

[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** If you're looking for even more amazing storytelling, I am thrilled to recommend the Reveal Podcast from The Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX. Because for the past two years, Reveal has investigated the disappearance of 43 students from Teachers' College in Mexico. Their reporting exposes political corruption, a coverup, and a surprising connection to the US and the War on Drugs. The first episode of Reveal's three-part series, *After Ayotzinapa*, is available right now. Listen on the Reveal podcast feed.

[music]

**Glynn:** In Southeast Asia, Westerners are always running around looking for the magic spot. The perfect place. We can live on the beach, get your chakras aligned, meet the person of your dreams, live off the fruit trees with the free massages and whatnot. Then in a few months, the supposed spot changes. First, it's somewhere outside of Chiang Mai. Then, OMG, you've just got to go to [unintelligible [00:01:21]. It's different there, man, different. Then, two words, Gili Islands. Whatever. I love travel. I do, but there's no such thing as Neverland. And that's what I'm telling this Australian woman on the train to Bangkok. But she's going on about this new magic spa, near Hat Yai on the southern border of Thailand. It's supposed to be brilliant, life changing. Word. "You should come with me." Right. But I do get off the train with her for the oldest of reasons. She's fine. And I know it's a mistake.

It takes us almost two days to figure out how to get to this magic land. First a boat, then a van, and finally late afternoon, on the back of two minibikes, we pull up cautiously to the place. It's weird. Like a big rain forest treehouse compound weird. Some of the structures are built on the ground. The rest, it's like they just decided to build around the trees and against them instead of chopping trees down. It's bizarre, beautiful.

We go in, and a bunch of happy people sit at a long table finishing up dinner. "Hello." They give us good things to eat and drink before showing us guest rooms. And my room is amazing, somehow feels both comfortable and part of the forest at the same time.

Next morning for breakfast, I eat fruit I've never seen before. Monkeys snatch away morsels when I turn my head. Drink a pinkish juice. And every place I turn my head, I see a beautiful painting or a sculpture, a [unintelligible 00:03:09]. The people radiate nice. They're laughing and painting and writing and cooking and yoga, and repairing your structure. And they take us to hikes and swims. In the afternoon, two half-naked women start playing on drums. Another joins on a homemade loop before others start dancing.

It's an artist colony, 20-25 people, mostly Europeans. During the dark recession, someone has an idea of pooling their unemployment checks in a place of an extremely low cost of living. They want to test ideas about how structure should be part of the environment and instill community and they came up with this.

[cheering]

Brilliant, glorious, gorgeous. Days run together in a happy fog.

Then, they announce an emergency community meeting, mandatory, and I'm waiting for it. The other shoes going to drop. Something's got to be off. This must be when they force you to join the cult. People saunter into the communal space in various states of dress. A guy everyone calls the Treasurer, takes the floor.

[In an accent] "I know it's a drastic step, but it's got to be done. Henceforth, we're switching over to Thai whiskey."

[boos]

"There's nothing for it, innit? We're not made of cash, you lushes. Locals swill won't kill you. That's it then."

[laughter]

And everyone laughs and goes back to the swimming pool. Awesome place, which being American, I can't abide for too long. So, I start saying my goodbyes. And the Australian woman's like, "Where are you going? What are you doing?" I don't have a good answer for that. I just feel that people aren't supposed to be this happy. I've got to get out, before it's too late.

[music]

**Glynn:** Today, Snap Judgment proudly presents Shangri-La. Amazing stories from real people searching for their own magic spot. I'm your host, Glynn Washington. Remember to always follow Australians wherever they are going, because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[music]

**Glynn:** Now that may be your grandfather would tell you stories of growing up, and you'd say, "Grandpa, that's not true. No way, grandpa." Well, maybe you shouldn't have been such a skeptical kid. Andres Ruzo used to listen to his grandfather tell stories about growing up in Peru.

[music]

**Andres:** I was about 12 years old and my grandfather, who is this amazing storyteller, I always love to hear stories. He told me about Legend of Paititi.

**Anna:** Paititi means gold. The legend begins when the Spanish conquistadors came to Peru and pillaged all the gold they could find.

**Andres:** Gold for the Inca, quri is the Quechua word, was considered life. It was something sacred. It was not something monetary. It was a representation of life itself. So, what could they do? They wanted revenge.

Out of vengeance, they tell the Spaniards, "Go into the Amazon. You'll find all the gold you want there. In fact, there's a city called Paititi made entirely of gold deep in the jungle." The Spaniards go off. They're overjoyed. They want this gold, they want the glory. But the few that return come back with all these stories. They did not find a City of Gold. They found giant snakes that could swallow men whole according to these legends. They found spiders as big as their hands that ate birds, trees that blot out the sun. [mosquito buzz] Every kind of mosquito biting, flying, anything that'll leave you drained of blood. Powerful shamans with crazy spells that would drive men mad.

And one of the details in this legend that I heard was a river that boiled. And that is really where [chuckles] this entire story starts.

**Anna:** Because in the funny way that we grew up to live the stories of our childhood, Andres grew up to become a geothermal engineer. His job is to find hotspots in the earth.

**Andres:** 12 years past from the moment when first heard the story of Paititi and the river that boiled. Working with colleagues at the equivalent of the Peruvian Geological Survey, imagine a stereotypical lab. There were maps, there were some dusty rocks around. One of my colleagues was there and he was like, "Hey, we're going to be publishing this map of geothermal features," so hot springs fumaroles, etc, from across Peru. He called me over to his computer and he said like, "Look, check it out. This is what it looks like." There were a couple hot springs there, some were really hot. But everything was small.

And seeing a map awoke this dormant memory and I said, "Whoa, wait a minute. Isn't there's supposed to be like a boiling river or something? A big river that boils? A big one. There's a legend. Come on. Anybody? No? Yes?"

I asked other geologists, colleagues from government institutions, oil and gas companies, mining companies, academic institutions, and the answer was overwhelmingly, "No, we've never heard of it. Legends regularly get exaggerated." One mining geologist specifically basically told me to stop asking stupid questions.

**Anna:** His colleagues totally laughed at him and his Boiling River story.

**Andres:** I'm at a family dinner shortly after that had happened. My aunt tells me, "No, Andres, it exists. I've been there." I've got this goal of identifying Peru's geothermal energy potential, which Peru, we

desperately need green sources of energy. We desperately need it. What they were describing is huge. It perked my interest if it was real.

**Anna:** His aunt said the local name of the river translates to “boiled with the heat of the sun.” She said it was protected by a shaman in a remote Indian community called Mayantuyacu. And she gave Andres the phone number for the shaman.

**Andres:** I would spend the next six months trying to get a hold of them, and with no answer. [chuckles] It took my aunt saying, “Look, Andres, I understand why they haven't gotten back to you.” Well, she helped me realize basically how naive I had been. I'm a geologist. Geologists have been at the forefront of development, oil, gas mining, you name it, and especially in the Amazon. So, I totally understand how a young guy being like, “Hey, I'm a geologist. Let me in. I want to study this, please,” might be an issue.

**Anna:** Andres decided to just go find the shaman himself. He got on a little plane, some bug spray, some GPS devices, a bunch of high-tech thermometers, and he arrived at Mayantuyacu and asked for the shaman.

**Andres:** The head of Mayantuyacu is a sheriari or a healer, curandero, a shaman named Maestro Juan Flores. I needed to get his permission to study the Boiling River.

**Anna:** Andres goes into the shaman's office. The shaman comes in.

**Andres:** At first, he was just watching and then looking, and he had this serpentine gaze. You know how snakes, they don't blink, in their eyes, their pupils aren't moving, but you know that they're watching you. That was the feeling, it was very stoic. Every movement that I'm making is being watched.

**Anna:** But turned out, the shaman, Maestro Juan, was pretty friendly. He said something kind of surprising. He thought it might actually be a good idea for Andres to study the sacred river.

**Andres:** He was referring to himself, “I'm a healer of humanity. My job is to heal people, and you are a healer of the earth. So, your mission is to heal it. And with that, you have my blessing to study our sacred river.” Being given this permission for me, brought with it responsibilities.

**Anna:** Andres was led through the forest to a river. A river that was really very warm. So, he knew there was potential to find the Boiling River from the legend. Andreas went back home. He talked to some colleagues. He got some research funding to investigate the potential hotspot. He flew back with a team of eight people. They moved into some huts on the side of the river. He took measurements of the water, pushing through the thick jungle.

**Andres:** I remember jokingly, even in my research team, I kept calling it the Near Boiling River, because even though they were like, “Yeah, the Boiling River.” This thing's hot for sure, but I don't see anything that even looks like boiling.

**Anna:** And then at one point, he was faced with a problem that posed a serious threat to all of his work.

**Andres:** We had not only treated our clothing to prevent bug bites, we had not only sprayed down the mattresses, where we were sleeping in the little huts. We really did everything. In fact, we were using Jungle Juice, which is like 99.8% [unintelligible [00:14:06] it melted my Pelican case. I'm not kidding about that. But amazingly, I was still getting bitten, and no one else in my group was and we were sitting there like, “Dude, what's the deal? Your legs look like they have smallpox or something.”

**Andres:** It was morning. The shaman, Maestro Juan, was near the river and he was preparing some of his plant medicines. He noticed my legs and he was just like, “I thought this would happen. The jungle is trying to protect itself from you. I expected this to happen and it's because of what you know.”

He started to explain how the spirits of the jungle see inside of us. They see the knowledge that we possess is what he was telling me. They saw what I was bringing into the jungle. Energy and Resources is basically what I focus on, and he explained how people with my skill set have come into that jungle before, and the jungle was hurt by it.

**Anna:** The shaman invited Andres to participate in a ceremony to introduce him to the spirits of the jungle.

Andre, is this kind of thing in line with your worldview, doing a ceremony to ingratiate yourself to the spirits of the jungle?

**Andres:** That is a great question. I don't know where my worldview sat. I definitely agreed, I'll do what I need to do to make it right. A part of me was also very curious. Something was going on, something that he recognized.

It was night. The shaman says that night is the best time to work because there are no distractions. The spiders in that area are all over the place. When light hits their eyes at night, they reflect like dew, so it looks like everything's just covered in dewdrops. There are more stars and you can possibly think fit in the sky, and it's just gorgeous. I go into their large ceremonial maloca, their building. And they first presented [foreign word] which is a type of sandalwood, I think it's called an English, I was instructed to take the smoke from the burning wood and do this smoke bath on myself. In the meantime, the shaman was singing [foreign word] the spells, the songs of the jungle. They're just really haunting. Imagine a song of praise, so like a church song to keep it simple, mixing with a healing song, the thing that really led the ceremony was those was the songs, the [foreign word].

In the ceremony, the shaman will take a breath in, and they won't inhale for the most part, but they'll breathe in the smoke and then suddenly just do this [swoosh sound] They'll start blowing the smoke on

in a very ceremonial way. The ceremony ended with [unintelligible 00:17:17], flower water. They take wild flowers and make this perfume out of it. It's really a clean smell. It's a beautiful smell. He comes up and just does the [exhales and swooshes].

[laughs] I left the ceremony. I went to bed. I woke up the next day and I forgot to apply bug spray. And I had no new bites. What happened? Hopefully, there is an organic chemist out there that might be able to take me up on this. But as far as I know, I don't know what happened.

We did the ceremony, and afterwards, he's like, "Hey, Andres, find me tomorrow. There's something I needed to show you." I'm like, "Hmm. I wonder what he needs to show me." The next day comes and he leads me into the jungle with one of his apprentices. And he's like, "There's this place called La Bomba, which means the pump. I was like, "Huh. The pump? That's peculiar."

I'm in my flip flops, and honestly, my pajamas. [chuckles] We start walking, and I've walked this path a million times. Have I missed something here? I absolutely had. The trail is thin and it is on this steep slope, and it just looks like there's a wall of green on your right side. Then suddenly, Maestro just stops. And he's like, "Alright, this is it." So, they take out their machetes and [mimics chopping], start opening up this old trail that had been totally overgrown, and I follow them down. It was really amazing.

The shaman personally leads me to this area that has become so overgrown that no one had likely been there for a very long time. The trails are so wound up in the roots of trees that you're basically just stepping on tree roots the entire way. Every kind of bug, snake, tarantula, spider, frog, whatever. The scene was fantastic. Beautiful, clear, slightly turquoise water. It's flanked by small, very thin banks of ivory-colored stones. And then, you've got these just walls of green on either side of you because you've got these big beautiful trees and just vapor coming up and just floating like big clouds. Even though there's not a rain cloud in the sky, it looks like rain is falling on this part of the river, but it's not raindrops. It's actually bubbles coming up from below.

Maybe the river was wider than a two-lane road. You've got these plumes of dense steam rising. It's like being in a sauna inside of a toaster oven. The steam coming up is hot. So, every single one of your breaths, you feel it.

As a scientist, we always try to steer clear of anything that might be sensationalist. Then suddenly, I find this one spot where there's clearly a significant amount of very, very hot water coming in. It's over 200-degree water. You're getting third-degree burns in less than half a second, easy. Every step is very, very intentional. Everything's painfully calculated. I came across a dead possum that had not only boiled alive, but the bones were totally clean, and the bones were almost gelatinous.

Honestly, I was exhilarated. [chuckles] It was amazing. It just seems out of a dream sometimes. I'm being totally sincere about that. Finally, the Boiling River had lived up to its name. If I were a scared Conquistador, and I saw this big mass of bubbling water, I'd know what I'd call that. That's for sure.

**Anna:** Andres took his findings, this real-life legend, and brought them back to his colleagues.

**Andres:** When I got to take that information back to everyone, the answer that I've gotten from these people is one word, "Wow." This is a real place. This is a spectacular place.

It has been at least six months since I'd been back at the Boiling River site. Everything was going great. The research was good. Everything had really been just this dream. And then suddenly, I get this wake-up call. I called up Maestro, the shaman at Mayantuyacu. On that call, he goes, "Oh, yeah, by the way, Andres, there was a group of people that came here that they said they knew you." Well, that's just when reality, boom, hits. Did it make me angry? Yes, it did. [chuckles] I had not authorized this. This is no longer a legend. It's not a fairy tale. It's not a dream world. This is real life. This is not all fun and games. You got to keep things close to the chest.

I got at least seven requests from energy companies. I've worked in energy. I've worked in resources. I know what questions you want to ask a scientist, or one of the geologists in this case, to get some information and developing one of the sites. I'm not ignorant of that. An irresponsible geothermal development could easily run this river dry.

**Anna:** So now, the race was on. Andres knew about the Boiling River, and so did an increasing number of geologists and developers. Andres, together with the shaman, decided he wouldn't promote any more information about the river. He wouldn't publish anything, he wouldn't give any talks until they could begin to get the place protected as a sacred site. It was a process that would take years.

**Andres:** What it brought me to Peru in the first place was looking to produce green geothermal energy. Suddenly, I get to the Boiling River, and I'm staring at this place that could really be a tremendous source of green energy. It really could. I think it's so funny. It's the irony of the fact that by the time I leave my PhD, my mission will have been to stop any energy development, at least in the Boiling River area. I have a boss, in fact, I have numerous bosses, for work, for school, etc. There are expectations on the part of foundations that give you grants.

**Anna:** He had found exactly what he set out to find. And it seemed like he could enjoy neither its riches, nor its glory.

**Andres:** It was a warm night, we were sitting on the terrace. The fenced off from mosquitoes by the mosquito netting. I was sitting there with Maestro and Luis and some other people, and their custom there is to smoke mapachos, this potent Amazonian cigarette, and it's a very musky smell. Anyway, they had offered me a mapacho and we're all sitting there just talking. I finally ask him, "What about Paititi? What about the City of Gold? Does it exist?" It was so funny, because he gives me the weirdest look and he just smiles, and he's got this great smile, it just like snakes across his entire face. His eyes just lit up and sparkling because there's something that he knew. All of this through the smoke of his mapacho cigarette and then he goes, "Come on, you missed it, really?"

[music]

**Glynn:** Andres and the shamans of Mayantuyacu are still working to keep the sacred waters protected. You can help them out. There's information on our website about their work, and Andres's book, *The Boiling River*. It's at [snapjudgment.org](http://snapjudgment.org). The original sound design for that the piece was by Leon Morimoto. It was produced by Anna Sussman.

[music]

**Glynn:** When Snap Judgment returns, sometimes you've got to get out before you can get back, when the Shangri-La episode continues, stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, the Shangri-La episode. Today, we're searching for the perfect spot. Now imagine, 1970s America, world-famous writer Truman Capote wants to interview you on national television. Cool, right? Right? Watani Stiner tells us his story.

[music]

**Promoter:** Truman Capote talks again with inmates inside San Quentin.

**Truman:** Larry Stiner. He's a young prisoner transferred from Soledad to San Quentin on a conspiracy to murder charge for which he received a life sentence.

**Watani:** I came to prison in 1969, or held in captivity from 1969.

**Truman:** Why do you use the word 'captivity' in particular?

**Watani:** I say all blacks are political prisoners because America is a political prison.

I said America is a prison. Something I said that sounded real slick. He said, "Oh." He liked that.

[chuckles]

**Sukey:** Was that your way to fight for freedom while you were--

**Watani:** Yeah, it was that and it was to show people that, "No, I'm the revolutionary."

[music]

**Sukey:** As you can hear from the tape, this man, Watani Stiner, was in the Black Power movement in the 60s. He was actually part of a militant group called the US Organization. He resented prison, not just because it was prison, but because he says he didn't commit the crime he was locked up for. The murder of two black panthers, who were killed during a shootout at a black students' meeting at UCLA in 1969.



**Watani:** Two people were killed. John Jerome Huggins and Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, and I was wounded in the shoulder.

**Sukey:** Did you have a gun at that event?

**Watani:** No. At the particular time, I didn't have a gun. I didn't shoot anyone. I had no weapon to shoot anyone.

**Sukey:** Do you feel you were targeted because they wanted to get you off the streets and out of the revolution?

**Watani:** I think this is what they wanted to do, and I was convicted of second-degree murder and conspiracy.

**Sukey:** He was leaving behind two young sons. He last saw them in an LA County courtroom as he was being dragged away in shackles.

**Watani:** One was three and the other one was two. He said, “Baba,” they call me Baba, and they gave me the Black Power salute. That was heartbreaking as well. I say, “Okay, this is a sacrifice I'm making for them.”

**Truman:** What is your own attitude towards you being here at San Quentin? You resent every minute of it?

**Watani:** Of course, I do. I believe a fool would just have to really enjoy living in a place like the penitentiary, any type of penitentiary. It's a silly question to ask me, “Do I resent being here?” Of course, I resent being here.

**Truman:** No, it was a silly question. I take it back. Well, what I really meant was, do you find that you gain nothing of value by being here, did you?

**Watani:** Well, actually there's no appreciable difference between me, by the time I came in. Now, I say Baba become more hip and more wise to the white man's game.

**Sukey:** How did you decide to escape? How did you make that decision?

**Watani:** After the Truman Capote interview, that's the first time that I was approached by a guard. He's a black officer. He came to me, “You stupid youngster.” I say, “What? What?” “You know, you're not going to get out of here alive.” I'm kind of scared, but I don't want to show him that I'm scared. In the back of my mind, I'm wondering, “Wow, if he's that concerned, this has got to be serious stuff,” and it was.

**Sukey:** Someone tried to stab Stiner on the yard. And then, that same guard went a step further and agreed to help him escape. One night, Stiner and his brother got a pass to stay with their parents in one of the family visiting houses. It was in a lower security area that was between the prison's high walls and the outer fence. After their parents went to sleep, the brothers piled up sheets and pillows under the blankets.

**Watani:** Just making the dummies and stuff and writing the notes because I remember I was writing a note, my hand was shaking.

**Sukey:** What did the note say?

**Watani:** Note said that, "Sorry, I had to do this, Ma, but we had no choice."

**Sukey:** Then, they quietly slipped out the back door. As they scrambled up the hill past the warden's house and the guards' quarters, Stiner could hear dogs barking in the distance. The brothers knew the guards' patrol schedule, and timing was everything. They ran silent and breathless through the shadows over the fences. As they cleared the last hurdle, a low fence, a car pulled up and flashed its lights.

[beeping]

[car door opens and shuts]

**Watani:** I finally got in the front seat, down, I got over the backseat. That sense of relief of finally making it out of here, that was a tremendous feeling. That was a feeling that we did a revolutionary act. We escaped from San Quentin.

[car drives away]

**Watani:** Then, the next fear would only be, "Man, we can't make no mistake."

**Sukey:** So, he was out of prison, but now he needed to get out of the country, leaving behind two sons who he barely knew. He hoped one day he'd see them again. The two brothers hopped on a flight to South America. As Stiner's plane touched down, out the window, he saw a wide slow river and thick tropical vegetation.

**Watani:** I looked at my brother, he looked at me, I said, "Get me now." We knew we were far away from that.

**Sukey:** Eventually, the brothers split up. Stiner made his way to Suriname, a tiny country in South America.

What did you know about Suriname before you got there?

**Watani:** All I knew about Suriname was that they spoke Dutch. Suriname was the last place that I thought that I would end up in.

**Sukey:** Strangely enough, the day he got there, he walked right into the middle of a military coup.

**Watani:** I saw people cheering in the streets. They had signs. Most of the signs was in Sranan Tongo, [unintelligible [00:34:11] country man. And I'm looking at the soldiers, and I see these some young boys, 19, 20 years old. They've got rifles in their hand, they've got dreadlocks. This is what I was looking for. The whole time we were fighting and talking about what we're going to do. Suriname is the place, and you can see the enthusiasm on the women faces that was just so pleased and they patting them on the shoulders and they jumping up and down. I thought Suriname would be my home, particularly in the beginning.

**Sukey:** He met a beautiful local woman and fell in love. She taught him to speak Dutch and they started a new family.

Did that change your life, your eldest daughter being born?

**Watani:** Yeah, she was born in the house. The first is Kishana. She was precious. She was just this bundle of joy for me.

**Sukey:** After Kishana, came Latanya, Natisha, Tamani, Lige and MTume.

**Watani:** MTume is the baby. I loved him so, so, so, so, so much. And I used to have him with me when I used to travel through the streets.

I just shifted my focus, my focus not on the big revolution that's way out there and overthrowing the government and stuff. It was on my family.

**Sukey:** One of his favorite things to do was take his family on these walks through the jungle or the bush.

**Watani:** Deep and interior, you've got big old tall trees. You may see a snake or something here and there, something running. But it's the sound of the bush that really draws you in. You hear the crackling noises. You hear things dropping from trees and then just being with them.

**Sukey:** But if he found it peaceful out in the jungle, back in the capital, things were starting to get tense.

**Watani:** The regime, I knew it was corrupt. I see him winning the election and don't want to give up the power and then rig the election. I see coming up with a referendum making himself President for life. There was some crazy stuff taking place.

**Sukey:** Then one day, soldiers showed up at his house with guns.

**Watani:** They came in, kick down the door, pull a gun on my little girls and babies and say we got to come out of this house or they're going to start shooting.

**Sukey:** The soldiers were taking over as property. They wanted it for a military post, and because they had absolute power, Stiner couldn't stop them. The soldiers grabbed his family's belongings and started throwing them out the window. Stiner picked up what he could carry. Within minutes, he and all his kids were on the side of the road with the baby, MTume, crying in his wife's arms.

**Watani:** The only thing I could think is getting a gun. It's suicide mission, it probably was because my wife convinced me that that was a stupid thing to do, because my children's on the streets, my wife is looking at me, like, I was just [chuckles] got punked out the house, I can't do anything. I have no clue of what I'm going to do.

**Sukey:** They ended up living in a single room concrete house in the jungle with no electricity or running water. Government soldiers were supposed to bring water. But some weeks, they didn't come at all.

**Watani:** And for my children, when they say, "Papa, [foreign language]." When I say they want water, I got to give them water. Even in the States, we have to drink from different water, at least you had the water. That was the breaking point for me, because I had nothing else.

**Sukey:** And this idea that was born, the moment the soldiers kicked in the door of his house, started to get bigger and bigger until it wouldn't leave them alone.

**Watani:** The most difficult thing was trying to frame it in a way where my wife would understand. We're sitting by the river. First, I'd say the situation's getting bad and talk about the kids a lot. Then, I told her, "I'm thinking about maybe I should go back."

**Sukey:** Back to the United States, back to prison in the United States.

**Watani:** She's totally opposed to that. I used to tell her some gruesome stories. So now, I tell I'm going back and going to prison, that's going to be hard to swallow. It's hard for me to swallow.

**Sukey:** Stiner thought maybe he could cut a deal with the State Department, get his family to America. And in return, he would give up his freedom.

**Watani:** What I framed it like, "Look, going back to the States, the most they can give me because I already did five years is two, three years. But you will all be in there, you'll be taken care of, you get medical care. They'll be able to go to school. And then when I come out, we will be one big happy family."

**Sukey:** Stiner's wife came around. Suriname was now in the middle of a full-blown civil war. And if there was a chance to get out, they had to try. Stiner walked out of the jungle and into the Capital. On the embassy steps, he stalled.

**Watani:** After all these years of going through revolutionary struggle, country to country, and then all of a sudden at this end now, I decided to throw my hands up and say, "All right, you win. I lose. Take me back to prison, and I'll be a good boy." That's not how I viewed it at that time. I framed it as a necessary sacrifice.

[music]

**Glynn:** When Snap Judgment returns, the startling conclusion. The Shangri-La episode continues in just a moment. Stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment. Today, we're searching for that space we'll never find. The last we left our hero, Watani Stiner, he was just about to turn himself into authorities. Snap Judgment.

[music]

**Watani:** After all these years of going through a revolutionary struggle, country to country, and then all of a sudden at this end now, I decided to throw my hands up and say, "Alright, take me back to prison."

**Sukey:** He walked inside the American Embassy.

**Watani:** Yeah, I went to the window. I told them, "My name is Larry Stiner. I think there's a warrant for my arrest. I want to talk with someone about surrendering." She looked up and she said, "Oh, one moment." My mind was telling me to break and run. But when they reacted the way they did, that just totally just blew my mind because they didn't arrest me. They were kind.

**Sukey:** After 20 years on the run and a few weeks of negotiations, Stiner had his deal, signed papers and all. Once he surrendered, the State Department would send his family to America. The sooner he said goodbye, the sooner he'd see them again.

**Watani:** I had Natisha, that's my daughter, she grabbed a hold of my leg and was holding. I never forget what she was telling me. She was telling me, "Papa, Papa, don't doo away." That just broke my heart. It echoed so much that it almost brought tears to my eyes, because I knew I was leaving and still in the back of my mind, I don't know how long this going to be.

**Sukey:** He was on a flight back to America, courtesy of the State Department. But here's the thing. When you escape from prison and are captured, you're sent back to the same prison you escaped from. So that meant Stiner wasn't just going into custody. He was going back to San Quentin.

**Watani:** You know that feeling I had and when I said, "Get me now." You got me now because it has a door. The door has a funny slam to it at San Quentin. When you hear that door close, it makes a noise that you can never forget. With that sound itself, it brought prison to life. It's no getting away this time. He put the handcuff over me and escorted me straight to solitary confinement.

That small cell, confined, can't go anywhere, starting to feel the walls is closing on me and I'm locked down for hours a day.

**Sukey:** He waited for word of his family's arrival. Finally, one evening after dinner, a guard called him to the front of his cell to sign for a letter. He passed Stiner an envelope with the State Department seal on it. Stiner ripped it open.

**Watani:** I received a letter from the State Department saying, "Well, we forgot--" Something like, "We forgot you're going to be in prison and you won't be able to take care of your family. Therefore, the agreement thing is over."

**Sukey:** He read it again and again until it sunk in. He couldn't provide financial support from prison. So, he wasn't a valid sponsor for his family. His wife and kids weren't coming to the United States. They weren't going anywhere.

**Watani:** First thing I said, "Damn. What the-- I knew it. I knew it." I started pacing the floor, I was saying, "Oh, they did cross me--" I was kicking myself because, I think, I should have known better and all I got is nothing there but my thoughts and this letter. I felt, at that moment, that I failed my family. I promised them so much.

**Sukey:** It turned out nothing was as he thought. At his first parole board hearing, the people who could set him free, called him a terrorist. They said, "You're going to be in here a long time." Stiner was in hell. Back in Suriname, so was his family. His wife had a nervous breakdown and his children were separated.

**Watani:** That just broke my heart in pieces. It just ripped it apart. That was the lowest point in my incarceration, was just thinking about what their thoughts are, how they feel about me leaving, and this whole sense of abandonment, and they probably hate me. What are they going to be when they grow up? I can't do anything.

**Sukey:** After 12 years, finally, the kids did get to come to the States, taken in by Stiner's eldest son, the one he'd left behind some 30 years earlier in an LA courtroom.

**Watani:** He kept all of that love and understanding and trauma and all of the other stuff that he had to go through, and he came out my hero.

**Sukey:** What happened with your wife after you left?

**Watani:** Well, she was supposed to come as well, but the kids came first and she was in the process. Then, she died, and that was a big, big, big blow for us. So, I always say that she surrendered just like I surrendered.

**Sukey:** All the while Stiner was behind bars, the kids visited a couple times. They sent photos of high school proms, and then college graduations. But still, Stiner didn't know if he'd ever get out.

**Watani:** I'd been denied so many times from the board, I pretty much figured that they would just wait till I die.

**Sukey:** Then, in January 2015, after 21 years in prison, Stiner went to his 14th parole board hearing. As the interview came to a close, Stiner knew he'd be denied, just like all the other times.

**Watani:** They summed it up. "Well, Mr. Stiner, we are listening to you and we realize that the only reason why you came back to prison is because of your family. You didn't come back to face justice." She said, "However, considering your age, the amount of time you've been here, we find you suitable--" As soon as she said suitable, I didn't jump for joy. I didn't do anything. I have no expression on my face, but I heard it.

**Sukey:** We're outside Stiner's transitional housing in East Oakland. And there's this young guy leaning against his car, who looks something like Watani Stiner.

Are you Watani's son?

**MTume:** Oh, yeah.

**Sukey:** Hi.

[crosstalk]

**Sukey:** It's MTume, the baby, the one who was just a year and a half when Stiner left Suriname and turned himself in.

How are you feeling?

**MTume:** Well, I'm good. I kind of excited.

**Sukey:** Yeah.

**MTume:** I mean it's like the first time ever so. I was jogging over just thinking about it.

**Sukey:** This is the first time he's seeing his father as a free man.

[crosstalk]

**Sukey:** Stiner comes walking toward us. He's wearing his fedora as always, cane clicking against the pavement.

[crosstalk]

**Sukey:** They give each other this big hug. And Stiner leans back and puts his hand on his son's shoulder.

[crosstalk]

**Watani:** Let's see what your jab look like?

**MTume:** Pretty good.

[laughter]

**Sukey:** They go back in for another hug and just hold each other.

[crosstalk]

**Watani:** Man, man, man. Wow. This man has got big.

**MTume:** Well, you know, I'm not two no more.

**Watani:** Well, you were one and a half years old.

[laughter]

**Watani:** Look, how big he got. You've got hair on your face.

[laughter]

**MTume:** A little more than you.

[laughter]

**Watani:** Oh, man, man, man, man. Wow.

[music]



**Glynn:** Thank you, Watani Stiner. Now if you're wondering what happened to Watani Stiner's brother 40 years after breaking out of San Quentin who's still on the run, maybe he found his own Shangri La. The sound design for that piece of by Leon Morimoto and was produced by Sukey Lewis and Mark Ristich.

[music]

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[music]

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