buzzard, and as indolent in motion. We cheered. Even the chief cheered, though he had seen much pain in his years in the city as a chiropractor, and had always his dignity to think of.

He and the radical priests had come forward to greet us, but as it were reluctantly, long after our engines had been cut and the unpacking of our baggage—our backpacks and *chinchorros* and Styrofoam wine coolers—had already created small mountains on the packed earth in the shadows of our wings. The landing strip was also the main street of the village, and our backwash had stripped wands of grass from the conical roofs, and our engine noise had made short work of the afternoon siesta. Of the two priests, one was tall and pale and elegant, his accent the Spanish lisp, and the other shorter and darker, his mixed blood churning in him like a suppressed vivacity. The chief, of course, had pure Indian features, though sagged and soured by his years of metropolitan experience. In late middle age he had been rallied by the nobility of this experiment—communism and ethnicity seamlessly combined—to return to the village of his origins. He wore the tribal parrot-feather girdle, which did not quite cover his buttocks, and the armbands of monkeyskin that blazoned his rank, and the vest of a gray three-piece suit. Miguel brought his little red-striped Cessna in on the money and trundled to a stop, trailing a crowd of children. Some of the children were naked, some wore blue jeans, but all appeared healthy, cheerful, and unalarmed, in contrast to the children of the unideal villages we had visited previously. There was no begging, and only on the part of the onyx-eyed infants was any tactile curiosity expressed in our apparatus or the sleek and shiny urban costume of the females in our party.

We were shown to our quarters, where some male villagers strung our *chinchorros* to the overhead beams, using the knots that only they knew, and so swiftly that even Ortega, the knot expert among us, could not follow the twists. Each tribe, in a culture based upon vines and fibers, and which thirty years ago astounded the pioneer anthropologists with the intricacies of its woven fishnets and suspension bridges, boasts a secret language of knots—a flurry of brown fingers and thumbs capped, as the knot is cinched, with a guffaw, half defiance and half celebration, out of mouths disfigured by the perpetual wad of green tobacco.

We were afforded time to freshen, and then given the expected tour of the artichoke fields, the acres of experimental cotton, the long hut where the women on looms powered by the village generator mass-produce the ancestral patterns, the small huts where the old men carve from kapok wood the same unvarying figures of coati, capybara, jaguar, and centipede, to be sold at airport souvenir shops a thousand miles away. Such an industry, the taller priest explained in his epicene Catalan, is of course less than ideal, since the zoömorphs thus manufactured are acknowledged by the hand that whittles them to have lost their sacred animistic purpose. We are in transition here. These old men—his gesture flicked across the bent, partly shaved heads—can create only these forms, which their fathers seriously confused with living creatures. The next generation, he hoped, would be quite free of the old shadows and produce wood carvings expressive of both their own individual genius and the beauty of the common weal. Whether such figures would be popular in the airport shops remained to be seen. We advance here by trial and error, he said; we do not disdain half-measures. Only in our ultimate goals are we doctrinaire.

These goals, it did not need to be said, were liberty, equality, fraternity; worker control of the means of production; freedom from oppression, subtle or overt. A social contract, in short, that had no binding edges. The smaller priest laughed, with his half-breed exuberance, out here in the artichoke fields, where the shadows were beginning to thicken, leaf upon leaf; his plump hands, slightly cupped, momentarily formed in front of his cassock a mystical shape, an intangible social form whose edges did not bind.

We swam in the river. There were no piranhas along this stretch, we were assured, and the alligators were in their *sazón de letargo*—their season of torpor. Conchita and Esmeralda looked piquant in their bikinis, slender and sallow and nervous. The opaque beige water swallowed their flesh at the knees like some magically thin paint; yet we emerged the same color as before, and uneaten. The vegetation along the riverbanks was monotonous and tall. Many tropical species, our botanist, Fernando, explained, had been shaped by nature to look almost exactly alike. An explorer from Mars, he went on to elaborate, even were he to land at our icebound poles would find microbes and lichen, so abundant—so frantically, hysterically abundant—is life on this permissive planet.

As, wrapped in our towels, we crossed the wide plaza of earth at the center of the village, between the feasting hut and the hut of adolescent initiation, we were struck by the large smooth stones dotted about without apparent pattern, and casting long shadows as evening approached. Luis, our anthropologist, surmised that these were counters in some ritual or game. He was not far wrong; the melancholy chief merrily explained that the young men of the village tested their strengths by lifting these stones. Against our polite but unemphatic protests, the present champion was called forth: a rather fat boy in blue jeans and stencilled T-shirt (*Bata Shoes*, his shirt advertised, though he was barefoot) who had to be urged forward like a bashful girl by his companions. He removed his shirt, displaying a soft-looking, rounded, almost female chest. He approached a stone—presumably the heaviest, a champion in its own stolid and mindless way—and with sudden decisiveness tugged at one end so that the monolith stood upright. Upended, it looked heavier, its shadow having become so much longer. The boy squatted and embraced the stone as a father would embrace a toddling child who had just demonstrated a need for affection. Then he attempted to stand with his burden, and the entire crowd (for our inner arc of witness had been multiplied and made into a complete circle by the arrival of much of the village population) grew tensely silent in empathy with his effort. On first attempt, the stone outbalanced him and he had to release it abruptly, dancing back lest his bare toes be crushed. On second try, he wrestled it up onto his thighs and then higher, so that the stone, like some massive slithering parasite, seemed to be searching for an entry into his body; at last, his bashful smile awash with strain, the champion had the monster on his shoulders. He turned once to face the complete circle of his audience and then dumped the stone to the ground with a thud swallowed in the burst of applause. The speed with which the boy melted into the shadows seemed modestly to state that his gift was not his own, but a divine blessing that had happened to alight on him; he had been pushed forward just as a crowd of loiterers at a street corner in my native North America might offer up one of their own to be questioned by Fernando’s hypothetical explorer from Mars.

The chief and the two priests had witnessed the demonstration and, observing our pleasure, arranged now for a blowpipe to be produced and for an especially proficient villager—a bow-legged elderly man with several front teeth ornamentally extracted and a chevron of welts on each cheek—to strike with its tufted darts small targets (a folded leaf, a Ping-Pong ball) dropped many paces away on the plaza. The blowpipe was at least ten feet long. Our shadows, too, had elongated remarkably, as an evening chill enwrapped our wet bodies; goosebumps, each with its own minute shadow, had appeared on Conchita’s thighs, and the fine hairs stood up on Esmeralda’s forearms like the feathery fringes of a tropical *rara avis*. Nevertheless, invited to try the blowpipe ourselves, we each obliged, amusing the crowd with our puffed cheeks and wide misses.

The whole thing, it should be stressed, was done with a tact, a fine lightness, not always present at such cultural intersections. Quickly, lightly, the crowd dispersed. Cooking smoke, both sweet and acrid, flavored the air. A translucent gibbous moon had appeared in the still-cerulean sky above us. We went to our quarters to prepare for the feast.

The feast! Anteater and coati meat swimming in a sauce peppered with bits of ground insect, plus side dishes of artichoke paste and boiled Pijiguao fruit, all served at the long plank table in the banquet hut, amid a plethora of toasts to progress, amity, and the overthrow of imperialism—the meal passed in a blur. Afterwards, we took chairs outdoors, into the moonlight; the earth of the plaza was as firm and level as the floor of a parlor. The native priest reached down and affectionately scratched the neck of a hairless dog that, like a few naked children, had come silently to join us. The chief had disappeared. Our pilots had retired with some onyx-eyed girls met by the river. The tall pale priest, a child in arms when his parents fled Franco, outlined his vision and responded to our questions. The rapid, segmented Spanish words—*comunidad, economía, avenimiento, modos de producción*—flowed like sparkling water across my ears. A wine bottle cast its half-empty shadow on the blanched earth, in the amazing moonlight. The dog curled himself into an intense ball, like an armadillo, beside the plump priest’s shoes, whose polished tips gleamed. The hands of the other priest in their impassioned gestures appeared elegant and white, flitting like bats in a negative film, but his voice never rose above a gentle, cautious, explanatory monotone. The moon above, sunstruck, seemed to dye a great realm of the heavens around it a lavender that drowned the very stars. The fringe of jungle at a distance around us was low, and as total as the horizon of the ocean. To think that this was the only such conversation within a thousand or more square miles—the luxury of it, the calm human grandeur. “All we ask of the government,” our host proclaimed, with his soft yet urgent melody, “is to be let alone!”

When the good priests took themselves off to bed, another bottle of wine materialized. Like children let out of school, we went for a walk that became a run. The moonlit stretch of village street that doubled as an airplane runway invited speed: our footsteps pattered; our suppressed laughter became the ecstasy of breathlessness; we flew. Pepé and Ortega and Raoul, our linguistics expert, led the way. Conchita and Esmeralda, surprisingly quick and lithe, followed hand in hand, giggling. Fernando and I and Salvador, our earthbound agronomist, ploddingly brought up the rear.

Then we stopped, at the place where the jungle trees, drawing close, grew tall. Their liana-interlaced crowns bent over us like solicitous giant heads. A clicking, whispering life could be heard behind their wall of darkness, and the soft tireless roar of the cataracts in the river far to our left. Beyond this wall the depth of forest loomed as practically infinite, like the depth of night sky above us. Looking backwards, we saw the runway as a pilot must see it in the instant before touch-down—as a cone of luminous safety framed by fatal vague shapes. Its isolation was an essential part of the plan of the ideal village. Any less far, the contaminating hand of government would reach, and the chief would not have bothered to abandon his chiropraxis and don his girdle of feathers.

Predictably, we slept badly in our *chinchorros:* each movement produced a sickening sway and there was no turning over onto one’s stomach. Early in the morning, in the silky black hour between moonset and sunrise, something or someone outside our windows repeatedly tittered. Departure proved to be a hurried, graceless process. The pilots were visibly suffering from post-coital depression as well as anxiety concerning the miles and miles of green wilderness they must droningly traverse. The chief showed up without his gray vest, which apparently had been put on out of deference to our supposed sense of decency. Conchita was given a necklace of tapir teeth; Esmeralda was allowed to purchase a carved coati at discount. We said our farewells and kept waving as our two planes banked in unison back across the plaza of baked earth and over the river and away.

It was not until weeks afterwards, collating our diaries in the course of preparing our report to the government, that we discovered how happy each of us had been to leave. Man was not meant to abide in paradise.