



“I was a girl from the suburbs, and that girl was terrified”

Ethnobotanist Maria Fadiman had to face her own mortality before overcoming her fear of creepy-crawlies

MY FIRST LOOK AT THE RAIN FOREST and its explosion of leaves, trees and vines was from a tiny plane as it aimed for a grass landing strip in Costa Rica. It looked like paradise, and it was, as long as you didn't mind what creeps and crawls beneath your toes: mostly snakes, lots of them, according to the station manager at Marenco Biological Reserve, one of the country's remaining rain forests on the Pacific Coast, where I had finagled a job as a nature guide. He also warned of poisonous tree thorns, scorpions in my sleeping bag, spiders and wild peccaries or pigs—not little pink Wilburs, but large, hairy, tusked beasts that travel in groups and could, he said, “bite you into bits.”

That first night I lay awake, afraid to sleep or move, in case something slithered into my bag. No matter how much I wanted to feel at home here, I was a girl from the suburbs, and that girl was terrified.

Overcoming this fear required facing a genuine emergency. The defining moment came years later in Ecuador, as I was doing field work for my Ph.D. dissertation. I'd made a wrong turn that led to many more, tumbled down a mountain and caught myself on a tree. I was lost and alone in the rain forest at night with no flashlight, mosquito net or hammock. As I lay soaking in the mud, my need to prove that I was tough and could find my own way back dissolved. I had spent years bumping up against the challenges of the forest, my fears and my sense of self. Now, the most frightening thing that could happen was



happening. The reality was dawning on me that I might not make it out of here at all.

Eventually, some villagers found me and, after I'd nursed my bruised ego, I took stock of the incident and its ramifications. I knew that I would return to the rain forest, and that I would need to include local people in my conservation efforts. I also had a whole new appreciation for not being dead.

I've been back dozens of times since then, safe in the knowledge that, with my academic skills, I can help indigenous people record and analyze their understanding of forest plants, instead of just watching their know-how diminish with time. Initially, I didn't even know “ethnobotany”—the study of the relationship between people and plants—existed. But I did know that it made sense to learn from the people who lived among these trees.

In the rain forest, endowed with this sense of purpose, I came alive in a new way. Surrounded by lush plants, toucans calling, the scent of dirt and leaves, the forest went straight to my core.

I still look before I step, but now when I peer into the canopy, my ever-busy and somewhat anxious mind lets go. I often want to pinch myself and think, “Am I really here?” Yes. And that answer often comes through the sting of an ant bite.

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