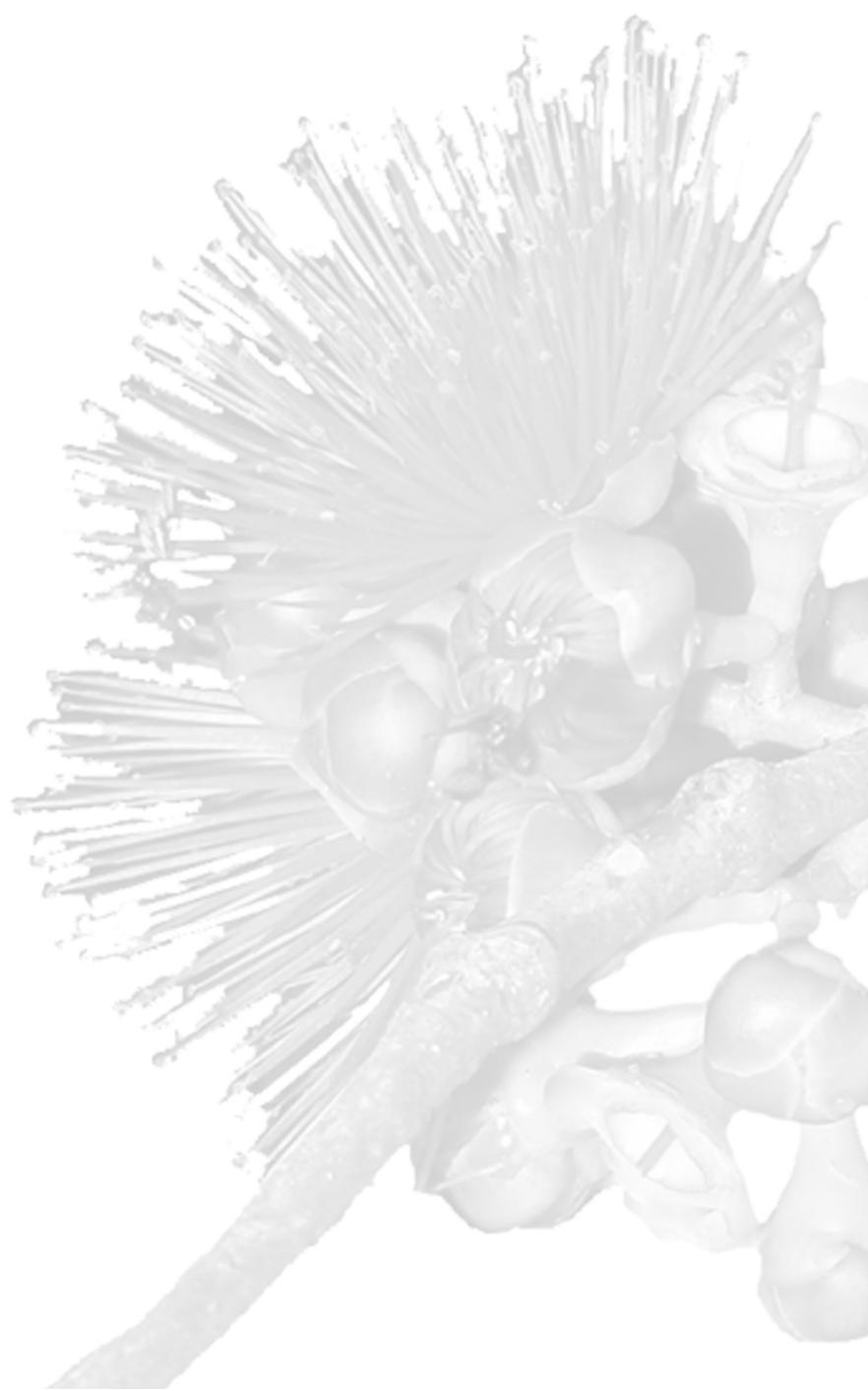


FREE TO BLOOM





FREE TO BLOOM

JILL GREEN



ADVOCATE HOUSE
Sarasota, Florida

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a work of fiction. The real people, places and events have been molded by memory, changed by time, and altered by necessity, like confetti thrown into the air to settle into a totally new pattern.

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I am wholly indebted to my network of wonderful friends family who have made my life rich and this book possible.

For my brave and adventurous son Ray and daughter Nicole

*“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”*

Anais Nin

CONTENTS

Of Time and the Mountain	1
San Anselmo	9
Getting to Know You Costa Rica	17
Fear of Falling	23
My Friend George	29
The Last Resort	35
God's Caveman: PART ONE	49
God's Caveman: PART TWO	57
Getting to Know You—Humboldt County, CA	61
Puppy Love	67
Alligator Dreams	49
Fault Lines	85

Of Time and the Mountain

My daughter Guiselle and I finish our shopping at the central outdoor market in San Isidro and head for the Chirripo Hotel to pick up my husband. Will travels back and forth to Costa Rica, keeping his job in the States but spending a month in the summer cutting through the bureaucratic red tape involved in our new adventure—buying property and building a house in a foreign country.

I look at my watch, “Come on Guiselle, we’d better hurry. You know how your father hates to wait.”

“How could I forget, Mom?” A worried look crosses her face. “And check out those clouds. They’re gathering awfully early today.”

The pace of our lives is going to accelerate while Will is here. I sigh. Of course I love that the family will be together, but the sparks always fly. The three of us are such strong individuals, and stubborn to boot. I’ve taken a leave of absence

from teaching so Guiselle and I can handle all the details of getting the house built on the southern Pacific coast while Will keeps the money coming in at home to pay for everything. Before construction can begin, the road has to be graded and rocked, local workers hired, and supplies ordered.

Guiselle is the key to the whole process. She's the only family member fluent in Spanish. It puts a big burden on her because she has to handle all the ordering, complaints, mistakes and misunderstandings. Though just out of college, she's proving quite capable. Her years of living alone in foreign countries, especially Argentina, have given her a strong advantage. Though her independent nature makes it easier to deal with problems, her lack of business acumen gives her a sharper edge than necessary when dealing with the laid back culture of Costa Rica. In that respect, she's like her dad.

I try to keep things on an even keel and handle the more menial tasks that always need to be done. I'm the sounding board for both Will and Guiselle. Trying to hold the stress levels down becomes my major focus as I try to instill in them a bit of the 'patience is virtue' attitude of the local people.

It doesn't really work, but they're right about one thing: the rainy season will soon be bringing daily torrents of rain. The road will become a sucking, sliding hazard and the wood won't dry enough to use. We have important deadlines to meet if we want to finish the house by the end of the year. The money won't last forever. I know I'll have to go back to work soon. Wish I didn't. Living in the little old farmhouse close to the river makes me very happy. Life is so much simpler here, filled with the important tasks of living a primitive existence in the tropics. Not boring.

I look up from my reverie to see Will already sitting on the patio of the Chirripo sipping *café con leche*. A tall thin man, reflecting a sense of urgency in the forward thrust of his tight shoulders, he moves quickly through life. When the everyday snags delay the completion of his goals, his irritation surfaces, his fair-skinned face reddening easily from sun, embarrassment, exhilaration and anger. So many things on his mind, surfacing willy-nilly like bubbles in a boiling kettle. No one knows what to expect.

“Hi Danielle, I’ve missed you.” Smiling, thank God.

“*Hola*, Hon, it’s so good to see you. I give him a quick hug and kiss.

“Hi Dad, what good timing!” She hugs his neck, sees him looking at the gathering clouds. “Just finished shopping and we’re ready to go home.” Guiselle knows what to say.

Will takes the wheel as we start out across the mountains to the coast on the two-hour trip back to the farm. The clear-as-cut-crystal afternoon is a complete contrast to the last five days of wet gray. The month of June brings with it the consistent rains that turn *verano* (summer dry season) into *invierno* (winter wet season). In Costa Rica the distinction in seasons depends on precipitation, not temperature.

The mountains rise above the strip of raw unpaved highway running the length of the Pacific coast. The sun shines a halo of light upon the peaks, illuminating the jungle in iridescent green, criss-crossed with gaily-strung ribbons of red clay roads winding in and out of view around the curves. The stark shocking beauty always surprises me as I follow the slope of the hill down to the clear aqua depths of the sea. A white foam line of breaking waves is interrupted by the coconut

palms swaying in the ever-present offshore breezes. “It’s just like in the movies, but we’re in this one,” I whisper.

As the ribbon of road straightens out for the last few kilometers before the drive up our mountain, I notice the looming clouds presaging the afternoon downpour. “We’re just going to make it before the rain turns the road to mud.” Guiselle can see Will’s face reflecting those clouds as the old worry creeps in.

“Before we return to the farm house, I want to check the altitude of the house site with the altimeter watch I brought,” Will says. “I need to test the water in relation to the altitude to guarantee that there’s enough flow for the hydro-pump to work.” Because of the steepness of the grade he locks in four-wheel drive for the last segment of the journey home. Guiselle and I have worked on this part of the road with Bolivar, the caretaker, filling in ruts with rocks and gravel to keep it passable between torrential downpours for the only car (ours) in the village. But during the *tormentas* even the horses have trouble not sliding.

The rain begins to fall as we start up the hill. Will leans over the steering wheel as Guiselle and I anticipate where the worst ruts and slides will be. The rain progresses from drops to buckets in a matter of seconds. The top layer of wet clay begins to slither under the tires as the backend of the car begins its sideways cha-cha-cha.

“As long as we keep our forward momentum going we’ll be fine,” Will barks as we slide too close to a steep drop-off.

“Dad, maybe we should just leave the car and walk the rest of the way,” gasps Guiselle.

Will loves a challenge. “We’ll be fine, I said.” The rock-filled ruts hold us steady as we jerk along pure clay, rock

boulders, and past the giant *ceibo* tree that marks the entrance to the farmhouse.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yell over the crashing rain. “Up here there’s nothing but wet sucking clay.”

“We’re so close to the house site. Just thought I’d drive up the last few meters to get my altimeter reading.” Will angers.

“Please, Dad, let’s wait until the rain stops. This is the steepest part, without any rocks to grab onto.”

Will is determined and now irritated. With no place to turn around anyway, he continues up until the tires are slick as silk sheets. No matter what he does with the brakes, clutch or gas, our forward momentum slows, stops and reverses the faster the wheels turn. The car gracefully slides backwards into the ditch on the side of the road and stops, balancing precariously on the edge of the cliff.

We burst out of the car, saving ourselves from certain death, as Will plans his next strategy.

“I knew it,” I take a deep breath. “Leave it. Until it stops raining.”

“No. I can get it out of here, goddamit!” He looks at the wheels and, trying a back-and-forth rocking motion, only spins the front tires in deeper and the back ones closer to the edge.

Guiselle’s protestations of, “For God’s sake, Dad. Stop!” make Will all the more determined to get the car out of the scrape it’s in.

His temper rises with the color of his face. “Give me some fucking credit,” he yells above the thundering rain. He jumps out and begins wildly tearing off wide flat banana fronds to cram under the wheels for traction.

“I can’t stand to watch! I’m going to find Bolivar to help

us out of this mess.” I retreat down the trail through the rain forest to the farmhouse.

Guiselle follows me, calling back to her father, “Why do you always have to be so stubborn? And controlling?” We leave him with the car teetering on the brink.

The separation is good, giving everyone time to calm down. “Why is it Will can’t use logic when he gets into these crises?” I’m the calmer one, slower to react. Not the emergency lifesaver that Will is. Walking through the dripping jungle, my constricted chest begins to relax as I suck in hot humid air. I realize that my horrid stress and anxiety returns only with Will.

Leaving the United States and incorporating myself into a slower life and culture, time has become a different entity for me. And Will isn’t around trying to change things. Guiselle and I are in charge of building our dream house in Costa Rica—a retirement retreat in a primitive tropical environment away from the development that ruined our Gulf coast hometown.

I’m beginning to understand the *manaña* attitude of the Costa Rican *campesinos* (country folk). Time isn’t something to beat, it’s a continuum of life from morning to night. It makes sense. There’s no high technology (or even low) to make things faster. Since it takes all day to saddle my horse and ride down to the village for supplies, I might as well enjoy the ride: the howler monkeys calling, a concert of parrots on stage in the *ceibo* tree, a friendly ‘*hola*’ to a neighbor passing by. Gringos, on the other hand, hurry, hurry to finish everything fast, get the news first, make the most money. And for what? To get bored because there’s nothing left to do? Workaholics.

On the isolated spot where Will and I have chosen to build there are no phones, no electricity or paved roads. What at first had seemed like a long walk down the mountain now has become just the common method of travel. The amount of time it takes doesn't matter. Day follows day in a succession of sameness. It's more important to blow a milkweed into the air and watch its delicate descent than to reach a destination *en punto*. Stress has slowly seeped out of me as acceptance has seeped in.

I don't like that returning feeling of tension shooting adrenalin through my body, but Will loves it. It makes him feel alive. After twenty-five years of marriage, is this the emotion that'll separate us? We've had a good life, wonderful children and friends. Is this tension going to crack us apart like the constant tremors on this faultline in Central America? After just a few hours together it's all coming back.

As the jungle opens to the old farmhouse I now call home, I declare aloud, "I can't live this way anymore. He'll be falling off this cliff one way or another for the rest of our lives. I don't need to be afraid with him anymore. I'm no longer afraid without him."