

IN THE FOLD OF A SACRED SUMMIT-PERU

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As we hike through the high mountains, large turquoise-blue and emerald lakes gradually come into view, bringing the otherwise barren landscape to life; huge rocky mesas thrust up out of the depths of the earth like weird fingernails scratching at the sky. Sturdy masses of perpetual ice, nearly twenty thousand feet high, form one of the most imposing cordilleras on the planet. This is the Vilcanota mountain chain, where Ausangate and Cayangate, two sacred *apus*, or ancestral mountains of Peru, dominate the life of the Andean people.

Romario Huamán Quispe, my guide, has a forthright and open gaze. He can make a hot fire with thatching grass and manure when the afternoon turns cold and prepare a variety of meals. At barely eighteen years of age, he has learned how to survive in those inhospitable conditions, enduring below-zero temperatures in winter. He has learned to respect the cycles of nature and protect the animal herd, the most precious possession of Andean people, as if it were gold.

Early the next day, squatting by the fire with my hands outstretched to its warmth, I look around the interior of Romario's rustic house. The small windows are mere vents, and the walls covered with countless clippings from newspapers and magazines. The main room, built of stones, clay, and plaster, contains some basic cooking utensils, homemade ropes, and a table carved from a large piece of local stone. At the back is a small door that one must stoop to enter, leading to a warm bedroom where occupants sleep on a raised section of floor covered with a pile of sheep and llama skins. Even on a bright sunny day, houses in the high Andes are dark, their only light coming from a stove and some oil lamps. The thatched ceilings, which have absorbed years of smoke and endless tales told by the fire, may display only a string of hanging onions or a forgotten piece of handiwork.

Romario's mother, kneeling, mechanically cuts up potatoes and prepares food for her family. Like the vast majority of older generations in the altiplano, she speaks only Quechua. The firelight illuminates her wrinkled face. A playful little guinea pig rests his furry head on my knee, while others chase around the pots, never imagining they would one day become a meal. Romario laughs, saying, "they're the pets of the household. We bring them from Tinquí and feed them until they're big enough for the pot. They taste better than rabbit."

It is not yet light, and as we wait for the dawn we drink a tea of coca leaves to prevent altitude sickness. At last it is time to begin our journey to Comercocha, or Green Lake, one of the many marvels along this little-known route. It would take us four or five hours to walk there, all depending on the condition of the path. "Last year there were landslides and several footpaths were cut off," my guide says as he lashes the load to one of his mules. "Sometimes the animals are frightened when they can't see the road in front of them and they run back home, leaving everything scattered all over the mountainside." Meanwhile, a band of alpacas moves slowly out of the corral where they had spent the night. The icy wind had frozen the wool on their backs, lending them a comical air.

With my numbed hands wrapped around the tea for warmth, I look out upon a scene of supreme calm and harmony. The silence of the Andes freezes my ears, while the crystalline sky still shows a waxing moon even as the first rays of the sun appeared. Against this panorama, the massive Ausangate, twenty-one thousand feet high, slashes the sky in two, like a gigantic, sharp diamond piercing the firmament. Although this spectacle is

familiar to Romario, still he speaks of its beauty. “This is the loveliest mountain in the world,” he says, taking a sip of tea and scanning the mountaintop. “We have everything here: food, pastureland, and the Ausangate to watch over us.”

Life in the high country moves slowly and inexorably. In the pasturelands, the people of Pacchanta are leaving their huts to begin the daily chores. Alpacas are their main source of sustenance, providing them with meat, skins, manure for fuel, and wool, which they use to make much of their colorful clothing and rope for harnesses. They also keep mules to carry sacks of food or transport animal fodder. Pacchanta families have also taken advantage of the nearby thermal streams to build a large pool where inhabitants may bathe each day. Potatoes are eaten daily, served in soups or stews or as unpeeled, dehydrated “cold potato.” Romario explains, “We lay down a layer of dry grass on the ground and place the potatoes on top. The night frosts dehydrate them, making them mealy and preserving them for a long time.”

Romario then brings up his mule, Villafuerte, to begin our trip. Ahead, we would circumnavigate a series of lakes, reach the base of an enormous glacier, and visit a gypsum mine, the source of the raw material the local people use to paint their fresh white houses. As we climb up a rocky ravine covered with short grass, we discover many herds of alpacas. The females, accompanied by their inquisitive young, come to meet us. There are more than three million such animals in Peru adapted to wetland pasturage. This is the largest such population in South America, since they are well suited to living at from ten thousand to some sixteen thousand feet. The everpresent *vizcachas*, large rodents, observe our serene progress from their vantage point on top of the rocks. The few birds that can be seen at these altitudes include raptors such as eagles, eaglets, and chimangos, but it is the condor who dominates the heights.

It is mid-June, good weather in the altiplano. The cruel Peruvian winter holds sway from November to March, when rains cause landslides and swollen rivers. Yet even now some lakes retain a thick covering of ice, petrifying them into gigantic mirrors, until late in the afternoon.

Villafuerte is a fine mule, but after several hours on his back, one needs to stop and stretch. We have arrived at the famous Comercocha, enfolded by the snow-capped Cayangate, which provide it with a handsome backdrop and nourishes it with melting snows. Romario opens a small leather bag containing food suitable for a high-altitude meal: dehydrated fruit, toasted corn, cold potato, a goodly amount of tea, and some slices of cooked guinea pig. While we eat our rations, he comments that his Inca ancestors were able to send water from these snow-capped mountains as far as Cuzco itself, about one hundred miles to the west, for the royal baths of Sacsahuamán. The virtually impermeable ground prevented the water running between stone channels from being absorbed during its long course. How they were able to calculate flat gradient is another of the surprising feats of Inca culture.

We continue our Andean crossing through canyons eroded by ancient glaciers that had scoured out the stone. Suddenly, a swarm of orange caterpillars appears under Villafuerte’s hoofs, heading downhill. What a strange sight! They came out of nowhere and are all at once everywhere, many of them borne away by small rivulets. When the rains come, Romario tells me, the place is full of flowers and butterflies.

The steady pace of the mules brings us slowly along our way to Morococha, which, according to my guide, had been created by a gigantic meteorite. Yanacocha, a small translucent lake, is teeming with tadpoles. Next comes Alcacocha, a strange elongated

tricolored lake, where Romario decides we should camp. Bone tired, we await the arrival of night, which falls like a great dark blanket. But we are awakened from our sound sleep by a muffled noise and an eerie vibration of the ground. I sit bolt upright in my sleeping bag and run out of the tent in a panic. Romario explains that the sounds are avalanches on Ausangate, but that our only problem now is to retrieve the animals, which have fled toward home. It is not an easy job; we run around for more than two hours to catch them in the darkness.

By dawn we return to our camp and continue our journey, planning to meet up with Clarimir, a distant uncle of Romario's, near the gypsum deposits. He lives at the foot of Sibilacocha, an enormous high-country lacustrine pit. As is the Andean custom, we exchange provisions and anecdotes. Clarimir, his broad forehead furrowed by the sun, explains to me, by gestures and signs, that he is going to Pacchanta, where he will find the forage that is in scant supply in the bleak tableland where he lives. The condition of his animals underscores the importance of his trek, for their ribs seem to stick to their spines. They hurry on down the mountain as if they know they will find their just reward on the plateau.

We continue on to Ocacocha and Uturungo, the latter the smallest of the lakes but no less beautiful. There, a number of herds browse the sparse vegetation. At Azulcocha, or Blue Lake, its thick layer of ice reflects the mountains. Romario presses on with a somewhat sorrowful expression. "This is the most dangerous place," he says. "A while back we lost twenty alpacas because they walked out onto Azulcocha without realizing it, looking for something to eat. We found them after the ice had melted." That heavy loss meant years of additional work for Romario and his family.

Finally, we reach the last lake on our journey, Queluacocha. Despite our exhaustion, we quickly locate a small group of alpacas so they could be rounded up and tended during the night. Years ago, Romario says, animals were often stolen, but since many new police units had been established in the altiplano and terrorism had declined, the problem had been almost entirely eliminated and large herds could safely be left at pasture in the wetland areas.

In the late afternoon, as majestic Ausangate turns a reddish hue and mist begins to rise, we come to the last corral of the Huamán family. A small hut had been built of stones mixed with clay and covered with tall grasses gathered from the lakes themselves. The stove, a necessity in such outposts, consists basically of a clay cavity with two holes on top for pots and a side opening for the hot-burning alpaca manure. Sheepskins spread on the floor for sleeping provide excellent insulation from the cold ground, which is often covered with a sheet of ice. Later that night, smoke from our evening fire rises up and through the opening in the hut's roof, which proves equally useful for observing the stars and dreaming on the wonders that tomorrow would bring.

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