



**A Lonely Man
On A Wakeful Road**

by Dan Ford

An Episodic Adventure

Episode #1

A Decision Is Made

This was a very ambitious narrative written for me to include as a Vision Quest episode by a man who was tired of the life he was currently living. He embarked on a Vision Quest that would turn his life around and give him a new reason for staying alive and interested. This episode is presented in a first person narrative by a man named Matt.

My name is Matt, and it's hard for me to believe even now, as I look backward from this point in my life, that I have just about finished a significant portion of my life's journey already. I didn't really believe that I had much reason to truly enjoy existence from here on out because it was all mostly behind me, but I found out that I was all wrong about that.

It all started when I realized that I was losing interest in my day-to-day existence. I don't really know why. Essentially my lifestyle and daily activities hadn't changed all that much. Considering proper internal analyses, I should be grateful for what I had rather than what I did not have. Perhaps that was typical of people in today's world, but I thought I knew better than to feel this way. I didn't think self-pity was a characteristic I would adopt for myself. I certainly didn't like what that attitude demonstrated when I saw it in others and couldn't see it as something I would ever accept for myself. But here it was, and here I was.

Even in the evenings, I relaxed and had a happy-hour cocktail while sitting alone and comfy in my favorite chair. I would look out the picture window towards beautiful scenery or even enjoy those not-so-pleasant days when I looked out to see heavy rain pounding the plants, grass, and hard surfaces. I would find myself sliding into a mild but real woe-is-me attitude. It didn't make any sense at all. I thought I was more intelligent than that.

Then one day, I read an article that suggested numerous people who required a change of pace or a location change to make their existence a viable one. Apparently, boredom equaled apathy, and apathy was a deadly ingredient in the make-up of a person's attitude regarding their lifestyle. The writer of this particular article said that a change of pace actually needed to be meaningful, not just a coverup. In other words, a trip to somewhere exciting with lots of parties, feasting, and drinking may offer a diversion, and in itself was helpful, but it was not

meaningful. It could actually result in a post-diversion setback. So, what do I choose to do?

At about the same time, I had read about one of my favorite actresses who might have had a similar problem. Shirley MacLaine was exceptionally successful in her career as an actress, musical performer, writer, and many other talents. Still, she apparently felt a need to pull away from her day-to-day stuff and immerse herself into a form of spiritual isolation. She decided to embark on a famous pilgrimage that has been taken by many people for centuries, called the Santiago de Compostela Camino, or a little more simply referred to as The Camino, located in northern Spain. Even though she was a world-renowned celebrity, she took off on this pilgrimage by herself. That act alone says a lot about her. I, of course, bought the book she wrote after her journey and was amazed, to say the least, when I read her account of that trek across The Camino. How I wished that I had the internal commitment to try something like that, not to mention the intestinal fortitude to accomplish it.

And so I dithered about having fantasies and imagined replicating Shirley MacLaine's spiritual endeavors, knowing full well that I wasn't going to do it. Soon after that, as I almost gave up the idea of a Camino-like trek, I reread Paulo Coelho's story, *The Alchemist*. His story was about a young Andalusian shepherd boy who gives up his beloved sheep to travel across Northern Africa searching for a legend and ultimately finds many spiritual things more valuable to him than a treasure during his desert trek.

After having reread *The Alchemist*, I poured myself a happy hour drink and began to understand that I was being offered something essentially very important that I had been ignoring. A message was trying to penetrate my thick skull, and it was from someone, somewhere, and it told me that I must follow Shirley MacLaine and Paulo Coelho's young shepherd's spiritual explorations. But I would have to do it in my own way and not according to their way. Each person's journey had to be custom-made for them for it to be relevant and doable.

I wasn't good with the idea of going on a journey that had been taken by many other people, such as The Camino, and I certainly could not trudge across the Sahara desert in search of a legend like a shepherd boy in *The Alchemist*. I also did

not want to deal with learning a new language at my age. I did not want to deal with the challenge of interpreting what was being said all of the time. I could, of course, do a foot-journey, which I knew I wanted to do, within the United States, which was a possibility, but it was not as appealing an idea to me for some reason.

Then it dawned on me. I had always wanted to travel to Belize. I preferred the jungle to the desert, and it was an English-speaking country, and that was my native language. The minute I considered it, I accepted the concept and knew that I should do this. I was up for a Vision Quest. Although I was not mentally or physically equipped to experience a real Vision Quest such as our Native American Indian's experienced, I was up for a reasonable facsimile.

I started to do my homework to learn more about the country of Belize. Each new tidbit of information eventually piled up to create an incredible treasure trove of things that would make a cross-country trek of Belize the perfect thing for me to accomplish. I would get to know myself better while I was also getting to know the people and culture of somewhere and something different to me. The decision had been made, and I was elated. Already I had created a new lease-on-life, and I hadn't even taken a physical step yet.

I was retired, and I had no schedules to be concerned about. I was also reasonably comfortable financially and could afford to go on this adventure with no problems. Life was now starting to morph into something really interesting for me. I still didn't have anyone, but I did now have something to look forward to.

Two weeks later, I was landing at Philip S. W. Goldson International Airport in Belize. My adventure was officially started. I checked into the Radisson Fort George Hotel in Belize City. It was a very nice waterfront hotel, but I didn't intend to stay very long. It was just a place to get organized before I set out on a journey by foot.

I had already purchased the best hiking boots, a backpack, and perfect trekking clothing that would allow me to traverse all manner of tropical terrain that I would likely encounter in Belize. I even acquired a lightweight backpack partner that blows up into a single tent complete with a sleeping bag for those nights in the jungle or wherever else I may find myself. I wasn't necessarily going to sleep every

night in nature, although I wanted to do that most of the time. I might also decide to check into a hotel, or a lodge, or whatever pops up along the way. I had decided that bathing in a river or creek would get old after a while, and I knew that a hot shower and fluffy towels have their allure. And then there is the issue of eating. There is no way I would pass up trying the food in any country I found myself in, and Belize was not going to be the exception. I would snack on food I could carry with me for most of this trek, but I would also grab a roadside treat of Belizean fry jacks if the opportunity came up.

I planned my trek on paper and committed it to memory after studying a map of Belize for a long time over many cups of coffee and quite a few beers. I was about to begin this journey after having a shuttle service drop me off at the juncture of Burrell Boom Cutoff and Western Highway, now called George Price Highway, and just before reaching a village called Hattieville a few miles inland from Belize City. I didn't want to traverse by foot through the commercial areas of Belize City.

I would then walk along Burrell Boom Cut to the villages of Burrell Boom and Bermudian Landing. I loved the name of Belizean villages, and they were reason enough to take on a travel challenge like this. I intended to head to Big Falls and onwards up the Maya Mountains to Belmopan, the Capital City of Belize. I fully intended to randomly walk all over the Mountain Pine Ridge area and, of course, visit Caracol, which was one of the most impressive Mayan ruins in Belize. I will also head to San Ignacio and wander over to the Actun Tunichil Muknal Cave.

After that, I will break my trek schedule for a bit and give myself a real treat. I plan to stay at Frances Ford Coppola's luxurious Blancaneaux Lodge on the beautiful Privassion Creek in the Cayo district. I will deserve a real treat at this point of the adventure. After that, I will head to South Belize and the Jaguar Preserve.

Although the various routes have been thoroughly analyzed for this walk, it was fully intended that I would veer from these actual targets whenever the circumstances or the urge struck me. After all, my own peculiar brand of Vision

Quest is a spiritual objective and not a tourist venture. I will want to follow my whims or perhaps pure inspiration as either impulse occurs to me.

I started my walk along Burrell Boom Cut around mid-morning on a Sunday and headed towards the village of Burrell Boom. It was the perfect day for me to do this. The temperature was warm, which was to be expected, but not uncomfortably so. The air was fresh and composed of scents coming from the greenery bordering the roadway. Those scents changed as the composition of greenery, and whatever other organic element was resident in a given locale. The vehicular traffic was minimal, but I was pleased to see that virtually everyone passing me in cars, cycles, and trucks waved or nodded to me. It was a good sign. There were plenty of birds darting from one side of the road to the other and usually too fast for me to be able to try to identify them. Other than an occasional dog, which usually glanced at me but did not investigate, I did not see any other animals along this walk.

The first legs of the journey were relatively slow as I was not really used to walking fast, and I was also not very happy to see that I was slowing down rather than establishing a faster pace. I wasn't trying to break any speed records, but I also didn't want to start falling back into an old man's shuffle either. I had read up on this problem and understood that this condition was just a matter of habit and muscle use. I would be required to use those leg muscles to get them conditioned to move me along at the pace I wanted them to acquire. The habit should assist me as I repeated the walking routine over and over. Breathing was important as well. It wasn't long before I learned to breathe regularly with a deep air-in and air-out process. I also started to adjust my walking pace and matching my breathing to a certain cadence as I progressed alongside the roadway. I would become a walking machine and maintain about 5 miles an hour on a flat and easy path.

After about an hour, I had set a good cadence for myself and figured that I would arrive at Burrell Boom in about an hour and a half or perhaps two hours, depending on my sticking to a present rate of walking. That would be around lunchtime. I would see what I could find for a quick snack when I got there. I hadn't bothered to have breakfast in Belize City before I left. As I was burning a bit of internal fat because of my cadence, I was bound to be hungry when I entered Burrell Boom.

And right on schedule, I arrived in Burrell Boom. And it was everything that I expected. A tranquil village situated on the Belize River. It had a quiet demeanor about it, and I had the impression that this was possibly what a small Florida town would have been like during the turn of the century. The river was flowing with a slow but determined speed. I walked along the river bank and came to a bridge with a sign that identified it as the Boom Bridge. I walked onto the bridge to view river events better. There were several canoes with three men each within them, apparently practicing some racing maneuvers. It was fun to watch, and the river was beautiful.

As I walked through the village searching for a restaurant, people would glance at me, and almost all offered very friendly nods or salutations of various kinds. This was indeed a friendly place, and I was being greeted warmly. I liked the feeling here. I was able to find a small restaurant that served something called salbutes, which were small oval-shaped fried masa pieces topped with shredded chicken, pickled onions, avocados, and tomatoes. The woman offering it to me had a bottle of hot sauce hovering over the plate and stared into my eyes, smiling the whole time. I nodded yes, and she shook it several times over the salbutes. With considerable trepidation, I bit into one of these fried delicacies and was immediately hooked. I loved them, but I was also encouraged to rescue my taste buds by cooling them with deep swigs of ice-cold Belikin beer.

I spent the rest of the day walking through the village, enjoying everything and everybody I had the opportunity of exchanging pleasantries with. I decided to finish the day in Burrell Boom and found a place to pitch my tent by the river. But first, I returned to that little restaurant and had another beer and plate of salbutes. I fell asleep to the sounds of the Belize River and had a great night's rest.

I woke up early the next morning, broke down my tent, and headed out to River Valley Road to head west towards Bermudian Landing. I felt that I would like to reach that village by the end of the day. I was able to stop at my new favorite restaurant for a cup of coffee. I avoided asking if they had any salbutes this early in the morning.

I was made stronger and more resolute from my short time at Burrell Boom and the wonderful snacks and the cold beer. It didn't take long for me to start moving into my new cadence. My back was straight, and my breathing was pumping along at an optimal rhythm. My leg muscles were working just fine, and it seemed as though they were pleased to be devoted to transporting me along River Valley Road at this quicker pace rather than simply walking around town. I found that I was beginning to move into a peculiar frame of mind as I traveled along the highway. I was highly aware of everything around me. As usual, there was the smell of surrounding vegetation and a new sound here and there coming from insects, birds, or animals. And, of course, the occasional cars or other vehicles going by with people waving. But something else was happening as well.

It was a subtle pulling of some kind. It was almost as if I was being attracted by something that was wanting me to go somewhere. But it was very subtle, and I knew I could ignore that pull if that is what I wanted to do.

And so I continued along on this leg of my Belizean trek. I walked briskly along the roadway, taking in and enjoying the sights and the reality of just being a part of everything that I was, well, simply being a part of. After another half hour, that persistent pulling sensation increased. I was expected to reach Bermudian Landing in about another couple of hours, but it seemed as though I was being urged to divert to somewhere else. I considered this thought, and then I realized that this was the reason I had started this journey to begin with. During most of my life, I made a plan and then carried that plan out in the most direct manner possible. If I ignored this urge, I would follow the same strategy that I had used all of my life, and I wasn't totally happy with how that turned out.

The decision was made. I would accept the pull I was feeling and divert from the scheduled route I was taking. I crossed River Valley Road and headed south into largely pasture land. I instantly felt that I had made the correct decision, and I was also immediately glad that I had accepted the urge. I attempted to pace my walking as I had done on the highway but soon realized that the land was full of minor obstacles that wouldn't allow for that to happen. There were lots of furrows and gullies, and random masses of vegetation. Some of the gullies were actually deep dry river beds that accommodated the occasional floods in this area. It resulted from the land being located at the bottom of the Maya Mountains. Huge

amounts of water would flow in this area on its way to the Caribbean coastline and through an Everglades type of land. All of this meant that I had to jump over, jump down, climb up the earthen features, and make my way through or around various forested areas. This required my cadence to become something entirely different from walking on a highway. Even so, I began to adjust and even enjoy the change. That is until I came upon the swamps.

I was willing and able to do all of the other stuff, but not mucking about or swimming in an Everglades environment. I tried wading in the shallower areas, but the tall saw grass cut into any exposed skin with small incisions like paper cuts. I was soon aware of swathes of saw grass that had obviously been packed down by crocodiles moving about. Plus, when I came upon one swamp area, I stumbled upon two crocodiles getting it on. The good thing was that they were more interested in each other than they were in me, so I could make a hasty retreat. I then stayed away from the swamp edge and moved southward, moving through the dense tropical lowland rain forest.

I carried printed maps with me, plus a smartphone with access to land maps and a GPS App that allowed me to check my position as long as I had a decent signal. I found out that the WI-FI is pretty reliable in most of Belize, so I can count on getting a decent signal almost anywhere I am likely to go. When I checked my iPhone, I saw that I was currently near an isolated large lake called Mucklehany Lagoon. It appeared to be nearly one and a half miles long and totally pristine, with no development or other activities evident around it. I wondered if this was the source of the pull I had been feeling on the road to Bermudian Landing.

The movement through the rain forest environment was not easy and certainly not fun. In many spots, it was so densely composed of brush, small trees, and large shrubbery. Vines were stretching from the ground up to the tree canopy, and then many other strands headed back to the ground like so many octopi tentacles. I could barely make any forward movement, and when I attempted to retreat to find another route, the vegetation seemed to have me trapped. I panicked every so often but somehow assured myself that I wasn't meant to perish in this manner and yanked and pulled everything in my way until I was able to prevail. I did not bring a machete with me, which would have helped.

I had lost all track of time and was shocked when I noticed, after the forest became a little less thick, that the sun was no longer high overhead and was starting to make its descent into the Western sky. I suddenly realized that I had been in this struggle all day and began to worry that I might be stuck in this tropical thicket all night. I had almost gotten used to brushing the spider webs, and God knows what else from my face as I struggled forward. I even had to pick various jungle insects, such as walking sticks, off me from time to time. I attempted to keep thoughts of jungle snakes such as the fer-d-lance, also called a yellow-jaw tommygoff in Belize, from dropping on me from above or striking me from under leaf litter.

Then suddenly, I fell out onto a cleared pathway. It was a dirt road of sorts. The two ruts were surely made by a vehicle with big tires. I was very happy to stagger onto this road, even though my legs were not used to walking after so many hours of stumbling, pushing, and lurching through the jungle. I began to walk in a direction without any particular knowledge of where I was going. After a few paces, I suddenly inhaled an extremely pungent smell that made my nose run and my eyes water. I walked closer to the source of the smell and found that a large mahogany tree had been cut down and was lying on the ground with big gaping saw cuts. The scent was so strong that I coughed a lot and had to retreat from it. I now knew what this road was for. Someone was felling these trees and hauling them out of the forest to sell. Mahogany wood is very valuable, and it is a sure bet that someone was doing this on the QT and has to be very careful not to get caught.

I continued to walk away from the fallen tree and soon ended up on the bank of the Mucklehany Lagoon. It was a beautiful place to behold. The water was mirror smooth and such a dark green that it appeared black. The trees surrounding this freshwater lagoon were very large and varied. There were many mahogany trees, ceiba trees, yellow flowering giants, and many more trees than I could not identify.

The water gently lapping on the shoreline was clear, and it was full of tiny colorful fish that appear to be like the ones you saw in aquariums. I believe they

were mosquito fish. This lagoon was wonderful, but I wonder why I had been drawn to this place.

As I walked away from the edge of the lake, I noticed large paw prints heading towards the logging trail. They were cat-like and very large. There is no doubt that these were jaguar tracks. This made me a little nervous, but then I reminded myself that I was committed to be drawn to this place, and if this was to be the last place I will ever visit, so be it.

I decided to follow the tracks because I couldn't think of anything else to do. It appears that I was just waiting for instructions. After going a short distance down the trail, the jaguar paw-prints disappeared, and it looked like the cat had gone into the jungle. Then I saw several blue morpho butterflies appearing on the trail. These fantastic and beautiful iridescent blue butterflies are some of the largest butterflies in the world. The bright blue color on the top and dull brown colors on the underside of the wings flash as the wings open and close. This makes them look like the morpho is appearing and disappearing as you watch them. I was mesmerized by their aerobatics. Then I noticed that they were flying towards me in mass formation and when they reached me, they began to dance in a circular pattern around my body. Once they had my attention, they slowly left me but hesitated as though they wanted me to follow them. I thought, what the hell! I had nothing better to do, so I started to follow the kaleidoscope of morphos as they headed back towards the lagoon. As we reached the lagoon's edge, I noticed that the jaguar prints had reappeared, but now they overtopped my footprints. This was damn scary.

I continued to track the butterflies, and they increased in number as they gathered others to their mob, as they headed to wherever they were going. I was intrigued. Then they stopped and fluttered about a lean-to shed made from palm fronds sitting on the shoreline of the lagoon. I was now amazed! These morphos had been acting as bellhops and had led me to my housing for the night. And it was about time as the sun was sliding behind the canopy line, and I could see that night would soon be upon us.

I entered the shed and saw that it was barren but clean. It had a waterproof roof made of layered palm fronds, and the frond siding kept the wind and blowing

rain outside. The entry port was open to the outside and had a marvelous view of the lagoon. I felt that I would be willing to pay for such accommodations as this. The blue morphos, apparently having done their jobs, left me to my comforts. I unpacked my tent pack and removed the bedroll. I took out a Sterno ethanol fuel can and a can of Vienna sausages. A perfect dinner, but I didn't have any wine to make it really festive.

As night fell, I felt quite comfortable in my new quarters. The ordeal of penetrating the thick undergrowth of the rain forest had taken its toll on me. I was exhausted and knew that I could sleep out in the open if I had to, but I didn't, and I counted my blessings.

Just as I was finishing my sausages, I looked at the hut's doorway and saw a large jaguar standing in the opening. Its fierce golden eyes penetrated mine, and my body froze. I was terrified!

After a slight hesitation, the jaguar slowly came into the hut. Its movements were not threatening, but I could not begin to know what I should do under these circumstances. The jaguar moved to a position next to me, and then, like any cat I have ever been familiar with, he performed a turning maneuver, sank to the ground and curled into a very large ball, and started to purr. I didn't think jaguars purred.

Following another even longer hesitation, I decided to reach over and pet him on his head, somehow justifying this action on my part as being preferable to getting up and running. The jaguar glanced up at me, and I swear that the big cat smiled. This possibly imagined reaction from him and the fact that I was incredibly tired from today's efforts relaxed me somehow, and that caused me to enter into a state of accepting these strange happenings.

Nighttime had completely enveloped the jungle by now, and the small glow from the tiny ethanol fuel started to extinguish itself. The hut was soon pitch black, and I was nearing total exhaustion. The concern I had about lying next to this warm large jungle cat had somehow turned to an odd feeling of comfort.

I smiled inwardly to myself and then fell into a deep sleep, assured that I was in the protective hands of a higher power.

