

Rory Osborne

A Light in the Darkness

Alone, in the jungle, at night, the darkness was all there was. Despite the full moon, mocking me from above the dense canopy, I could see nothing, and hear everything. Back the way I came was my campground, deeper into the jungle were the Mayan pyramids of Tikal, Guatemala. But with no clues to go on, my internal compass spun wildly, useless. I wandered awhile, came to a clearing that had three paths leading out, picked one, and started walking, waving a stick in front of me to check for spider webs. But an hour later I was back at the same clearing. I sat down and started listening to the sounds of the jungle at night, wondering which ones I should be afraid of.

I had arrived that afternoon, with my fellow volunteers from an animal sanctuary nearby, invited guests of the park director. We had an appointment for a guided tour in the morning, but as the sun went down and the yellow moon rose we couldn't wait. We knew we weren't supposed to enter the park at night, but we also knew that any guards that stopped us were probably just looking for a small bribe, to boost their smaller salary. Besides, it was pyramids, it was a full moon, it was the jungle! It didn't take much convincing.

From our campsite, the jungle had loomed as a dark bumpy line above the horizon, but once inside we had no choice but to march in line behind our single flashlight. Barely five minutes in, coming towards us, we saw a point of light. A security guard, we murmured, what do we do? Pay him off? Run? Two girls at the back of the line made their minds up, heading back down the path into darkness. The couple up front froze. I wavered, but as the light came close, I slunk off the path into the woods and hid behind a tree. The guard caught them, and escorted them out, right past me, hidden, my heart racing, trying not to laugh at my own stupidity. Now, not only was I alone, but I didn't have a flashlight.

Two hours later I was ready to give up, so when I saw the light again, I waved the guard down. He approached me, smiling, shining his light in my eyes. But his grin faded when he saw I was alone. "Donde estan las chicas?" he asked me. (Where are the girls?) He had seen them, he knew they'd slipped past him. "I don't know, honestly, I just want to go back," I said, exasperated, "how do I get out of here?" He rolled his eyes. "Just follow," he said, and started off down the path at speed.

I walked behind him, twisting and turning in the dark, embarrassed to have been caught, more so for having to be led home like a child. Finally I saw the dim grey light at the edge of the forest. But as we stepped out from under the canopy, I froze. He hadn't taken me to the gate, he had taken me directly to the Grand Plaza of Tikal. To my right was the Temple of the Masks, the second biggest pyramid here, and to my left the biggest, the Temple of the Great Jaguar. Above me was the full moon, its light so bright the pyramids were crystal clear, a perfect black and white photograph. I whistled lowly, straining my neck to take it all in, and grinned from ear to ear.

My reverie was interrupted by the guard yelling at me. "Donde estan las chicas?!?!" he repeated, getting angry. He had been so set on finding them, he'd taken me to where he expected them to be, assuming we had a plan to meet. I told him that I had no idea, and went back to gawking at one of the most amazing scenes I'd ever witnessed. In the end, he gave up, and told me to get the hell out. "Sorry, I don't know the way!" I said, honestly. He groaned, and pointed me down a path. I turned, and offered him my hand to shake. He looked at me like I was crazy, and didn't shake it, so I just said thank you. I meant it too, thank you, sincerely. I know he didn't realize it, but he'd found me lost in the jungle and led me here, to this, a scene I would remember for the rest of my life, a story I'd tell my grand-kids. I headed off into the forest, content, smiling, pausing only to turn and wave at the two girls, who were sitting at the top of the Temple of the Masks, unseen, trying hard to stifle their laughs.