

Ken's hands were hurting but he dared not let go. His grip on the tailgate was precarious, his elbow ached, but he had to hang on. Lives were at stake, or they might be.

The truck was dilapidated and there were so many people crammed into the pickup bed, 16 or more of them, much more than were wise. Perhaps they were more weight than the manufacturer intended. The driver, whom Ken guessed to be the owner, was not complaining. In fact it was he who urged Ken and Alice to get in, to hurry, before it was too late.

Ken peered into the darkness behind them when he could manage to turn his head a bit, but saw nothing of the certain destruction and devastation pursuing them. That was good. The salvage of lives fleeing in a pickup truck was assured. But they had been unable to save anything else.

Ken wondered about his neighbors. They must be leaving behind animals, pets and small livestock perhaps, and family heirlooms in homes they'd had for generations. He himself was braced for the loss of property just purchased, a dream of happy retirement, a place for his progeny to visit, a new home. It had cost a good amount of money, of course, so that would also be gone—they had, in fact, signed the papers just days ago. He was shocked to have it all wiped out, but a natural disaster could do that.

He looked at Alice who was huddled in the truck bed now, giving him a little sad smile. Less than an hour ago they were relaxing in their new home. It was a half concrete, half wood two-bedroom dwelling with a tin roof and screened windows. They'd made a special trip to Costa Rica to close the deal, it hadn't been a convenient

time and their tickets had been expensive. Alice had rearranged her cases, getting them covered by other midwives in the small window between birthing clients. Ken had retired a year ago, his wife was letting go of her practice, and they planned to live on Ken's social security income. They could, in Central America.

In 34 years of marriage they had only grown closer. They'd been through a lot together: the births of seven children, the loss of their first home. Their youngest child had recently moved away to college. They'd lost a little place they loved and in which they'd started their Southern California family. The four bedroom house and acre of land had been taken away from them by the government, under eminent domain. The compensation they received was not enough to pay legal fees incurred in the fight. There had been a bankruptcy.

That was behind them by decades. It had happened to much younger people. Here in Costa Rica, their property was so remote they couldn't even legally buy it except by forming a corporation to lease it for a century. Friends were incredulous. They warned that foreign governments were risky and could seize the rights on a whim. It made Ken and Alice smile, because their own government had already done that to them.

Could lightning strike twice?

No major taxes threatened them here; they had encountered no obscene closing costs. They'd paid outright. Travel, through international airports, regional airports, and boat taxis, was the main expense. There was a road, a much longer route, proving they were not technically on an island, but the location was isolated. Everything had to be brought in.

The electric bill was \$20 a month.

Their house was across a dirt road from the black sand Playa Zancudo. The name means “Mosquito Beach,” and there was some seasonal truth to it. When city friends probed with concern about insect-transmitted diseases like dengue fever, Alice countered with the growing threat of West Nile Virus in California and the greater health benefits of their Zancudo lifestyle.

Fresh fruit being primary in the couple’s diet, they loved that the new property contained exotic fruit trees in abundance. They ate daily salads, coconut soups, root vegetables and local fresh fish. No processed foods tempted them, although there was the option of some small restaurants when they wanted rice and beans.

Their active Costa Rican lifestyle was natural and fun. They bicycled, walked, and swam daily. They hiked miles in nearby primary Amazonian rain forest and explored mangrove estuaries by kayak. They relaxed in hammocks. They fell in love. And they did their homework.

Playa Zancudo was not subject to hurricanes. It had never suffered typhoons, tidal waves, shark attacks, jellyfish invasions or salt water crocodiles. Only the mildest of currents flowed there.

But they were fleeing from a major Tsunami.

Alice had been reading to Ken from a memoir she enjoyed, an inspiring tale of a cancer survivor, when the phone call came. Ken was preparing for bed, stripped down to his undershorts, having put his glasses aside and brushed his teeth. The phone call was unexpected, probably a wrong number.

It was a wrong number.

Ken watched Alice pick it up and listen. “I’m not Kate,” she said. Out of the few fellow gringos they had met in Zancudo, there was a woman named Kate. Perhaps this call was meant for her. But Alice didn’t hang up.

“What are you talking about? We are near the point, not on high ground at all.” Probably the caller is drunk, thought Ken.

“No second story, no car,” Alice continued. “Nine o’clock? Okay, I will go outside and see what the neighbors are doing. Thank you.” She hung up.

“You won’t believe it,” Alice explained. “She said a Tsunami is due to hit us at nine o’clock. It’s 8:15 now. She said we need to evacuate. I promised I’d go outside.”

“What has she been smoking?” Ken asked.

He was getting more tired, wanting to lie down, but he could tell Alice was becoming excited. It was true they had no TV or radio they could turn on. Alice did not argue with his skepticism, but she was putting on lightweight clothes to go out. If it were true, they should be gathering a few things—passports, money, keys, camera and credit cards... But if they did that, they’d feel foolish. It couldn’t be happening.

Alice said she wanted to check with the neighbors. Ken almost let her go alone and turned around and went to bed. But here in Central America, he felt he had better go along to protect her. He pulled on some shorts and followed her out the door in his bare feet. He would have pulled the door closed but it locked automatically, and he didn’t have the keys in his pocket. He left it ajar. Alice’s purse was on the table.

She was tramping across the yard in the direction of the neighbors, a Tico (as Costa Ricans call themselves) family of six. Spanish speaking, they owned a boat and one motorcycle besides bicycles. They had a television and Ken could view it right now

through their window. It was showing file footage of the recent Tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia that claimed thousands of lives and for which no warning had been given.

Alice stopped. She waited because headlights had appeared in the distance. They were coming from the point, the place the peninsula ended. Poor but industrious fishermen and squatters inhabited the eroding land there, living on coconuts, fish and alcohol. The headlights moved toward them wildly on the deeply rutted road. It was the pickup truck, metal protesting noisily as it approached. Ken could see that the cab of the vehicle contained an infant, a young Tica mother, and two elderly women besides the driver, who was a middle aged man. On every side young Tico men held on, they shouted uproariously like teens coming from a soccer match.

Pulling up abreast of Alice, the truck stopped. The driver gestured and yelled. Ken wished he could understand, but Alice was already responding. "Tsunami?" she asked incredulously.

"Si, si," the man answered. His next exclamations were peppered with "Venga, Rapido, Peligroso!" Yes, come quickly, danger!

Ken thought of a nightmarish cartoon. But there were no other cars leaving the point. It was 8:30. There were sounds erupting in the night, sirens, warnings. He was amazed such a system was in place here. Ken looked at Alice's face and saw her make a decision. She jumped over the truck's tailgate. Bodies shifted and made room. All eyes were on him.

He turned toward the house, saying "Wait..." but was interrupted by shouts, "No tiempo!" No time! It was surreal. Alice called to him, "Please come on!"

She was leaving and he could not let her go alone. How would their children feel if they were lost because he hesitated? Ken climbed onto the tailgate, barely securing a hold when the truck lurched down the road as fast as it could. He held on with tightened abs, using biceps and leg muscles. His body cooperated in the quest to survive. He watched anxiously as his neighbors came outside, more shouting from the truck driver, but he didn't stop. The family's boat would be useless, but where could they fit six more people?

The truck reached the center of town and stopped, but a sense of urgency continued. A few of the young men clambered up roofs and pounded on doors. The town was deserted. Words were spoken to Ken and he directed the speakers to Alice, who understood more Spanish. She clearly did not get much of what was said. Did the men expect them to get out of the truck? What was going on?

Discussions erupted among the Ticos. Everyone returned to the vehicle and prepared to keep going, but the truck's ignition only whined weakly. The driver tried again, but the motor failed to turn over. The battery's dying wheeze was audible to all, and then only soft clicks emerged. The crowd in the pickup bed stared into each others' faces in mute horror. Ken's heart was pounding.

Two men jumped down and propped the hood up. Others provided flickering lighters to see by. Wires were shaken, pulled, pushed. The motor would not ignite.

More bodies moved decisively. Most had bare feet and chests, like Ken, who thanked the stars it was not raining. As the men teamed up to push the truck, including Ken below his spot on the bumper; Alice started to get up but was shouted down.

The Ticos worked in unison—rocked, gained momentum and finally propelled the truck until they could only run alongside. The driver popped the clutch, but it did not start the engine. Defeated, the men rested a moment and then tried again, their efforts futile. There were quiet murmurs of despair.

Within moments another truck arrived and stopped alongside the stranded vehicle. It was newer, but just as small and there were already people aboard, who frantically shifted to make more room. The women and the baby in the cab were moved into the new truck. When they were seated, a tall young man approached Alice. The young man locked his eyes on hers, willing her to understand him.

Alice translated for Ken, “He says it’s very important I understand this is a serious emergency. A 7.9 earthquake occurred in the ocean right in front of Zancudo. A tidal wave is coming. It has never happened before. He says I have to get into the other truck right now.”

The flood of fears coursing through Ken’s mind changed course. He had been afraid the Ticos would save themselves, leaving him and Alice behind. He was unprepared for what seemed to be a plan to separate them, to send Alice with the other women.

Alice was saying she understood. Ken would help her get into the truck. As soon as it was done, other men insisted Ken should sit beside his wife. Alice’s face shone with gratitude. Ken was happy to be more comfortable, but what about the others? Who would be left behind?

Another truck, a four wheel drive, appeared. The men thanked their rescuer and climbed in. Racing down the road again, Ken retrieved what the young man had said: “it

never happened before.” Could it not be happening now? A false alarm? But, his mind argued, these are locals! They should know!

Ken’s new fears intensified, even as the old ones diminished with the dark landscape behind them. He started to worry about how they would get out of the country without passports, without money. They might find themselves relying on whatever help they could get from the U.S. embassy—he didn’t even know where it was. How would they pay a taxi to take them there? They might miss their plane. Alice rested her hand on his, her shoulder touching his arm.

Lights began to emerge in the distance. They met no vehicles going the other way, which was telling. Conversations in the truck ignited, the mood lightened. The truck came to a halt in front of a house in which all the lights were on. A radio blared announcements as people poured out of vehicles around them. They recognized the young clerk from Zancudo’s general store. He smiled shyly and said in English, “This is my brother’s house.”

“Where are we?” Alice asked.

“Comte,” the clerk answered, “Don’t worry. They will open the church if we have to stay the night. There is plenty of food, too, and blankets. The people who live here will bring whatever we need. Right now the radio is saying we have to wait until midnight. That is when the danger will be passed.”

Another man approached Ken, asking questions in Spanish. Alice turned as the man hurried away. “He just asked if you were cold,” Alice translated, “He’s going to get you a blanket.”

Ken ran after and caught the man. “No, no,” he almost shouted, “It isn’t necessary, I’m fine.” He spread his fingers, palms down, slicing the air repeatedly in a baseball “safe” gesture. He felt ridiculous, as he was hardly the only one in shorts here, although he was possibly one of the few who had left behind much else to wear.

Circling his arm around Alice’s shoulders, he spoke quietly to her. “There probably is no Tsunami. I want to get back as soon as we can. The door was left open, the passports...”

“I thought of that,” she agreed, “Probably this is a false alarm. There might be looting...”

Now that they were out of mortal danger it was easier to sort things out, to indulge in a bit of intimate defensiveness:

“I wanted to go back in the house for the keys and the passports, but you jumped in the truck...”

“You didn’t hear her on the phone! All I could think of was how the kids would feel if we wasted time and lost our lives...for money!”

Now they could let themselves think about her camera, and the bank card to their new Costa Rican account. He hugged her. No matter what happened, blaming each other would not help. They had come here together for adventure, after all. And at least it wasn’t raining!

The air was humid, as always, but clear, a truly beautiful night. No signs of stormy weather. Ken wondered what the source of the Tsunami story was. He was certain now that it had been blown out of proportion, perhaps even an elaborate hoax. If so, the joke was on most of the 400 citizens of Zancudo.

A small motorbike weaved its way toward them. Ken recognized the riders—a young Canadian couple from Oceano, the best restaurant on the beach. Mark was maneuvering around people and potholes. Stephanie held onto him with one hand and steadied a cat carrier behind her with the other. They stopped to talk.

“It’s all clear, the entire Pacific coast of Central America is out of danger,” Stephanie told them.

Mark was talking excitedly, “We had just talked about how we’d handle an emergency if we had to get out quickly. The cat and the passports, that was the plan!”

“We left without our passports or anything else,” Alice said grimly. “We’d better get back!”

“Buses are coming,” Stephanie offered, “We saw them. They’ll be here soon. It’s a good thing someone thought of using the school buses. I guess the police were on vacation...”

Buses! Of course, that’s why the town was deserted. Everyone left before they’d gotten the wrong number phone call. Ken realized the middle aged man in the pickup truck who stopped for them had been a real hero, risking his own life to rescue people left behind, people like them, who had no way of knowing what was going on. But they had heard sirens...

A schoolbus arrived to take them home shortly after Mark and Stephanie took off. There was plenty of room on it. Ken climbed up the steps behind his wife and saw quickly that he was the only man on board. The other passengers were women and children.

As the bus got underway, Alice thanked the other passengers in Spanish and told them what property they'd just moved into. She whispered to her husband that the Ticas had been discussing them: Where were they staying? Did they need help getting back to their motel? The concern had been mounting until she spoke up. The bottom of Ken's heart softened.

The bus was stopping at homes on the road. Children were admonished to go to sleep, men stepped forward to greet their wives, sisters, and mothers descending the steps. So the Tico men had stayed behind to protect property and sent their families on the bus.

"I'm glad you came with me," Alice told Ken, reading his thoughts. "These men were foolish, they should have evacuated. A real disaster would have left widows and fatherless children."

The bus stopped last at the school, they would have to walk the half mile home. The police station was shut up, dark and quiet. Again, the lack of rain was marvelous but Ken did not relish the walk in bare feet. They started out and noticed many things for the first time.

There were street lamps! Considering the unpaved, rocky, rutted and mud-holed condition of the road to have it lighted was a miracle! No moon shone, but the stars blanketed the sky. Then there were the sounds—they laughed and poked each other because it was a chorus of frogs who mimicked air raid sirens, the incessant "whoop, whoop," having fooled them. It was amazingly loud.

They had never been out at night before. Ken always went to bed early and Alice didn't want to risk biting bugs in the darkness. They hugged each other. A Tica woman waved as she found her home and then they were alone on the road.

"I guess we're part of the community now," Alice said.

They stopped in their own front yard to enjoy the stars another moment before entering the house that was still there and still open, possibly looted.

Ken pushed on the door and saw Alice's purse on the table. Alice was right behind him. She rummaged through her bag and found both camera and wallet with all their cards and money safely inside. Ken was already in the other room, finding his wallet and the passports undisturbed.

They looked at each other with relief and gratitude. "It'll make a good story," Ken said.

"The kids will never believe it."