



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BAREFOOT IN BEAUTIFUL BELIZE

LIVING WITH MENNONITE MISSIONARIES

It thunderstormed on the two ferries I took out of Mexico to Belize. Water fell like cold fire, pounding the ferries into submission.

The reward for the rage was a rainbow that appeared, as if by magic, to form a graceful arch of pink, teal, and orange above the water, a handshake of friendship between the ocean and the elements above it. The sun peered out from behind the clouds, and turquoise waters shimmered like crystals under its newly scathing gaze. In the depths of the waters swam golden, green,

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and indigo schools of fish—forming their own underwater rainbows—alongside sharks and stingrays that drifted through the currents like ghosts. White-winged seagulls navigated through the winds like paper planes.

Belize is a haven for the over-worked and the under-sunned, a restful and leisurely *ashram*, except that the God here is not Buddha but Bob Marley. Belize has a resident population comparable to that of Honolulu, Hawaii, and its culture is similarly constructed on sandy beaches and the American vacationers who seek them. Belize was previously called British Honduras, and the English queen continues to reign as monarch into the present today, playing a mostly ceremonial role.

I'd thought my ferry rides from Mexico to Belize were turbulent—subject to the fury of clouds that opened and closed like trapdoors—but they were like a spa in comparison to the bus rides of Belize. Bus rides were like *Orange Is the New Black*—a dog-eat-dog bubble of prisoners trapped together. Passengers *ran* onto buses, pushing and shoving, making a mad dash as though they were escaping a fire. I couldn't do it. I missed the bus.

The second bus rolled in, and I would have missed it again had a sturdily built woman in the crowd not taken pity on me and grabbed my wrist, thrusting forth through the throng with me and my suitcase in tow. She pulled me onto the bus, but there were no seats left. I resigned myself to standing tiredly for two and a half hours, finding myself reminiscing about something I'd thought I'd never reminisce about: the air-conditioned buses of Mexico, where I'd sat next to snoring men and the TV screens had played awful action movies like *The Fast and The Furious*, made worse by their dubbed Spanish.

Two women on the bus permitted me to perch on the edge of their seat. The bus wound through neighborhoods of pastel-painted houses and orange orchards and palm trees. Ranges of

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mountains rose in the distance like hazy apparitions, their foliage a menagerie of all shades of green: dark, bright, lime, olive. The national motto of Belize is appropriate to its landscape: "Under the shade I flourish."

As I looked out the bus window, I noticed something conspicuously absent in Belize, something favored in Mexico but shunned here, something that formed also a crucial difference between Indonesia and Malaysia: fast food. There were no gaudy M-shaped arches in Belize, no posters of Colonel Sanders's face.

"The only food chain here from America was Subway," said the woman sitting next to me. "A Subway restaurant opened; there was interest in it for two months—only because it was new—and then people stopped going. It closed down. Belizeans don't like fast food."

Belize seemed like the right place for me.

When I disembarked from the bus, I took a taxi to the Mennonite farm where I would be staying. But the farm gate was locked, and no one was home. Five dogs appeared behind the bars of the gate and barked at me uproariously. I plopped down on my suitcase and waited.

