

Not a Finger More

Richard dares me to do that *banshee yodel* again. So I do. After I say “NO” when he expects the opposite, after I call him a tyrant, after he pushes just enough that I fall to the bottom of the basement steps, after I crash-land against the washing machine, I wail like a wounded animal. When he walks away, first making sure I am more frightened than injured—he is a doctor, after all—I stand, pick up the phone and call the police. While I wait, I pull the ring off my swelling finger before it is too late to remove at all.

* * *

I had thought about leaving it in the safety deposit box before we moved to Costa Rica: my perfect blue sapphire surrounded by diamonds, a piece of night sky caught in a lasso of stars. But I couldn't. Richard gave it to me on our fifth anniversary, and I swore I would never take it off. That's why it was covered in yellow Nicaraguan dust that day I dangled my hand outside the window of our van. Richard, our four children and I were making this trip out of Costa Rica to extend our visas. An old, Costa Rican Peace Corps drop-out had told us that Panama was too risky for tourists, but Nicaragua was safe—war torn, but no longer dangerous. Richard believed him, and I had to believe Richard. Cross the border, stay overnight, and return with a stamp that extended the deadline for another four months, like feeding a meter.

I was reading and translating out loud a sign in Spanish, *PELIGRO*, DANGER, watching the landscape morph from tropical to lunar, from lush coffee plantations hugging impossible cliffs to barren ravines beckoning to be filled—I hoped not with us—as we

crossed the demilitarized zone into a country known for its contra rebels. The route was less road than a series of mouth-like craters waiting to rip and swallow the green gringos. Us. Richard gripped the steering wheel like a bronco-busting cowboy. Rugged, dark and laconic, his square chin and broad shoulders pulled me in and held me fast from the first. They still did. I bit my tongue when our van bounced into what could have been an excavation for a small skyscraper. Our children shrieked as if Disney had arranged this little treat for them. When the front tires found purchase on the other side, the van tilted crazily before righting itself again. Richard settled his nothing-to-worry-about grin on me. I swallowed the salty pocket of blood that had gathered in my cheek.

“Daddy, do that again.”

I turned to look at our youngest daughter, Laurie. Her chubby, pink face smeared with peanut butter, the only food she, Daniel, Chloe Kate, and Julie would eat when we were traveling, if McDonalds weren't an option. I pulled a few sheets off our precious roll of toilet paper — we'd been told not to expect anything more absorbent than newspaper, if we were even that lucky — and swiped at Laurie's face while she bounced in and out of my reach.

Peanut butter, not rice and beans. How could I pack enough Skippy — or Charmin — for a year? That was my first innocent question that day, a few months after Richard had sold his orthopedic medicine practice for so much money it felt like a super-jackpot lottery win. He had had a rough night and awakened agitated, excited.

“I had a dream,” he said. “We were drinking *papaya-con-leche* in Costa Rica on this porch with chickens and monkeys, all of us. But it wasn't a vacation. We were home.”

I thought, “Sounds more like an hallucination.” I said, “Maybe that was your subconscious telling you to find another job before we all end up like that crazy family in *Mosquito Coast*, blowing up an ice factory in some tropical rain forest.” I had just finished reading Paul Theroux’s cautionary tale and thought I got my refusal across with just the right amount of humor. Richard didn’t think I was funny.

Months passed. The vision moved from a fantastical dreamscape to a real reservation to have our van shipped on an empty banana boat from Wilmington, Delaware to Limon, Costa Rica. Daniel, our ten year old, threatened never to ride in the van again if there were even a hint of Chiquita left behind. When Richard asked the captain if he could accommodate our family along with the van — we would apprentice ourselves to the crew — the captain politely demurred, something about not having insurance for children. Daniel stopped gagging. I stopped laughing. Plane reservations were made. I helped the kids pack twenty duffel bags—half of them stuffed with books—and told my friends how excited and lucky I was to have this great opportunity, changing the subject when they asked me how I really felt. It was only for a year. Besides, Costa Rica was famous for butterflies and orchids, no military, and a good school system. Floridians even flew to San Jose for cheap elective surgery. How bad could it be?

We settled in Nicoya, Costa Rica’s answer to the Wild West. I sent back letters filled with stories about scorpions in the bedroom, iguanas in the toilet, and chickens in the kitchen. I said how cold showers could be really refreshing. I thought I was pretty funny and let Richard read my letters. He thought I was complaining— nothing funny there. I was re-educated with a two-hour monologue on family values. He did like the one about Maria, our next-door neighbor, who sent over *arroz con pollo* containing one of their few, precious

chickens, because she said the Americanos were like helpless children who didn't know a plantain from a banana, and she didn't want to see the family go hungry.

I made one last swipe at Laurie's face, smearing rather than clearing the oily, tan spread that kept my daughter from starving. Back in Baltimore this would have warranted a stop for soap, water, and a paper towel or two. But now, clean enough.

"Daddy, make us go sideways again," Laurie squealed into Richard's ear, her dimpled arm around his neck like a sausage necklace. He kissed her sticky fingers.

"Get back into your seatbelt, Baby Girl. I'll see what I can do."

I looked over at my husband. His pulsing right temple told me what I needed to know: he was in charge; he would take care of us. Nothing to worry about. I loved that about him. I had gone from my parents' house to Richard's house with only a summer vacation between college and marriage, and neither my parents nor my husband wanted me to worry. I agreed with them. We drove on in silence, passing walled compounds topped with razor wire guarded by armed sentries. Nicaragua was not Costa Rica. Mostly we saw shacks with dusty bodies — difficult to differentiate rib-defined children and dogs — scabbling together in barren yards. Every now and then an orange and gold lantana bush rose out of the jaundiced dust, like a lamp that had no visible power source.

"Daddy, I need to go pee," Chloe Kate, our seven-year-old said.

"Cara, didn't I tell you to take them when we stopped at the border?"

That tone again. I turned my hand, palm up, and swiped my ring across my lap. It left a dirty streak, like a layer of itself, only the wrong color, on my favorite pink skirt, the one that swished around my knees like an upside down tulip gone soft on its stem.

“I’m sorry. With all those kids begging around the car, I forgot. Maybe we can stop at the next town.” A bit of blue night-sky peeked out from between my fingers balled up in my lap. I must have been squeezing pretty hard, because when I unclenched, the ring had left behind a perfect pink imprint, like a negative. It matched my skirt.

He was quiet for a moment. Then with a tight smile he said loudly enough for the back seat to hear, “You sound just like your mother with those damn excuses, Cara.”

“Daddy said a cuss word, Daddy said a cuss word,” Chloe Kate chanted, bouncing up and down, her stubby braids flying like small blond birds.

“Hey, CK,” Richard said reaching back to tickle our middle daughter, “sometimes grown-ups say things to show how they feel. When you’re twenty-one, you can use that word. Until then, it’s only for Daddy.”

“How about Mommy? She’s twenty-one.”

“I don’t need words like that. I have other ways to share my feelings,” I told our daughter quietly.

“Yes, Mommy has other ways, don’t you, Cara?”

Richard delivered his rhetorical question with his loaded eyes aimed at me, invisible to the back seat. I silently leaned away and looked out at a walled compound, almost elegant, except for odd circular pockmarks. I saw them on several more buildings, until the whole town seemed the victim of an unfortunate, scarring rash. I wondered if the random pattern was intentional, a native architectural statement, or the result of sub-standard, sandy concrete.

“Dad, look at all those bullet holes. Wow, there must have been some gigantic fight here,” Daniel said from the back seat.

Of course. Even my ten-year-old son recognized real life when he saw it. Goose bumps rose on my hot skin. This was the closest I had ever been to violence. By choice. No horror, car chase, or war movies for me. When I was growing up, I craved stories about choosing teams for canoe races across lakes with Indian names. Instead I heard about selections, wrong lines, and camps where the prize was living another day. They probably didn't think I was listening. The closest I got to Frankenstein was with The Three Stooges as bodyguards. I even closed my eyes when Wile E. Coyote got flattened for the thousandth time by an Acme anvil.

The town appeared deserted as we drove through slowly, looking for somewhere to stop. I saw an open door leading to a jacaranda-shaded courtyard, full of children and adults celebrating something, maybe a birthday. I made eye contact with a black-haired woman whose smile disappeared as mine widened. I leaned out the window, and just as I was about to try out my Spanglish, her door slammed shut, as if it had been a mistake that it had been opened at all. We rode on in silence, except for Chloe Kate whining in the back about the heat. We circled the empty town square looking for some sign of hospitality. There was none.

“We're going to press ahead to Managua,” Richard said. “We'll get back on the road, and the kids can pee behind some bushes.”

“I don't want to pee in the jungle. What about scorpions?” Julie our oldest said. Ever since she found one in her favorite jeans on the laundry line — she had beaten it with the killing stick notched with her extermination count — Julie kept strict vigil. She even helped Chloe Kate build a cage out of a scrap of screen to protect hers and her sister's toothbrushes against ant nesting. Just like her father: see a problem; name it; face it; fix it.

Richard stopped. The kids piled out of the van with Julie beating the bushes. We sat in silence and watched our intrepid daughter lead her siblings, with fists-full of wadded toilet paper, into the scrub. They were a page out of National Geographic. Back in Baltimore they each had a private bathroom. They took bubble baths in a marble Jacuzzi. They had towel warmers. Julie would never have learned how to kill scorpions from me. When they were finished, we pulled back onto the cratered highway. I reached over and massaged Richard's shoulder. Sometimes a touch helped.

“Daddy, I'm hungry, too,” Laurie wailed.

“Well, your mother shouldn't have given away your lunches, now should she?”

Richard shrugged his shoulder out from under my hand. I didn't think he had seen me passing out our sandwiches to those begging kids at the border. His eyes were as hard and dark as the blacktop under our tires.

I reached into my bag, found a plastic spoon and handed it back to Daniel with a jar of peanut butter. “Here, help your sisters with this. There's a jug of water in the back. This should hold you until we get to the hotel.”

I settled back into my seat, rested my cheek against the cool glass of the side window and closed my eyes. I had checked the map at the border. One main road traversed Nicaragua. Richard would get us to Managua without my navigating. A silly song Chloe Kate made up about *Mommy reading maps backwards* buzzed through my head. I woke up with a headache to the sound of my children calling out answers to Richard's rapid-fire geography questions.

“Okay, give me the Great Lakes in order, west to east.”

Julie and Daniel's voices tangled around my head.

“I know, I know, it’s my turn. You answered last time,” Julie shouted.

I turned and saw Daniel clamp his hand over his older sister’s mouth and with a gotcha-smirk say, “Lake Superior, Huron, Michigan, Erie, Ontario.” While he waited for Richard’s praise, Julie ripped Daniel’s hand off her mouth and crowed, “You’re wrong. Michigan comes before Huron. I guess you read maps backwards like Mommy.”

Richard laughed out loud.

I stretched my lips, not exactly a smile, and pretended it didn’t bother me.

The rest of the trip passed in relative quiet. The closer we got to Managua, the more life we saw. A snarl of arms and legs, both animal and human, dangled off every kind of wheeled contrivance. Rooftop bus riders were perched so precariously they might have been circus acts. I couldn’t take my eyes off their nonchalant war against gravity. They needed to move, and they found a way.

Daniel’s voice brought me back. “Hey, Dad, can we go there after we check into our hotel?” He was pointing to a sign *VOLCAN MASAYA PARQUE NATIONAL*. Lately he had been interested in explosions, both man-made and natural, a short-lived phase, I hoped.

“I don’t see why not, Dano.”

“I think we should find out if it’s safe, first,” I said.

“It’s a national park, for God’s sakes, Cara. You worry too much.”

“Yeah, Mommy, don’t worry so much. We’ll take care of you,” Laurie said in a mimicking voice. My face burned. My four year old was imitating Richard. My eyes were throbbing along with the top of my head.

We drove into Managua. The Hotel International was an easy find. It was the only building taller than two stories still upright. I took no comfort in its verticality, the jagged

crack running down its fake Mayan façade an almost perfect match for the lightning bolt cleaving my brain. Rubble bordered the hotel on three sides, the leftovers of a ten-year-old earthquake the country, in its war frenzy, didn't have the resources to clean up. On the fourth side, elegant European-style villas housing foreign embassies stood incongruously intact.

After an expensive hotel lunch, Richard mumbled that he was paying the entire wait staff's salary for the month. We checked into a modern room with the kind of plumbing and electricity we had not seen since we left Baltimore. The children bee-lined for the television. Even Spanish soap operas looked good. Just as quickly, Richard turned it off.

"I thought you wanted to see a volcano. Who's ready?"

I got up from my chair slowly. What I really wanted was a warm shower and a nap in the cool, dark room, by myself. I turned to Richard. He cut me off as if he read my mind.

"Come on, the fresh air will do you good," he said. I translated: he didn't want to take all the children by himself.

I reached for my purse. I remembered the armed guards we had passed on our way into the hotel, to keep the beggars out, Richard had told me. I hooked the strap around the right side of my neck and under my left arm. We passed through the lobby. The concierge said the park was worth a visit and that we shouldn't have any problems there. I thought about leaving my ring and our cash and travelers checks in the hotel safe, but Richard said not to bother. We were safe. I looked out a side window at some almost-naked, stick-thin children playing in the rubble while their equally gaunt mother tried to sell single cigarettes to anyone leaving or entering the hotel.

We piled back into the van. Managua slipped past us like a child's block world knocked sideways by the class bully. But every now and then a small new building stood up above the wreckage. We stopped at a kiosk for some cold Cokes and an orange Fanta for Laurie. A toddler, wearing a rag of a diaper, sat under a table, banging a spoon and kicking at a chicken getting too close to his toes. A small wiry man, probably the father, was frying empanadas while his soft, round wife swept the concrete floor. I looked at my children, quiet and safe in the back seat. I looked at Richard. He was right. My headache was easing.

After about ten kilometers, dodging ox carts, tractor-fronts, donkeys, and bicycles piled high with rag-tag riders precisely counterbalanced by bulging sacks—more circus acts—we pulled into the Masaya Volcano parking lot. A small armed-guard, not much more than a boy, stopped us, and pointed where to park. I frowned at Richard when I saw the crusty rifle he shouldered against his torn park service t-shirt.

“See, don't you feel better now? This is the only entrance and exit, and nobody's getting past him.”

I nodded, more to appease Richard than out of relief. I hugged my bag with our cash and travellers checks close to my ribs. Richard grabbed his bag with our passports and visas in one hand and scooped up Laurie with the other. Julie, Daniel, and Chloe Kate ran up the twisted stone stairway carved into the side of the volcano. The rise was so steep and sharp circling up into the low-hanging clouds Rapunzel's castle could have peeked through the mist. I picked my way over loose lava rock, too slow to keep up with my scrambling children. Richard, with Laurie on his shoulders, passed me when I stopped to catch my breath. The wind was so strong, I saw rather than heard Laurie's squeal when a gust whipped my tulip skirt up to my chin, exposing me to a group of tourists on their way down.

I gasped and laughed at how I would tell this one later: a Nicaraguan Marilyn-Monroe-over-the-steam-grate moment.

I finally reached the top. Knots of tourists were milling around the rocky plateau. Richard, with Laurie firmly in his arms now, motioned for me to come close. He was standing at the edge of the caldera. I craned my neck over the precipice and saw a very rough footpath leading down to a plateau full of stone letters about fifty feet below us. I caught Daniel's, Julie's, and Chloe Kate's heads as they bobbed out from under an overhanging ledge.

"I told them it was all right to go down there and spell their names," Richard said, pointing to the other tourists' volcanic graffiti. He almost had to shout, the wind was so loud. Laurie buried her face against her father's shoulder.

"Daddy, I want to go back to the car," she wailed into his shirt, "I don't like it up here."

Richard hugged Laurie tightly to him and turned to me. "You'll be all right. There's only one way up or down, and the guard's there."

"Go ahead," I said, the wind almost stealing my voice. "I'll wait here for the kids."

I watched Richard and Laurie begin their descent and noticed another couple leaving right behind them. I turned back to the caldera to keep an eye on my children. There were only two young men left on the plateau with me, locals by the looks of them, who might be playing hooky. Some things are the same everywhere: a nice day, a long lunch, and before you know it, AWOL. I smiled at them and then turned to motion for the kids to finish and climb back up. I walked to the far side of the plateau to get a better look at the surreal view across the needle-sharp landscape stretching out below me.

Just then, one of the young men, the one who smiled back, gestured frantically for me to come closer. I panicked thinking maybe one of the kids had fallen. Before I took my second step, I felt a hard hand across my mouth and another around my waist. For a moment I relaxed. It must be Richard come back to surprise me, Laurie putting him up to this little game. Then I was on the ground, the smiler pinning me down. No game. I tightened my body as if it would make a difference. The other one cut my shoulder strap with a swift, accurate slice. I was an animal with nothing to lose. I thrashed blindly. My fingers gripped the already amputated bag at my side as I weighed my options: to give up our money or die or both. Then the blade flashed again so close to my mouth, I tasted dank metal at the back of my throat. I screamed into the wind. A hand moved the knife to my neck, where it delicately cut through a fine link in my gold-chain necklace. I felt fingers, not my own, touch my ring and pry my fist open. My hand was swollen. The ring was a blue ballooning aneurysm sprouting from my knuckle. The only way to get it was to take my finger. I stared at a hand that was attached to a wrist that was mine. The knife made a tentative move toward the ring.

“No, no, please, no,” I whimpered.

I lay perfectly still, transfixed. I wondered, in the time it took for the point of the blade to rest gently under the sapphire, how I would tell Richard that I lost the ring. I looked at the gaunt, man-boy straddling me. Our terrified eyes met.

And I knew: this was his first time, too.

He dropped my hand and flicked the blade carefully between my watchband and my wrist. Not a scratch, and the watch was his.

The smiler was losing patience. He pulled his partner off and kicked me toward the edge of the caldera. I would not survive the drop.

I didn't want my children to see.

Oh. God. No. I live in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. The concierge said it was safe here. Richard promised I'd be safe. I squeezed my eyes shut. Pain was coming.

I don't know how long I waited to die. When I opened my eyes, the men had disappeared.

"RICHARD..." The wind swallowed my scream. I had come to rest at the cliff's edge, my hand dangling into the abyss. The ring remained embedded in my swollen finger.

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Later, I thought how desperation cushioned my attackers' flight, their thin-soled sandals no match for foot-slicing outcroppings. Later, when I felt poetic rather than mugged, I heard the rocks in the caldera calling the sapphire back home. In the years since we've returned to our estate overlooking Lake Roland, our children took to calling us Madre and Padre. When they talked about our time away, they described it as demarcated by the volcano: Madre, before and after. I knew what they meant.

In the beginning I told what I remembered. Then I left the story to my family. Their personal embellishments made heroes of whoever the teller was. Daniel and Julie both claimed they saw me first, when they climbed up out of the plateau and pulled me back away from the ledge. Chloe Kate said how she was the only one not afraid to go down the stone staircase by herself to get Padre. Laurie said how she saved her Padre by making him leave before the bad men came. Richard described his chase over the sharp-as-broken-glass

terrain, with shots fired by both him (with a borrowed pistol) and the armed guard like a scene from “Raiders of the Lost Ark.”

There were things I did not tell. Some days I felt hands on my neck. Some days I wondered who got our dollars: the man-boy’s family, maybe a baby sister or brother, a grandmother? Some days I felt so light, a good, strong wind could have carried me away. The children stopped singing the *reading maps backwards* song. Richard called me hard and guarded because I looked directly at him and sometimes said *No*.

One day I said *No* at the wrong time. He was talking at me in our bedroom. One hour. Two hours. Three hours. He had so much to say about how disappointed he was: why I didn’t trust him, why I didn’t respect him, why I wanted to get a job now that the children were growing up. I should have wanted to be with him. And there was so much yard work to do. We could do it together. Except for the months that he was in The Congo doing his medical philanthropy.

If I were working, who would pick up the black walnuts all over the property that the squirrels wanted to bury in his newly seeded lawn, all four acres of it?

“I bet Phil and Hugh next door will be happy to earn some spending money,” I said.

And who would keep the woodstove going?

“Turn on the furnace until I get home,” I said.

It was getting dark and late, dinnertime. Laurie and Chloe Kate were downstairs pretending we were *in conference*, which was Richard’s way of telling them that he wanted me all to himself. Daniel and Julie were away at college.

“Madre, we’re hungry,” Laurie called up the stairs. “When’s dinner?”

Finally. Saved.

“I’ll be right down, honey.”

I headed toward the doorway. Before I could ask if she wanted rice or noodles with her chicken, Richard jumped in front of me.

“Madre and I aren’t finished with our conference, Baby Girl. You and CK can get a snack.”

“I don’t want a snack, I want dinner,” Chloe Kate whined up the stairs. Her intolerance for delayed gratification was legendary.

“Do what I said. Madre will come down when she’s ready.” Richard enunciated each word.

Silence downstairs. Chloe Kate swallowed her father’s order. It would hold her. I sank back.

He planted both feet in opposite corners of our bedroom door and reached to the upper corners with his hands.

He was an *X*. A fill-in-the-box next to your selection *X*.

I watched him, and for a crazy moment wanted to believe he was stretching.

“I’d like to finish this conversation later, after dinner,” I said as if I were asking a friend to call me back later. Because I was busy. No big deal. Nice and easy. I moved toward him and judged the space between his elbow and his knee.

“No, Cara, I want to finish now. I’m not really hungry yet. You’re not, either.”

If I bent down and hunched my shoulders, I could just squeeze through because of how his right hip was canted.

I made my move.

My head grazed his forearm.

I was in trouble.

“You shouldn’t hit me like that, Cara.”

He dropped both arms, grabbed my neck and shoulders and pushed. Hard. I missed the foot of our sleigh bed. Just. I watched myself fall and land on the thick plush of a rose and lily bouquet rug we bought together in Manhattan. Madison Avenue. Aubusson, I think. On my way down, the flowers looked so silky I almost didn’t think to break my fall, and then was surprised at the abrasions on my elbows.

There was more. I felt other hands. On me. On my neck. Around my waist.

Boy-man and Smiler hands.

I was above the caldera, and if I didn’t scream for help with all my might, the wind would lift me and carry me over the edge, like a bird without wings, and I wouldn’t wake up because this was not one of those dreams.

My bedroom, my house, my world filled with a terrible sound. It was coming from me. Five minutes...fifteen...sixty. I didn’t know how long. I heard a keening harmony from downstairs. I stopped. Richard was standing over me.

“You’re scaring the girls. I didn’t push you that hard. Stop screaming. You sound like a banshee yodeler.”

I stopped. His face was stretched and discolored like something spoiled, waiting to be thrown away. He ran down the stairs, and I heard murmuring, comforting sounds breaking through the miasma that was my daughters’ fear. I pulled myself up, like a dog, on all fours, panting. If I could make it downstairs, they would see I was all right. With legs that felt as if at any moment they would return to a canine configuration, I let myself circle,

slide, and slip down my winding staircase, where a lucky girl could have floated in her wedding gown toward her waiting Prince Charming.

Richard was standing, hugging, and comforting Laurie and Chloe Kate, telling them I was fine.

“I need to apologize. I want to apologize,” he said. He reached out to include me in his circle of love. Chloe Kate and Laurie looked at me sideways, to see how fine I was. I was so stunned at the impending apology—to me—Richard never apologized to me—that I gave my daughters a nod of confirmation.

“Girls, I’m so sorry Madre and I scared you. Madre didn’t mean to scream so loud. We were having a disagreement...that’s all. Everything’s going to be all right...you know how much we love you.” He stopped talking, and tears, real tears, puddled, spilled, and left glistening tracks down his grey, drawn cheeks. I didn’t know why he was crying. Laurie and Chloe Kate were probably crying from relief. My eyes were dry.

* * *

I am ashamed that my first *banshee yodel* was not enough to send me packing. Nor even the second. When I’m sitting at the bottom of the basement stairs, when the police come, and I call Richard by his name, I don’t press charges. It’s not until later, after a small and almost silly thing—a final straw thing—that I feel the full shame of my children thinking this is what a wife looks like. I chase an oxcart that appears full, but I make room. In spite of my terror of falling off, I pile on my favorite blue leather recliner, my books, and, of course, Laurie, the only one left at home. I take what I need, not a finger more.

After I throw my piece of night sky caught in a lasso of stars into Lake Roland, my balance obtains. I don’t know what took me so long.

