



PAVANNE FOR PAUCARTAMBO

The chronicle of two horse trips to Paucartambo
with their unforeseen consequences.



Street in Paucartambo, Peru

FIRST MOVEMENT

Capitán was tough and rather ornery. His curly hair a testament to the endurance these horses were known for, mountain ponies bred in the rarefied atmosphere of the high Andes. Unlike the paso finos, renown for their outward swinging leg action and luxuriously gentle ride, Capitán had a kidney-rattling gait. He also had the irritating habit of stopping suddenly from a gallop (especially when riding bareback) or dashing unexpectedly under low branches, tactics aimed at getting me off his back, but he was a hardy beast and well suited for the journey ahead.

We were climbing easily, following the Chongo River, which now, during the dry season, was a mere rivulet rushing harmlessly to join the mighty Urubamba on the valley floor. Zig-zagging up the trail, we rode past the last of the mud huts, watched quietly by the children tending sheep on the ancient terraces that rose in tidy order toward the silent ruins of P'isaq.

My partner Chip and I had been in the village for a few months, exiled after a year of living in Cuzco, during which time we had run a small business exporting ponchos, alpaca jumpers and fur bedspreads to boutiques in Europe and the US, where exotic clothing was becoming fashionable. But the increasing number of backpackers on the Marrakech-Katmandu circuit arriving in town each day had tarnished its appeal, and I would often come home to find strangers sprawled out in the sitting room, having appropriated our flat as a convenient place to gather. Enquiring of my partner if these people were guests of his, he replied “I thought they were friends of yours!” So when we learned of a house in P’isaq that was coming up for rent, we decided we’d had enough of city life and fled to the Sacred Valley in pursuit of new adventures.

The Agrarian Reform following General Velasco’s military coup d’état four years earlier had significantly altered the countryside. Many haciendas, large estates that for centuries had operated with an often brutal feudal efficiency, were expropriated and the land redistributed into peasant cooperatives. For centuries, the campesinos had been tenant workers, living on the patrón’s land in small communities in exchange for the free labour they supplied the gamonal. But with the Reform came growing pains. Many mestizo landowners preferred to see their properties destroyed before handing them over to the campesinos and some had left their haciendas in ruins. Moreover, having counted for years on a patrón to provide seed, fertiliser and machinery, the campesinos now faced the task of keeping up production to feed an endemically undernourished population. The Indians still remained amongst the poorest in the land, and most of the countryside lacked basic medical services, clean water supplies or electricity.

One of the most striking results of the reform was the disappearance of horses from the landscape. Since the Conquest and the introduction of horses to Perú, Indians had been forbidden to ride them, a privilege once only permitted to the Spanish and mestizo class. The difficulty of the terrain made horses the preferred mode of travel, and the old landowners had prided themselves in maintaining a stable of fine animals. But with the Agrarian Reform the new owners regarded them as unnecessary luxuries and soon got rid of them.

The first thing we did after moving into the village was to buy a couple of horses. The options were limited however, and I had to settle for the recalcitrant Capitán. Chip fared better; he was able to buy a young paso fino stallion named Cariblanco from the Justice of the Peace-cum-blacksmith over in the next village. From our base in the Sacred Valley we planned to explore Inca ruins and villages far from the beaten path of the tourist destinations to which we knew only horses could give us access. We had read Gene Savoy and Hiram Bingham, colonial chronicles and countless archaeologi-

cal and anthropological treatises, and we were eager to go. But Hugo Blanco and his pro-indigenous guerrilla group had for years threatened the stability of the region and detailed maps of the area, not to mention topographical charts, had long been impossible to obtain; the military, deeming them tools for subversion, had effectually eliminated them from circulation. So, armed with a few hand-drawn plans and the advice of friends and locals who knew the area, we left that morning, zig-zagging up the trail towards Paucartambo, only two days' ride away.

Nestled in a deep valley, Paucartambo is a small colonial town that offers a gateway to two distinct worlds. Downriver, a road leads up over the mountains to the Madre de Dios Amazonian Reserve. Near the top of the pass is Tres Cruces, a cliff-side aerie where the Andes abruptly end, opening below to an endless sea of green that stretches all the way to the Atlantic. It was said that with a little luck and the right atmospheric conditions, a double sunrise could be seen rising over the misty expanse to the East. Lorries carrying lumber often passed on this road on their way from the jungle to the mills of Cuzco. Upstream in the opposite direction, the river led to a valley that climbed to the land of the Q'eros, a highly mystical ethnic group of master weavers scattered in a few villages at the high elevations who were said to descend directly from the Incas.

By mid-afternoon, the Sacred Valley lay far below us and we were riding across the open puna. In the distance, the Apus, ancient mountain spirits of the 6200-metre-plus peaks of the Ausangate and the Salkantay seemed to follow. For several hours we had seen very few people other than llamas and the occasional thatch-roofed adobe farmsteads, in front of which, set out to freeze in the night, lay neat piles of small blackened potatoes known as chuños, a main ingredient of the Indians' diet. Quinoa and cañihua grew in the fields and, in the distance, campesinos could be seen gathered to thresh at the era, a donkey circling endlessly round a pile of barley, the villagers pitching it skyward, letting the breeze take the chaff while the grain dropped to the ground. Scenes like this were immemorial. With Neolithic Age implements, the Indians were repeating agricultural cycles that had changed little since the time of the Inca.

We rode on.

As the sun dropped toward the horizon, the temperature plunged and we made camp in a copse of eucalyptus, setting up our small tent and lighting the Primus stove for dinner. Pleased with the way things had gone so far, we talked into the night about Kauffman Doig, Prescott and Hemming's versions of the Conquest, and other books, planning our next expedition to Vilcabamba, the Inca's final refuge, buried for centuries in jungle growth.

In the morning, with the horses fed and rested, we saddled up and forded a small river, following the steep descending trail carved into the mountainside that brought us that afternoon to an arched 18th century stone bridge spanning the Mapacho, or Paucartambo, River. We crossed and entered the Plaza de Armas, a three-sided square with four palm trees at its centre.



Chip with Cariblanco and Capitán in Paucartambo

The town had the unkempt charm of forgotten glories. Sumptuous houses, now sadly decayed, spoke of the wealth and prestige of bygone times. Paucartambo had been a prosperous town since the Colonial Era, a major commercial hub for the coca, lumber, corn, wool and gold transported on endless mule trains to Cuzco, and it was the provincial centre of a vast area dotted with enormous haciendas. But the Agrarian Reform had broken up many of the estates and they no longer supported the large families whose livelihoods depended upon them. In recent decades Paucartambo had seen a steady decline as the mestizo population moved to Cuzco in search of better economic opportunities. Today very few people were on the streets and it had a somewhat melancholy look. We rode slowly through the empty town, marvelling at its colonial past, its white-washed houses and cobbled streets.

Seeking a place to camp for the night, we rode out of town and followed the river a few kilometres upstream, arriving finally to a eucalyptus grove near the river, where we pitched our tent next to a corn field.

In Cuzco we had met a grizzled old gringo expat who had married a local woman. Her family owned an hacienda several kilometres up the Paucartambo Valley, where it joins the base of the Q'eros Valley. Hearing of our interest in exploring the Q'eros communities, he had extended us an invitation to visit, and we planned to check out their property and explore its feasibility as a staging ground for future expeditions. But before venturing on, we decided to spend the next few days roaming the countryside and getting a feel for the place.

One afternoon I was in the town, enjoying some beers and playing sapo with a few locals in the courtyard of a cantina. The game consists of pitching a coin into the maw of a bronze, opened-mouth toad screwed to the top of a wooden box filled with little compartments. Coins that missed the mark would land in the holes cut into the surface and descend into the compartments below, where depending on how it landed, gave the player a number of points. A fellow against whom I was playing had for some time been casting covetous glances at my wristwatch. I slipped it off and showed him: it showed the date as well as the time and was wound solely by the movement of my wrist. He was most impressed.

During the course of our conversation he told me he had been a "horse fixer," an ambulant trainer who travelled from hacienda to hacienda teaching horses to recover their paso fino gait. He explained how he would load a horse with an 80-kg sack of grain and make it walk in a stream, thus forcing it to lift its hooves as it stepped between the rocks.

"That kind of work doesn't exist anymore, the haciendas are all gone now," he rued, taking a sip from his beer.

"So what do you do now?" I asked.

"Not much. I have a herd of horses that I sell from time to time and do a little trading when I can. Are you interested in a horse?"

"How much do you want for a horse?" I replied, my interest piqued.

"I'll trade you one for your wristwatch!"

I agreed to have a look at his herd.

"We'd better leave now if we want to catch the light," he warned. "It's five kilometres downriver, on the other side."

Outside the cantina door his horse was tied up next to mine. We mounted and rode off on the dirt road toward Challabamba, the river flowing fast on our left, rushing its way to meet the Amazon. An hour later we arrived at a field near the water's edge, where he dismounted and, pointing to the hill on the other side, said, "There they are, see them?" In the deepening dusk, I could faintly make out a herd of horses grazing on the hillside.

"We've come this far, might as well have a look," I thought, nosing my horse into the water, in search for a good place to ford. The water was swift but the bottom was firm and we reached the far shore having wet only our legs. The horse fixer moved up into the herd and lassoed a horse. "This one! I'll trade you this one for your watch!"

It was a palomino gelding, eight to ten years old, with a long white mane and tail. He had a good straight back, a gentle disposition and strong fetlocks. His teeth looked good but there wasn't much more I could see in the dying light.

"You've got a deal!" I said, taking off my watch.

With the rope round his neck I led him down to the river's edge and started to cross. This time, however, I miscalculated the ford and Capitán lost his footing, slipping into deep water. Suddenly swept away by the current, I slid off the saddle and grabbed hold of the horse's mane as he swam to the other side. The palomino swam alongside, his rope lead trailing in the water. Several hundred metres downstream we finally touched bottom and made our way up the bank. I was soaked, my leather jacket weighed a tonne and I tried to shake off some of the water as I gathered the horses. The horse fixer then rode up, considerably drier. He'd found a better place to cross.

By now it was completely dark. We could barely see our noses in front of us as we rode, dripping wet, along the road back toward the town. Behind us, in the distance, I could see the headlights of a lorry trundling down the mountain with a load of lumber en route to the Cuzco mills. The dirt road to Cuzco is only a single lane wide. Traffic is routed one-way on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the other way on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays; Sundays are a free-for-all. Looking over my shoulder, I could see the truck's lights getting closer. In the darkness we could see no place to duck into and allow the truck to pass; to our right the river roared many metres below and the steep embankment of the mountain rose on our left. Outrunning the truck into town remained our only hope, and we spurred the horses into a gallop. The palomino, however, was having difficulty keeping up and kept tripping on his lead, so I let go, herding him along in front of us, trusting that he would keep to the road and not take off somewhere in the night. The three horses barrelled into

Paucartambo at a full gallop, the palomino running off on a parallel street, followed moments later by the lorry as it thundered past on its way to the bridge. Now I had to catch him and take him out to our campsite, where Chip awaited, no doubt wondering what had become of me. Fortunately there were few people about and I was able to corner the horse in a dead end street, where I took hold of its lead and led him along to our place near the river.

A nice fire was burning at the campsite as I rode up. I tied up the horses and gave them some alfalfa before changing into dry clothes and joining my partner to relate the day's events over a few shots of machachicu'cha, a local sugar cane liquor. We celebrated. A new horse was a good thing, we agreed; we would now have a packhorse to carry our kit, significantly lightening the work of the saddle horses, loaded as they had been with sleeping bags, tent and assorted gear in addition to our saddlebags. I couldn't wait to saddle up the palomino and see how he behaved. That night I decided to call him Q'orisumac, lovely golden one in Quechua. We laughed and smoked well into the night under a star-filled sky until, fully fed and lubricated, we settled into our sleeping bags.

Early the next morning we were roused from our tent by the loud clamour of Quechua voices. Crawling out, I saw the campsite surrounded by an incensed crowd of campesinos waving their fists at us and jabbering all at once. The horses had got loose in the night and had entered the cornfield, munching away to the distress of the farmers who now angrily demanded compensation. In my adrenalin-induced elation of the night before I had inadequately tied the horses, and now I could only accept full responsibility for my actions. One of the campesinos stepped forward as spokesman, and after some discussion, we settled on a price for the damage done. I handed over the money with sincere apologies, but their scornful looks showed us we'd overstayed our welcome.

We broke camp and saddled the horses, loading Capitán with all our gear and fastening it tight with a cargo cinch. At the cantina in town, we sat over coffee and bread and discussed our next move. Should we continue up the valley and explore the Q'eros? Or should we head back to the Sacred Valley and recover, benefit from our experience and gather supplies for our next trip? We couldn't decide. My foolish mistake and our encounter with the angry farmers had seriously diminished our funds, but we were so close, it would be a shame to go back now. Unable to decide, we tossed a coin: heads up the Q'eros Valley, tails we head back home.

The coin came up tails.

Once again, we crossed the stone bridge and continued up the trail toward the high country. Q'orisumac had a gentle mouth; he had an easy gait and, although not exceptionally lively, he responded well to the reins. He was also strong, showing no sign of tiring as we climbed the steep trail toward Soncco. Several hours later, with Colquepata in the distance across the river, we met a group of Indians waiting by the side of the trail carrying bundles on their backs. Two men in ponchos and ojotas stepped out; behind them stood three women and several children.

“Aliñanchu wiracocha!” the man politely greeted us, taking off his hat and revealing the colourful chullo he wore underneath.

“Aliñami tai tai!” I replied, bringing the horses to a halt.

“Where are you travelling to?” he enquired.

“To the Sacred Valley.”

“Can you take us?”

I explained that the horses were fully loaded and that we were sorry, but simply didn't have room for them.

“Not a problem, wiracocha!” he replied. They only wanted to follow us. The land was full of bandits and, with our escort, they would feel much safer on their journey. We agreed and continued on along the trail. The family gathered up their bundles and followed us for several hours, having no trouble keeping up with the horses' leisurely pace and chatting amiably with us, revealing that they were heading home from marketing in Paucartambo, loaded with fresh supplies. That afternoon we came to a little village with a charming Colonial church, covered in faded frescoes. We bid our friends good bye as they continued on their journey and lingered for a few hours before settling in for the night under the altiplano's canopy of endless stars.

In the morning we found the trail that would lead us down through a narrow defile into Lamay and the Sacred Valley. The air grew warmer as we descended and the sparse ichu grass of the puna gave way to oleander and scotch broom, scattered between the eucalyptus groves that occasionally bordered the trail. We were hoping to stop in Lamay and visit Manuel Luna, a good friend whose family had once owned the Hacienda Chuquibambilla, since expropriated by the Agrarian Reform. He was finishing his studies in Agronomy at the University of Cuzco and lived on the hacienda with the campesinos. He was also extremely proud of a young colt he'd recently

purchased, that he'd named Illapa, the Quechua word for thunder, and I was eager to show him Q'orisumac. But finding him away in Cuzco, we continued our way to P'isaq, twelve kilometres up the valley, enjoying the mild weather. The corn harvest was in full swing and the valley was a pastoral idyll filled with wild flowers and bird-song, a very welcome relief after the harsh conditions of the highlands.

Following a corn harvest, the fields were traditionally opened to communal pasturing, and the locals would bring their animals to feast on the corn stubble, clover, grass and other weeds that had grown unimpeded for months. It was a common sight to see cows, sheep, goats and the occasional horse grazing together in these harvested fields. So, after unloading our gear at the house, we led the horses to a large field outside of the village where they could eat to their hearts' content and recover from the strenuous work of the journey. Letting them loose amongst the other animals, we returned home to unpack and take stock of what we'd learnt during these last few days.

Relaxing in our courtyard over a few beers, we were suddenly interrupted by a group of children who rushed in, yelling "Señor Micher! Señor Micher! Your horse has been gored!"

"What? Which one?" I cried, putting down my beer.

"The new one! Come quick!"

We ran out as fast as our legs would carry us. Standing in the middle of the field was Q'orisumac, teetering on wobbly legs. The other animals were scattered round, blind to what had happened. Often, during the course of these "open feedings," when bulls as well as cows are let loose in an unsupervised field, issues of territory rise up and the animals fight for breeding rights. Q'orisumac had grazed too close to a rutting bull and had not got away in time. His docile manner had been his undoing. Running up to the horse, I was first surprised to see no blood on him, yet on closer inspection I noticed, just behind his right foreleg, a large wound on his chest in the shape of an H from which his breath emanated in sad fluttering sighs. The bull had gored him in the chest and pierced his lung, bits of flesh vibrating with each exhalation. This was bad indeed.

"Quick! Let's try taking him over to the grove of trees, away from the sun and the other animals, and see what we can do!" I cried in a panic.

Grabbing a rope I led him slowly to the shade of the trees while we figured out what to do. A veterinarian examiner lived in the village, working mostly with the dairy

farms along the valley, and I ran to his house for help. But there was no one there, so I dashed home and got some sheets, the cargo cinch, more rope and his hackamore, a bit-less bridle I figured I'd need to tie him up. I rushed back to the grove to find Q'orisumac surrounded by a dozen boys, stoically enduring his misfortune. Up the Chongo Valley was a dairy farm, and I was sure they would have the knowledge and experience I needed to save the horse. I dashed off on foot to seek their help, but again, there was nobody there. I ran back to the trees to find the local policeman standing by.

“What do you think?” I asked him. “Can we save him?”

“He's a goner for sure. We'll have to put him down,” he replied, pulling out his pistol.

I suddenly remembered my grandmother telling me of the bullfights she'd seen when she first arrived in Spain in the early 1920s. The horses in those days wore no protection and were routinely gored in the course of the fight. The mozos would quickly sew them up and send them out again to the ring, a memory that haunted her for years.

“No! Wait!” I cried. “I think we should try to cure him! Let's sew him up and see where it goes!”

Chip rushed back to the house for fishing line and a curved sack-sewing needle and I asked one of the boys to run to the pharmacist's for sulpha pills. While I waited for their return, I rigged the rope to cast the horse onto his side. This is a delicate manoeuvre, requiring several people to work in tandem. One has to hold the head while two others pull at the rope passed under his belly round the hocks of his back legs. Then, all pulling together, the horse's hind legs fold and he settles down. A few minutes later, Chip returned with the needle and line and the boy ran up, an envelope full of pills in his hand. We cast the horse down and he lay on the grass, struggling to get up.

“Sit on him and keep him quiet!” I shouted to the boys, who instantly piled on the horse, sitting on his neck and haunches. Now immobilised, I could have a closer look at the wound. It was very ugly. Air continued to whistle out of it and it was not going to be easy sewing up that awkward H, with so many angles.

“Does anybody need to pee?” I asked.

Having read somewhere that urine is an excellent antiseptic, I thought that it would serve well as an emergency disinfectant. One of the boys raised his hand.

“Aim well,” I said.

Unbuttoning his fly, he proceeded to pee directly into Q'orisumac's wound. We next found a large flat rock upon which we laid out the sulpha pills. With another rock, a smooth river one, we ground the pills to powder, gently placing it back into the envelope. I sprinkled some sulpha in the wound and threaded the needle. My hands were shaking and it took considerable effort to pierce the skin; I was surprised at how tough the horse's hide was. Chip took the needle and with patience and determination joined the pieces of flesh together, sewing shut the gaping hole and leaving a tidy H stitched together with fishing line. Sprinkling the rest of the sulpha powder onto the wound, I said, “Now let's see if he gets up.” We untied him and gave him a little nudge and slowly he rose to his feet. We then wrapped a bed sheet around his chest, securing the bandage with the cargo cinch and placed the halter over his head before tying him to a tree.

The policeman said quietly, “The real test will be to see if he's still on his feet tomorrow morning. If he's still standing 24 hours later, he'll make it. If he's not, he'll die.”

There wasn't more we could do, so we walked slowly back to the house in a pensive gloom.

Early the next morning we were back in the grove of trees. Q'orisumac was still on his feet. He would live! I was so excited at first that I didn't notice his bridle and the rope he was tied to the tree with had been stolen in the night. Indians, on their way up the Chongo Valley, had helped themselves; the temptation had simply been too great to ignore.

Next door to us in the village lived Felix García and his wife, a gracious elderly couple who, with the snobbish pride of their Spanish ancestry, affected a quaint, antiquated speech. They owned a petrol-fired mill that occasionally ground the villagers' wheat and over the months we'd become quite close. Across the street from their house they had a large corral where they kept a dilapidated old Peugeot 403 pickup. By mid-morning they had heard about the tragic accident and came knocking at our door, offering to keep Q'orisumac in their corral while he healed, where he'd be close at hand and away from the other animals. They also insisted on sending me a trusted curandera of old acquaintance who they felt could help cure the animal. I was grateful for their offer and brought the horse into the village, leading him into their corral, laying out for him a bundle of forage.



Chip lays out forage for Q'orisumac, P'isaq, Perú, 1973 (Photo credit Jon Schahinger)

Soon, an old woman and a young girl showed up at my door. She introduced herself as Doña Encarna the curandera. She spoke no Spanish, her young assistant did the translating. Walking her over to the corral, I explained as best I could what had happened and what I had done thus far. She nodded and said she'd see what needed to be done. Talking gently to the horse, she unclasped the cinch, removing the sheet and bent down to inspect the wound. She gave a few sharp orders to the young girl, who dashed off. A short while later, the girl returned carrying small bunches of plants picked from the mountainside. Doña Encarna crushed the herbs into a green paste and applied the compress to the wound before wrapping it up again.

Day after day and with infinite patience, Doña Encarna cleaned the wound, replacing the herbal compress with new herbs that she herself had plucked from the mountain. Under her care Q'orisumac soon regained his appetite and looked well on his way to recovery. One day I was with her when she performed the cure. Unwrapping the sheet, we discovered that a section of the wound, where Chip had sewn one of the flaps, had come undone. The stitches had torn out, leaving an eight centimetre triangle of flesh, dangling helplessly and reeking of putrefaction. I was alarmed, but Doña Encarna assured me that it was a good thing. With scissors, she delicately cut away the dying flesh, leaving a gaping hole in the side of the horse.



Doña Encarna, P'isaq, Perú, 1973

“This way, all the bad toxins can exit the body,” she explained. Q'orisumac had sometimes developed large ballooning sacs on his chest that from time to time she would puncture, releasing the gas. Now, with this clean hole in his side, she was confident there would be no more gas bubbles and the wound could heal nicely.

For three months Doña Encarna treated that horse. Chip fell in love with a pretty limeña and left town. I too, was preparing to move. On one of my horseback wanderings, I had found an abandoned 400-year-old mill on several hectares with a large, well-irrigated pasture. Known as Uрпиhuaylla, meadow of the doves in Quechua, the mill nestled in a eucalyptus forest over a small stream, a kilometre above Taray, a village on the other side of the river. It was an idyllic spot, the picture of pastoral perfection.

However, before I made my move I needed to stop in and see my neighbours to thank them once again for their kindness. Most of all, I wanted to show my appreciation to Doña Encarna, who for so long had patiently cared for the horse. She had shown me which herbs to use, where to find them, and how to apply them, knowledge that I have regrettably since forgotten, but for which I would be eternally grateful. Stepping into the García's courtyard, I found them talking to Doña Encarna, who announced with a smile that Q'orisumac was now cured, that I could take him with me to the mill. We crossed over to the corral, where she unwrapped the bandages, revealing hardly a trace of his terrible wound. The big ugly H Chip had stitched together had

fused completely and only under close inspection could his scars be detected. But the section that had come undone and she had cut away was now a solid mass of scar tissue. Pink flesh showed where once had been hair.

“But this?” I enquired, pointing to his scar.

“Not to worry,” she replied with a laugh. “Simply rub lemon juice over it and you’ll soon see how his hair returns.”

Over the next months, I assiduously applied lemon juice to Q’orisumac’s scar. True to Doña Encarna’s word, his fur began to grow over the bald spot and soon all trace of his encounter with the rutting bull had vanished.



Q’orisumac tied up in Urpihuaylla, Perú, fully healed.

SECOND MOVEMENT

Transporting my bed, chairs, tables, kitchen equipment and sundry personal items to Urpihuaylla, I began to make the old mill habitable. The main room's roof had collapsed and the machinery lay rusting inside, covered in dust. But a small, blackened kitchen and three other rooms were in decent shape, so I was able to move my things and set up house. Between the mill house and the kitchen was a corral where the horses could sleep, it only needed a gate. I had plans to grow oats and alfalfa in the field behind the house, but it had lain fallow for years, and before any planting could be done, I would need to reconstruct the broken and root-infested irrigation ditch that passed behind the mill. Down in the village was a little shop where I could purchase candles, kerosene for the Primus stove, canned tuna and other assorted food items. I soon got to know the majority of the villagers, who received me with warm hospitality, pleased as they were to sell me forage for the horses: alfalfa and chala, the Quechua word for cornstalks.

The work at the mill required professional help and I enquired around the village for someone who could advise me in managing the property. I was introduced to an elderly gentleman, named don Cornelio, who showed up the next morning with a proposition.

“On weekends I will sleep with my wife in the village but during the week I can come and live with you here in Urpihuaylla and help you with the animals and the farm,” he proposed, asking for a small salary. In an old patched-up suit, wearing ojotas and a shapeless felt hat, he resembled a character out of Tolkien. He appeared quite old and I wondered if he would be up to the physical demands of the job.

“How old are you, don Cornelio?” I asked, concerned.

He thought for a while and replied, “How old do you think I am?”

“I'd say you're sixty-five years old.”

After a pause, he said, “That's right! I'm sixty-five, Señor Micher. Sixty-five!”



Don Cornelio, Urpihuaylla, Perú, 1975

Don Cornelio moved right in and together, we started to put the mill in order. He found labourers in the village to help with the ditch, hired a team of bulls to plough the field, advised me in all matters agricultural and showed me how to breakfast with trout. In the evenings we'd lay out some worm-baited fishing hooks in the stream, tying the lines to a branch from a bush on the bank and attaching to them a plastic bag. In the morning we'd invariably find one or two of those bags moving erratically from side to side, and all we needed to do was pull in the trout and fire up the stove. Sundays he'd take our surplus harvest of lettuce, chard or carrots to market in P'isaq, setting up his own stand. At mid-day I'd ride in to collect whatever he'd been able to earn, inviting him with the proceeds to lunch at the only restaurant in town.

Vampires, however, became a problem. The horses slept out on the pasture, tied to a long rope that would let them graze, and they were happy. But in the mornings, I'd find sores on their withers, or sometimes near the tail, that left their shoulders covered in long bloody trails. Vampire bats feed on blood, and their saliva contains an anaesthetic anti-coagulant that allows them to make repeated dives during the night and feed off their unsuspecting prey. I'd clean the wounds with antiseptic, but night after night the bats returned to the same sores, and by morning, the horses were again covered in blood. I couldn't ride them with these sores: the friction of the saddles only exacerbated them. I needed to find a solution. I designed "pyjamas" for each of the horses, buying some cloth and draping a large sheet over their backs which I tied round their neck and secured with a bit of line under their tail. They looked ridiculous, but I was hopeful. Safe from the vampires they'd heal in a week or two. In the morning, however, I'd inevitably find them grazing peacefully in the pasture with their "pyjamas" hanging like diapers under their bellies, blood streaming from their freshly reopened wounds.

This wouldn't do.

Since bats use a kind of sonar to navigate, I decided to put the horses in the corral for the night, where they would be sheltered from the vampires. But the corral lacked a roof, so don Cornelio and I built a structure of poles and thatch that we fitted over the corral, tying bits of line weighed down with stones from the overhead beams. We now had an enclosed area with a roof over head from which hung dozens of bits of rope, designed to confuse the blind bats and allow the horses to safely sleep. The corral looked terrific. Confident this would solve the problem, I led the horses in for the night, proud of my ingenuity. They were a bit confused by all the hanging ropes but they settled in and I went to bed.

The screeching and neighing and kicking that emanated from the corral next door kept me awake half the night. Having a stallion with two geldings in close quarters was not going to work. I clearly didn't need three horses; I'd have to sell one. In P'isaq I had befriended Josco Vaz, a garrulous Czech who lived in the old Chongo Chico hacienda at the base of the P'isaq ruins, property of his Peruvian wife's family. She lived in Lima, but he was committed to converting the hacienda into a hotel, and he steadfastly undertook renovations that went on for years. We had spent many an afternoon on his property drinking beer and sharing stories and I thought he would be the perfect candidate to take one of the horses off my hands. But with plenty of other problems of his own, Josco was reluctant to embrace another. One day I met his young son, up from Lima on a school holiday, and I convinced Josco of the benefits his son would enjoy exploring the area on horseback, of the adventures that lay wait-

ing. All he needed was a horse! My persistence weakened his resolve and I promptly sold him Capitán.

And so the months passed. Don Cornelio taught me many things, and my esteem and respect for him only grew with time. Without his help I would never have been able to manage the mill or leave it unattended. He had my absolute trust and I was grateful for his help. We became close friends.

With Cariblanco and Q'orisumac I continued to travel over the mountains. One October we travelled down the Sacred Valley to its end, where steep palisades block the way, and climbed over a snow-driven Panticalle Pass to work our way around the nevado Veronica, through the tropical heat and humidity of Chaullay, to enter finally into the mythical land of Vilcabamba. It was a fascinating journey of discovery, complete with voracious insects, forgotten Inca ruins and the vestiges of haciendas expropriated by an abused peasantry under the direction of Hugo Blanco ten years before. After several weeks, the rains began in earnest, forcing my return, but I was now convinced that horse travel was the most efficient means of connecting with the country's painful past and I looked forward to making many more trips in future.

The following year I returned from a trip to Brazil having succeeded in selling some photographs and an article or two to magazine publishers in Rio. Arriving in Cuzco with money itching to burn in my pocket, my first thought was to get a new saddle. I found a beautiful one with matching saddlebags that I purchased on the spot from the saddle maker. I had heard of some horses for sale on the Pampa de Anta, and next morning got a ride on a truck to pick one out of the herd. An hour later we stood before a large corral filled with neighing horses. I bought a tall bay gelding named Polizón and saddled him up, heading out over open country to Moray, then winding down to Urubamba on the Sacred Valley and home, a simple two-day trip. Don Cornelio was pleased to see me and admired our new horse. Urpihuaylla looked good, don Cornelio had taken good care of it in my absence; the fields were well-tended, the horses healthy and it was great to be home.

Despite the mill's isolation and my rare visits to Cuzco, I was able to maintain an active social life, and friends often stopped by to visit, enjoying the bucolic charm and healthy lifestyle of the place. The abundant festivals in the Valley were a joy to watch (or partake in) and I was occasionally asked to lend horses to the authorities on business up the mountain—a coroner for a death or a judge for a police enquiry—as well as for festivities in the village, where horse-races were often held.

Across the river, a gringo had moved in. A self-proclaimed “Arkansas River Rat,” Pepe

Cabrón was an interesting character. Very secretive about his past, I never learnt his real name. Could he have been a CIA agent, the first suspicion to cross everybody's mind upon meeting a solitary gringo? Who knows, but he was extremely affable and we had grown close. He had rented a tiny hut in a field near P'isaq and had taken to farming, grew his own food and, scurrying under the kitchen table, he kept cuys, or guinea pigs, a staple in Quechuan cuisine, that he would prepare into sumptuous meals.

Again, not needing three horses, I sold him Q'orisumac.

One afternoon I was sitting on the front lawn, enjoying a pot of tea with friends, when don Cornelio walked up. My visitors were city people, up from the capital on holiday, and they were amazed at the old man's dexterity. I had been telling them of all the things he'd helped me with, lauding his skills and ancient knowledge.

"How old are you, don Cornelio?" one of them asked.

"I'm sixty-five! Isn't that right, señor Micher?" he replied with enthusiasm, glancing in my direction for confirmation. Either don Cornelio couldn't add or he chose to ignore the fact that several years had elapsed since I'd last asked him the same question. Either way, he was happy with his age, that much was obvious.

My personal life had also changed. I was enjoying a certain success with the ladies, several of whom would often spend a few days at Urpihuaylla. Careful not to offend the villagers' conservative morals, I would invariably introduce them as cousins, or nieces, or sisters, hoping thus to quell the rumour mill and ease whatever confusion the villagers might have about the solitary gringo living alone up in the mill. But I was now in a relationship with a young limeña called Rocío, who had left her husband in the capital for a more serene lifestyle in the Andes. Her husband had accepted the new arrangement and we had become friends; he would often drop by for a visit, bringing news from Lima and toys for their daughter, who would share her time between both parents, shuttling back and forth between Lima and the Sacred Valley.

I was growing restless though, eager to take off again, to ride up the mountain with the horses before the rains began in earnest. It had been months since my last trip, and the dry season was drawing to an end. I thought it would be a good time to return to Paucartambo and Pepe Cabrón enthusiastically agreed to join me. He had a strong horse in Q'orisumac and, with his darkly irreverent sense of humour, would make for a convivial travelling companion. Having settled on a date for departure, I set upon organising everything we'd need for the journey and preparing the mill for a

long absence. Perhaps this time we could finally meet the Q'eros!

Rocío was enthusiastic about my trip and was helpful in my preparations.

“What will you do while I’m gone?” I asked her.

“I’ll stay here with don Cornelio and work on the garden, plant some flowers perhaps, and catch up on my reading! Don’t worry about us, we’ll be just fine!”

Just the picture of connubial bliss, thought I.



Urpihuaylla, Perú, 1974

THIRD MOVEMENT

Dawn caught us riding up the Chongo Valley in the footsteps of the journey I'd taken three years before, and we climbed to the puna in good spirits, I on Polizón and Pepe Cabrón on Q'orisumac. Some months ago, on a trip to Cuzco, I had met José Quispe, a very cordial fellow who lived in the Paucartambo Valley. Upon hearing of my interest in the area, he invited me to his farm near the river, insisting I drop by if I ever found myself there. So, two days later we crossed the Carlos III bridge, the marvellous 18th century stone arch spanning the Paucartambo River and rode into town. Since it was late afternoon, we decided to make directly for the Quispe farm, seven kilometres upstream, where we could camp and rest the horses. The farmhouse was by the side of the road and, behind it, a steep incline dropped onto a wide field at the river's edge, dotted with a few eucalyptus trees. José was away on business, but his wife Engracia was extremely gracious, apologising for her husband's absence. We asked her permission to camp on the field below and she immediately consented, saying, "Anything you need at all, please let me know!"

It was a lovely camp: flat, green and lush with ample shade. Forage was available nearby and there was plenty of pasture for the horses. The river roared beside us, ice cold, as it wound its way to the Amazon from the lofty snowy peaks. Under a million stars, we cooked a nice dinner on the fire, glad to be on our way and pleased at how things had come together thus far. In the morning, I rose and walked to the river's edge to wash before making breakfast. Turning back, I noticed that Polizón was favouring his foreleg. He couldn't put his hoof down; the slightest step a terrible pain. I examined his hoof but found no stone or encrusted object. The pain was in his fetlock, at the joint. He must have stepped wrong crossing a stream on the way here, perhaps catching his hoof on a rock and, pulling up, had sprained something. He seemed fine yesterday, but after cooling down in the night the pain had set in, and now he was incapable of taking a single step.

In a situation like this there isn't much one can do, except give the horse time to heal. I talked it over with Pepe Cabrón who agreed we had no option but to delay continuing our trip until the horse mended. We were looking at two weeks of rest before we could move on. I knocked on señora Engracia's door and informed her of our predicament.

No problem!”, she said. “You can stay there as long as you need to. My husband will be back soon and I’m sure he can help you.”

Pepe was fine with the idea of camping out for two weeks on the side of the river. He would find plenty to do, and besides, he was looking forward to seeing the fiesta for the Virgen del Carmen, which was coming soon, and for which Paucartambo was renown.

I, on the other hand, was thinking of Rocío back in Urpihuaylla. Her daughter had returned to Lima with her dad and she was alone at the mill. It occurred to me that I might spend these next two weeks in her company, shoring up her determination to live the rural life. She was, after all, a city girl, and I feared that she would soon grow weary of a solitary life with don Cornelio. The next day, I caught a ride on a truck leaving for Cuzco and, late that afternoon, walked up the trail to the mill. Seeing me cross the little log bridge over the stream, don Cornelio greeted me, “Hola señor Micher! What are you doing back so soon?” I explained that the horse had gone lame and that I thought I’d spend his recovery time here, working on projects around the mill.

I looked round. Not a trace of Rocío; the place was empty. “Where’s the señora?” I asked.

“Ay, señor Micher! The day after you left she took off with some gringo in his camper!”

So much for connubial bliss.

Taking a bus back to Cuzco, I spent the next day polling the usual haunts and learned that Rocío had been seen with a Costa Rican who was travelling the continent in his VW camper. I’d never met the chap, nor even heard of him, so the news came as a complete a surprise. I was told that they had taken off for Paucartambo, intending to catch the sunrise at Tres Cruces.

Juan Flores and his mother Sofía lived in a splendid flat overlooking the Plaza de Armas, and they would often put me up during my visits to Cuzco. He worked for Cervecería La Cuzqueña, the local brewery, and it was his job to drive around the country contacting growers and buying their barley for the brewery. That evening, over dinner in their dining room, I shared with them my tale of woe.

“It just so happens that tomorrow I have to drive over to Paucartambo to check up on

the harvests and I would be happy to take you. We can stop over in Tres Cruces and see what is really going on with your, ahem, 'girlfriend,'" he said.

Early the next morning we took off in his 4x4, the dirt road to Paucartambo open that day to traffic flowing north. Hours later, we crossed the stone bridge into town and continued downstream and up the road to Madre de Dios. At the top of the pass we found the turnoff, arriving at the lookout after dark. Perched on the edge of the mountain is a small lodge, built for the comfort of visitors, who in inclement weather can take refuge whilst waiting for the sunrise. As we pulled up we could see a VW camper parked next to the lodge and several people gathered round the small clearing, playing a guitar and passing around bottles of beer. A party was in full swing and I put on my best face as we stepped out of the car. There was good cheer all round and our arrival was greeted with toasts and expressions of amazement and words of serendipity. I had yet to receive an explanation from Rocío, but I thought it wiser to wait until morning, joining the merry making as best I could.

Heavy clouds scudded overhead and it was evident that tomorrow no sun would be visible rising from the East. Catching the famous sunrise from Tres Cruces is an iffy proposition in the best of times, but with the dry season soon coming to a close, our chances of seeing it tonight were practically nil. Tres Cruces sits at a spot where the Andes open to an endless expanse of jungle, and the views are formidable. Most often though, the rising humidity covers the rainforest, shielding it with a thick canopy of clouds, visible only as a lumpy sea of white, stretching to infinity.



Dawn at Tres Cruces, anonymous photographer

With that in mind, I suggested to the group that we move the party to our campsite. Pepe Cabrón was there, our horses were there, and it was situated in a beautiful spot, in a meadow next to the river, with plenty of room for the cars to get down to. There was no point in staying at Tres Cruces, where it was getting colder by the minute, and we would be sure to be disappointed in the morning, when the clouds would hide any view of the sunrise. Everyone agreed and we all climbed into our respective vehicles, making our way back down the mountain to Paucartambo and on to our campsite beyond.

From the farm house on the road a small dirt track wound down to the meadow, and our two vehicles carefully made their way to the campsite. As we approached, we could see the tent, a fire and the horses grazing nearby. We parked and Pepe Cabrón rose to greet us, always ready for a party, happy for the company. With fresh beers in hand, everyone piled out, settling round the camp fire, glowing cheerfully in the night. The Costa Rican pulled out his guitar and strummed a few bars of tunes everyone knew and soon the festivities were again in full swing.

The mood was suddenly altered when Rocío began to complain of pains in her belly. Informing me she could no longer stay at the camp, she insisted I take her up to the house, where she could rest and recover. Unwilling as I was, to further impose upon our hostess' hospitality, I proposed she retire to the tent instead, confident she'd feel better in the morning. But she adamant, claiming women's troubles and assuring me that it was an emergency.

"OK, let's go. I'll walk you up and introduce you."

"It hurts too much," she whined, "I can't walk, you must drive me!"

I looked over to the Costa Rican and asked him if he'd drive her up to the house, but he demurred. "Take the VW yourself, if you don't mind. I don't think I can drive, but I'll come along too," he said. I climbed into the camper and started up the engine. With audible moans, Rocío climbed in back, followed by the Costa Rican, who nestled cozily at her side. "Go ahead and take her up," he said, leaving the side door open and wrapping her in his poncho. The headlights revealed a very narrow track leading up to the house and I gingerly put the car into gear.

I had owned a prior version of this camper, one with split windscreens and side windows that slid fore and aft. This one was newer: it had a single, curved windscreen and regular side windows that rolled down, but it handled pretty much the same. Both were notoriously underpowered and the car had difficulty negotiating the tight curves

of the switchback as we climbed. At each curve, I had to let the car roll back a bit to gather enough speed and make it round the next bend. After a few curves, as I was positioning the car for the next one, the Costa Rican commented, “I can see you know how to drive this car—”

Before I could reply, I felt the rear wheel give. I had gone too close to the edge and the loose dirt of the track gave way. The car rolled over and we started to tumble, tossed about head over heels like dice in a cup. The windscreen popped out. And then it was dark. And wet. We were in the river, underwater. With the windscreen gone, the cold water gushed in, unimpeded. Yet somehow there remained a pocket of air and I could breathe. Over and over, I dove and groped in the scrambled mess, trying to find my passengers. Nothing. I gasped for air and dove again, I couldn't find them.

Suddenly, a I felt a strong hand grip my arm and pull me from the car. I emerged to see our companions standing at the river's edge, backlit by the 4×4 that had been pulled over to the shore, its headlights lighting the river.

“Are you all right?” Pepe yelled into my ear, jolting me out of my stupor.

“Yeah, I'm fine!” I replied, “How is everyone else?”

Rocío and the Costa Rican sat disconsolately on the bank, wrapped in ponchos. He had been knocked out of the car in the tumble, landing on rocks and hurting his chest; she'd been pulled from the river some minutes before, unhurt. I had no idea how long I'd been there, in the car, scrabbling for them in the dark before Pepe Cabrón pulled me out, but turning back I could see the van upside down in the middle of the river, wheels in the air, its headlights casting lonely twin beacons upon a furious torrent.

It was an eerie and desolate sight.

Dripping water, I stood on the shore in a daze, wondering what had happened, stunned by how a single split second could alter our lives forever. Rocío and the Costa Rican were now moaning audibly and we loaded them into the 4×4 for the ride up the hill to the farm, where a startled señora Engracia received us with hot tea, putting us up for the night under blankets on the dining room floor. We slipped out of our wet clothes and lay shivering under the covers, waiting for the dawn.

At first light, I dressed and walked down to the meadow. The Costa Rican had complained all through the night and, fearing he was seriously hurt, I suggested to Juan

that he drive them both to Cuzco in his 4×4, where they could receive proper medical attention; I'd stay behind and look after the car. He agreed, and took off, picking them up in the farmhouse before driving away.

I looked at the wreck. In the dim light, the headlights were still on, though shining feebly. The camper lay half submerged, a maelstrom of flotsam swirling within; pieces of clothing, papers and parts of the interior visible through the rear window. Dark clouds threatened above and I worried that a strong downpour upriver could take the car and all its contents downstream in a flash flood. It was imperative that we try to save what we could before it was gone forever. Pepe Cabrón and I spent the morning emptying out the car, entering the waist-high water, grabbing what we could and depositing it to dry on the meadow. Soon the field was covered with hundreds of slides, books, clothing and other items, spread across its entire width, laid out like market wares for the Indians who were now descending the Valley on their way to the Fiesta de la Virgen del Carmen.

In an ironic twist of fate the Q'eros were coming to us! Dozens of colourfully dressed Indians were coming down along the river bank on their way toward the town. Up on the road, I could see more of them, carrying bundles, children and musical instruments. The Fiesta of Paucartambo had started that day and half the Q'eros seemed to have emptied out onto the Valley. Realising that if left on the field, the Costa Rican's possessions would soon end up in the Indian's bundles, we began to gather them into piles, searching for some way to bag them or box them until I could get them to safety.

The next order of business was to get the car out of the river. Across the bridge from Paucartambo, a kilometre or so up the switchback road that leads to Cuzco, sat a Caterpillar bulldozer, permanently on standby, ready to clear the road of its frequent huaycos, landslides that often blocked all transit and which were common during the rainy season. If only I could get the bulldozer over here, we could pull the car onto dry land and work on getting it to Cuzco for repairs.

Pepe Cabrón agreed to stay behind and watch over the Costa Rican's belongings while I saddled up Polizón, whose leg seemed to have healed, and rode off to town. Tying up outside the Ayuntamiento, I met with the mayor, explaining to him our dilemma and our urgent need of assistance; we needed the Caterpillar before the rains began in earnest.

"It'll be tough to find the driver, what with the Fiesta getting started and all," he replied. "You might check his house. He lives down the road."

The Caterpillar driver listened to my story and agreed to drive over the following morning. But he warned he would only give me an hour of his time; the possibility of rain required he stay close to his post on the road.

“And get some chain! You’ll need chain to pull it out!” he yelled as I rode off.

Relieved to have settled with the bulldozer driver, I now needed to find some chain for tomorrow. The town was filling up with revellers down from the mountains and groups of men and women could be seen gathered round a jar of chicha or passing around bottles of beer. From the depths of a cantina, a charango could be heard strumming accompaniment to a huayno while a quena imitated its mournful intonations. Everyone I spoke to stared back at me with eyes glazed, drunk and uncomprehending my broken Quechua. Someone finally directed me to a large house in town hidden behind a tall wall with an imposing gate. I stood before the gate and knocked. Nothing. After repeated knockings, the gate opened and I was shown in to meet the owner, don Felipe Calderón, a portly man of obvious means. Again, I explained my situation and he replied that yes, he had plenty of chain and would be glad to lend it to us, offering to drive it out to the farm in his pickup truck tomorrow morning. Pointing to the large courtyard, I then asked him if I could store the Costa Rican’s belongings with him, scattered as they were back there on the meadow, at the mercy of thieves and the weather.

“By all means, compadre!” he replied, “We’ll load them up in the pickup truck tomorrow and I’ll bring them back with me. They’ll be safe here.”

I rode back to camp, satisfied that everything was in order. The bulldozer would arrive tomorrow morning, the chains would be delivered, the Costa Rican’s belongings placed in storage... Pepe Cabrón and I spent the afternoon tidying up; tomorrow would be a big day.

Early next morning I sat in señora Engracia’s kitchen over a cup of coffee, cuys scamp-ering at our feet. We were waiting for the pickup truck to deliver the chains. The bulldozer driver had assured us he’d be here by nine and we still had a few minutes to go. But we had no chains. If the driver arrived and found us unprepared, he’d turn round and then it might be impossible to get him back. I was getting anxious.

“I’m going into town to see about those chains. If the driver gets here while I’m gone, feed him breakfast. A long breakfast! Just don’t let him leave until I get back!” I implored, my foot on the stirrup as I swung onto the saddle.

At the approach of town, I found the road crowded with Indians, long rows of people filing into Paucartambo for the Fiesta. "Paso! Paso!" I called out, threading my way through the teeming multitude. Movement had virtually ground to a halt.

The clock was ticking, I needed to get by!

Gently as I could, I spurred the horse through, trying to get round a group of people, when suddenly, a man grabbed my reins, screaming in Quechua. What had happened? I couldn't understand a word he was saying. Dismounting, I saw a young boy sitting on the ground, holding his foot and crying with heartbreaking sobs. Polizón had tread on his foot as we passed, and now his irate father was demanding justice. I knelt down and felt the boy's foot. To my relief, nothing appeared broken, no skin was ruptured and no particular movement increased his pain or his crying. It was only a simple bruise. Rising to my feet, I dug into my pocket and found a 50 sol note which I presented to the father with both hands. The boy stopped crying and the man grudgingly accepted the money, slipping it into his bundle. I jumped back on the horse and continued my way into town, heading for don Felipe's house.

This time the gate to his courtyard was open and, tying the horse outside, I entered to find the entire family sitting down for breakfast. Many relatives had arrived from Cuzco for the Fiesta that day, and they were deep into their meal, enjoying the conviviality of a family reunion. Humbly apologising for the interruption, I explained the urgency of the matter: we needed to get the chains out to the farm before the driver arrived with his Caterpillar. He was already on his way and if the chains weren't there, he'd turn round and go back and we'd lose our only chance to save the car.

"Tranquilo, compadre! As soon as I finish breakfast, I'll bring them out."

Resigned to the fact that there was little more I could do in town, I mounted and headed back, hoping to stall the driver until the chains arrived. Halfway to the farm I first heard and then saw the Caterpillar up ahead, rolling up the road on its tread under a cloud of exhaust. I needed to get past him, but the horse kept shying and I couldn't find a way of getting round him on the narrow road. Finally, a little clearing opened up on the left and we sprinted over the top, leaving the Caterpillar behind and galloping ahead to the farm.

Señora Engracia was in her kitchen when I arrived. I explained that the driver would arrive in a few minutes and we'd better get the coffee on.

"Everything's prepared, don't you worry!" she smiled, putting out some plates.

Her husband was still away. What an ordeal we'd put her through! I doubted he had this in mind when he invited me to visit, all those months ago in Cuzco.

The Caterpillar then drove up and the driver hopped off. We offered him breakfast and he sat down at the table, beaming at the spread of food laid out before him. Keeping a nervous eye on the road, I tried to engage him in idle chat. But the driver was in no hurry, responding to my polite queries with laconic grunts and monosyllables while calmly lathering butter onto pieces of toast.

Finally, we heard the pickup truck drive up the road. The chains had arrived!

Wiping his mouth, the driver rose from the table and stepped outside. Standing quietly, his hand shielding the sun, he gazed down the hill at the river, where the car rested pitifully in the water. The rest of us followed his orders and unloaded the chains, piling them into the bulldozer's shovel. Without a word, he climbed into his cab, and started up the Caterpillar. Then he began working on the trail that led down to the meadow. With a barely perceptible movement of his hands, he operated the controls, driving forward and back, widening the path until he had carved a reasonable facsimile of a road all the way down to the river. I watched amazed at his insouciance as he then drove his rig into the river and proceeded to remove every rock that lay around the car, pushing them away to clear a soft, sandy area between the car and the shore. Having prepared the ground to his satisfaction, he rigged the chains to the car and attached them to the Caterpillar. With a few short manoeuvres, he had righted the camper back on its wheels. He then repositioned the chains and slowly towed the car out of the river, up the embankment and on to the road he had carved, zig-zagging up to the farm house. Out of the hill opposite the house he carved a sort of platform, carefully placing the car next to the road in such a way that it sat parked a metre high, facing out.

On closer examination, we could see that in the tumble, the van had lost its square. Viewed from behind, a cross-cut of the vehicle showed it was no longer a rectangle, but a parallelogram. The upper section seemed to lean over to the left, over the wheels, and the doors didn't close properly. I'd have to find a mechanic in Cuzco who could fix it, but first, the Caterpillar driver was eager to leave and I paid him off with many thanks. We then loaded the assorted jumble of belongings and the chains on to the pickup and don Felipe drove off, assuring me they'd be safe in his courtyard until I could recover them. Tomorrow, with the outgoing traffic, I would catch a ride back to Cuzco and find a truck to deliver the car to a mechanic.

Hopping off the truck in Cuzco the next day, my first stop was to the hospital. Rocío

was not around, but I found the Costa Rican, swaddled in bed, lost in a deep funk. He had broken several ribs and was under observation, but otherwise he seemed fine. I comforted him as best I could, telling him we had salvaged his belongings and had pulled the car from the river and that I'd see to it his car was repaired. Next, I arranged for a mechanic to receive the car, telling him where to bill me, and located a suitable lorry, whose driver agreed to deliver the van to the shop. He could leave for Paucartambo in the morning, when the traffic was open in that direction. We settled on a price and arranged to meet the next day; we'd go back for the car together.

My last stop was to the Plaza de Armas. I needed to visit Juan Flores and thank him for his help and support. I hadn't seen him since the accident and wanted very much to express my gratitude. He was away, but his mother Sofía received me with open arms and put me up for the night. She was a lively widow with a sharp wit and I had always appreciated her sense of humour. That evening I shared a warm meal in her pleasant company and enjoyed the first hot shower I'd taken in many days.

In the morning, I met the driver and we drove off to Paucartambo. This was my third truck trip on this road but, for once, I was sitting in the cab. On my previous trips, I had sat in the back, sharing the bed with sheep and assorted sacks of grain while breathing copious clouds of dust. By comparison, this was the lap of luxury! We drove straight to the Quispe farmhouse where, with great skill, the driver manoeuvred the camper from its position by the road onto the bed of his truck. With the camper safely lashed down, he headed back to Paucartambo to seek lodgings for the night and enjoy the festivities that were now in full swing. Tomorrow he would stop at don Felipe's house to pick up the Costa Rican's belongings and take the whole lot back to the mechanic in Cuzco.

In town early the next day I took the driver to the Calderón house and helped him load the salvaged gear that lay piled in the courtyard. After seeing him off I said good-bye to don Felipe, who generously refused any payment and, promising to visit again soon, I rode out to the river's edge.

Sitting quietly on Polizón, I watched the lorry cross the old stone bridge, the VW camper boxed in the back, riding alone like a forlorn animal. The truck began its climb up the switchback and the whine of its engine echoed off the mountainside as it passed the Caterpillar, parked silently on the side of the road.

CODA

A few days later, Pepe Cabrón and I rode down the mountain and entered the Sacred Valley. There didn't seem to be much to say. For two days we had ridden mostly in silence, each lost in his own thoughts. We had said fond farewells to señora Engracia, thanking her generosity and apologising for all the inconvenience we had caused. She was extremely gracious, assuring us we had been no trouble at all, and invited us to return another time, when her husband was sure to be home. With all the activity, we had missed the much vaunted celebrations, the dancers and the music for which Paucartambo is known, but we were glad to be coming home.

Riding up to Uрпиhuaylla, the mill had never looked better. As we crossed the stream, Cariblanco neighed his welcome, looking healthy and well fed. Don Cornelio had taken good care of the property, the alfalfa in the field sporting bright purple flowers. I brushed and fed Polizón and sat down with don Cornelio to catch up on recent events.

It felt as if nothing had occurred since I last was here, as if time had continued its inexorable passage, oblivious to the petty disasters that befall us. I reflected on the events of these past weeks, the odd alignment of personalities that had meshed into calamity. Was there some kind of cosmic order to the Universe? Or was it fate with its karmic consequences what had brought us three together, Rocío, the Costa Rican and me? Was my driving of his car over the hill and into the river a kind of poetic justice for his taking off with my girlfriend? Was the guilt I felt for wrecking his car what had compelled me to take on the very expensive task of salvaging it? The whole episode had seriously depleted my resources and I had had to scramble to cover the damages. Furthermore, whilst in Cuzco, I had learnt he was the scion of a very wealthy Costa Rican family who could easily have borne the costs. And he was probably fully insured, but at the time I hadn't given it any thought. No matter: I felt I'd done what I had to, and could now could put the whole affair to rest.

During the next few months I contemplated returning to Brazil, recalling the interest that the Carioca publishers had expressed in my work. Perhaps I could sell some photographs or an article or two and thus replenish my diminished resources. And it was

during one of these meditations that, one morning, I saw a colourfully dressed couple cross the log bridge over the stream and stride up to the mill.

“Are you the owner?” they asked. “We’ve heard you have horses and we’re looking to buy!”

I hadn’t considered it, but it sparked my curiosity. “What do you want them for?” I enquired.

They explained that they were Colombians and were planning to ride the old Inca Trail all the way back to Colombia. They weren’t offering cash, but had a handful of pre-Columbian bead necklaces they could offer in exchange, assuring me they were worth far more than the horses. I didn’t know anything about pre-Columbian beads or their market value, but perhaps this was the catalyst I needed to move on to the next phase, the nudge I required to make that trip to Brazil. We agreed on a deal and, holding five necklaces in my hand, I watched Polizón and Cariblanco ride off through the trees.

It would be a couple of months before I returned from Brazil to resume my life in the Sacred Valley. I bought a beautiful stallion, a dappled grey paso fino, named Almondir, who in time, was to become the finest of my horses and a true friend.

I never saw the Costa Rican again. Rocío returned to Lima and it was years later before our paths would cross, once during Carnaval in Bahia and later, in San Francisco. The old fire had gone out and would never be re-ignited.

The necklaces, I gave away over the years.