

# The great adventure of Tomas

Scholarly sources:

Seligson, Mitchell A. (1980). Peasants of Costa Rica and the development of agrarian capitalism. Madison, WI: University of Madison Press.

## Meet Tomas

Tomas Carillo lived in the Central American country of Costa Rica. He was twelve-years-old in 1824. The year was important for Tomas because it was when he began the adventure he'd dreamed about since he was six.

But we'll get to that in a minute.



First, let's tell you a little about Tomas. Tomas wasn't born in Costa Rica. He and his older sister had actually been born in a poor peasant village in Andalucia, Spain.



But Tomas did not remember Spain. When he was only four his parents made the decision that they would move to Costa Rica. This was because the family would have an opportunity to buy land in Costa Rica that they could never afford in Spain.





## Why?

Costa Rica had been unique in the Spanish colonial empire. Most of the Central American countries had a lot of natural resources. But in Costa Rica there were always rumors of gold and silver deposits, but none were ever found.

Furthermore, the Spaniards were unsuccessful in enslaving the indigenous population. The Indians in Costa Rica did not make good slaves for the Spaniards (as the Indians had in other countries). The Costa Rican Indian people died too quickly from disease and overwork.



So those few aristocrats among the Spaniards who developed large haciendas along the coastline of Costa Rica ended up having to ship in slaves from Africa to do the farming. And this was an expensive operation.

All these issues left the upper class Spaniards with little interest in Costa Rica.





But for members of the lower classes, Costa Rica was a dream come true. Families like the Carillos were able to move there and purchase land at the cheapest prices anywhere.

Most of the settlers moved inland from the coast into the highland area where the soil was rich from volcano eruptions.



Tomas' family moved into the foothills and developed a small farm.

"We are poor by many people's standards," Thomas' father Julio would say. "But we have a little land, a house, and we can provide for our basic needs."





Being in the foothills, it was always a couple hours' walk to the rainforest. Tomas and his sister were being educated by their father. They were learning how to read and write as well as farm. But the education Tomas most enjoyed was the family hikes into the jungle where they'd discover all the different kinds of plants and animals.

"An old farmer said that there are over 10,000 types of plants and animals here," remarked Julio one day.



The Carillos were so interested in the rainforest wildlife that they often brought home orphaned animals. When Tomas was five they found a baby ocelot that had apparently been abandoned by its mother.

The Carillos called the cat *Gato* and brought her home. Over time *Gato* would become Tomas' constant companion. This was very important to Tomas because all the farms in Costa Rica were so far away from each other and the rest of the world that he was lonely for companionship.





But Tomas' loneliness would change the next year when the Carillos and Gato were hiking in the rainforest. It was then that they found another orphan.

This orphan was a little boy hiding behind a tree. The boy tried to run away when he saw the family, but Tomas coaxed him out to talk. Through his tears, the child explained that his name was Juan and he was the son of an African slave woman and an Indian laborer who'd been working at a hacienda near the coast. When Juan's father died, his mother escaped with him. But she had been shot in the attempt and he was now all alone and starving.

"Please," cried Tomas to his father, "can we keep him?"





Julio looked over the boy. "Well, I only have two children. And I know how lonely you have been, Tomas. If he gets along with Gato, maybe we can bring him home."



He did. And for the next six years, Tomas and Juan were as inseparable as brothers. Tomas taught Juan about the plants and animals of the rainforest. In turn, Juan told Tomas about the wonders of the coastal area. "At the hacienda where we were slaves, they grew cacao trees by the thousands," he claimed.

Tomas of course knew what that meant. Cacao beans were the medium of exchange in Costa Rica. They were just plain money. His family had never seen more than a handful of the beans in his life. He wished Juan could take him to see the hacienda and all its wealth, but he knew it was impossible or his new brother would be forced back into slavery.





There was even more to Juan's stories. He told Tomas that some coastal Indians he'd only heard about in stories were hoarding gold, silver, and other precious things. Juan's father had told him to find those people if he was ever freed, as they might share their wealth with him.





Tomas took these stories to his father Julio. "Can we go to the coast one time, father?" he asked. "Because we are so poor and perhaps we can bring back some treasures."

Julio didn't pay much attention to his son. "Well, I am very happy with my humble farm and our independence. When you and Juan grow to be men, you should make the trip yourselves. But of course you must first find a way to get Juan declared a free person."



Tomas did not like what his father had to say. He knew they had no power to emancipate Juan.

And still he dreamed and dreamed of his big adventure.



## The adventure

Then one day everything changed. It was in 1824 when Tomas turned 12 and Juan turned 13. Three years earlier, the isolated farmers of central Costa Rica had been very surprised to hear that they were declared independent of Spain. They were surprised because these humble farmers hadn't been involved in any rebellions—unlike the Mexicans to their north.

But if the farmers were surprised then, they were even more surprised to find out in 1824 that their now local government suddenly abolished slavery!

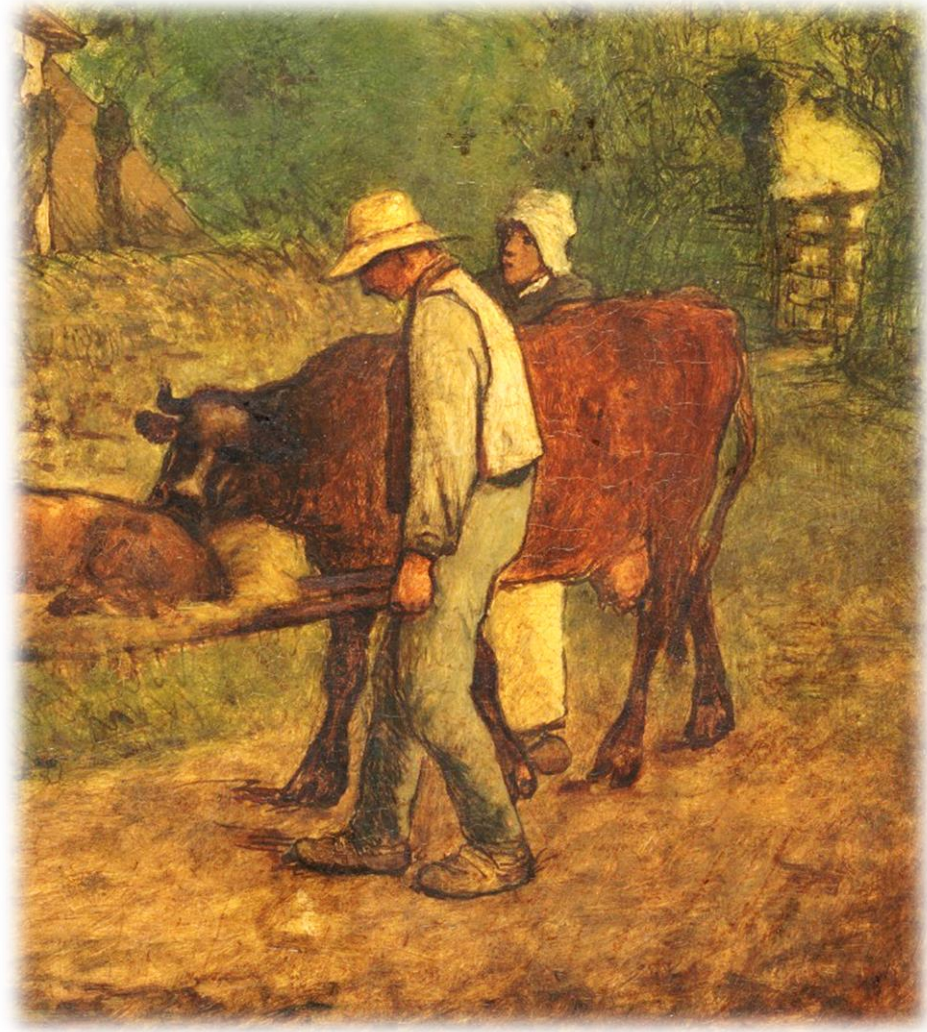




When Tomas and Juan heard the news from another farmer, the parents were bringing in the cattle from the fields. Tomas quickly scribbled a note to his father that they were headed on their journey to the coast.

"Do you think we should ask first?" questioned Juan.

"Father said we could go if you were freed. We should not waste time."



They gathered a few cocoa beans they had earned, packed one change of clothes, and headed out for their big adventure—an adventure they believed would bring wealth back to their humble farm.

Gato would go along.





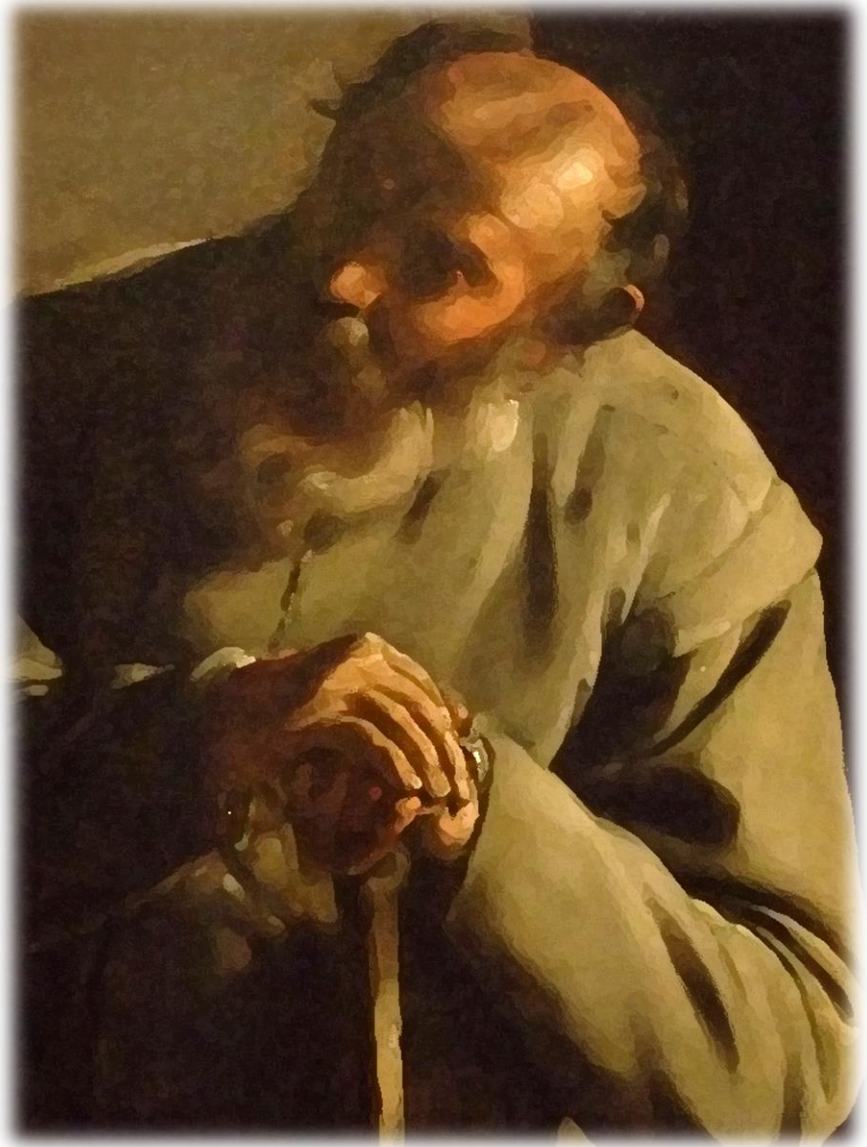
The trip took days. They headed west across the rainforest. They crossed rivers.





On the second day, they discovered a jungle hut with a very old Spaniard living inside. When the boys told him about their destination, the old man laughed at them.

"They've been headed for the coast for centuries, trying to find all the secret wealth," he declared. "They never found a thing!"



"The English pirate, Henry Morgan, came with 37 ships to raid the haciendas back in the day. No luck. Legend says the Church came in and hid the wealth near Quepos."

"Is that true?" asked the boys.

"No one knows. Another English pirate came later for it. John Clipperton. He went to the town of Quepos and made friends with the Quepoa Indians, figuring they'd know where the stuff was stashed.

"And did they?"

"Well he stayed for nearly 20 years and never learned a thing."





"So the haciendas didn't have that much? Don't they have lots of wealth from all their cacao trees?"

"Nah," responded the old Spaniard. "Back in the day they thought they would make a fortune, but Nicaragua started out-producing them at lower prices. They nearly drove the haciendas out of business. And now with no more slaves, they barely get by."





Okay, the boys wouldn't find their wealth at the haciendas. But they weren't overly discouraged.

"We have to head for Quepos," Juan stated. "I know where it is. It's on the coast."

And so the two boys continued their journey to the ocean.

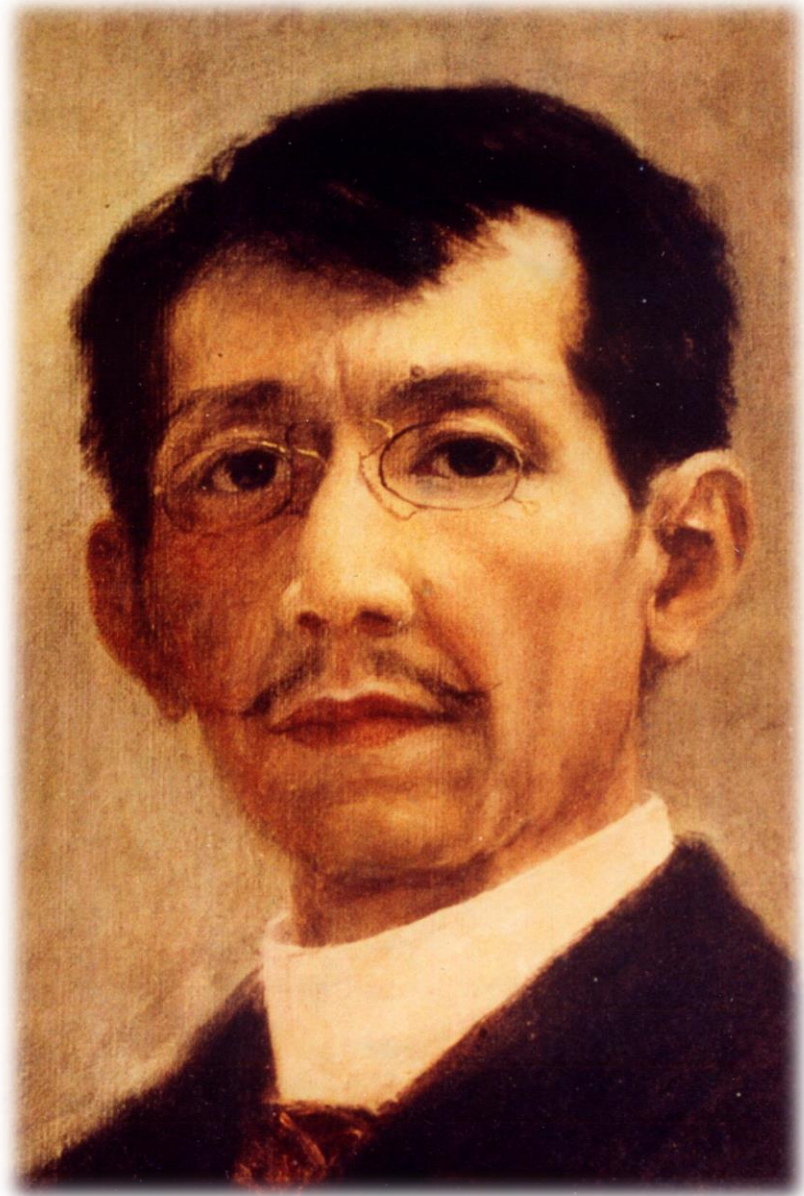
About ten miles from Quepos they stopped at a small village inhabited by Indians and Mestizos.



The boys began asking about the Quepoa Indians, A woman led them to an elderly, educated Mestizo.

"So what do you want to know about these Indians?" asked the man.

"Just tell us about them."





"Well I'm told they liked to cover themselves with purple dye and collect valuable pearls from oysters in the ocean."

"Valuable pearls!" shouted Tomas. "Maybe *that's* the treasure."

The Mestizo sneered. "Oh good, more treasure hunters."

"How do we find them?" interjected Juan.

The Mestizo grinned. "Find them? The Quepoa Indians were extinct nearly 100 years ago! "

"What! How?" shrieked Tomas.

"War and disease, like most of the native people."





The boys were becoming more discouraged.

"What do we do now?" asked Tomas. "Go home?"

"I say we move on to Quepos. We'll look for the secret stash of pearls or other wealth," said Juan.

So they continued walking. It was getting late in the day. They passed more coastal villages.



Finally they found the town of Quepos and the ocean. Night was approaching fast as the sky darkened.

As soon as Juan saw the sea he raced in it to swim.

Tomas stayed at the seaside to pan for gold and search for pearls. He had never been to the ocean before and didn't even know how to swim.



Tomas looked at *Gato* who seemed nervous. He was watching Juan in the sea with an intense gaze.





Suddenly, as if from nowhere,  
Juan was attacked by a huge  
wave.



A tidal wave pounded the beach and in a split second snatched people and cottages into its grip.

"Just go with it!" Tomas could hear Juan shout. "Hang on to Gato for your life!"

Tomas did just this. He seized Gato's tail as the two went into the sea. He tried everything he could to hold his breath and not panic.



And within moments the enormous wave settled down. Tomas, Juan, and Gato found themselves floating back to the beach. They pulled off their wet clothes.





Chilled to the bone and exhausted, they rested for nearly an hour.

Juan sighed. "I don't think the spirits of the people here want us looking for their treasure."

"We wouldn't either," responded Tomas, "if it were our treasure."

And it was at that moment that the boys looked at each other. They both knew they were thinking about their *very own* treasure.



And the three got up from the beach that hour and began their journey back to their frightened parents and humble little farm.

And for many, many years, the boys and Gato were very happy to care for the little plot of land they came to know as "their treasure."



The end

Let's talk!!!