

University of Memphis

University of Memphis Digital Commons

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

---

7-25-2014

## The Senhora Who Doesn't Speak Portuguese: Following Francisco de Orellana Across the Amazon Jungle

Colleen Lynnette Pawling

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd>

---

### Recommended Citation

Pawling, Colleen Lynnette, "The Senhora Who Doesn't Speak Portuguese: Following Francisco de Orellana Across the Amazon Jungle" (2014). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1043.  
<https://digitalcommons.memphis.edu/etd/1043>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by University of Memphis Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of Memphis Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [khhgerty@memphis.edu](mailto:khhgerty@memphis.edu).

THE SENHORA WHO DOESN'T SPEAK PORTUGUESE:  
FOLLOWING FRANCISCO DE ORELLANA  
ACROSS THE AMAZON JUNGLE  
by

Colleen Lynnette Pawling

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

August 2014

Copyright © 2014 Colleen Lynnette Pawling  
All rights reserved

## ABSTRACT

Pawling, Colleen Lynnette. MFA. The University of Memphis. August 2014. *The Senhora Who Doesn't Speak Portuguese*. Major Professor: Dr. Kristen Iversen.

In 1542, Francisco de Orellana was swept down the Amazon River on what would become one of the most incredible—and unknown—journeys in history. Nearly half a millennium later, a 52-year-old American lawyer left everything behind to follow Orellana's trail across the Amazon to see what changes 500 years of western intervention had caused. She discovered three different Amazonias—the first was a land of indigenous peoples torn by conflict with outside forces wanting to exploit the oil that lurked beneath the forest; the second was a remote area almost untouched by the outside world; the third was the mighty Amazon River itself, long since industrialized during the rubber boom and firmly rooted in western culture.

Using public transportation and finding shelter as she went, Pawling stayed with local residents and learned the realities of life in modern Amazonia. She witnessed the impacts of the petroleum industry, border disputes, and the rubber boom of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. She also faced her own limitations as a middle-aged American woman without the strength and energy who once had—not to mention reliable knees. Oh, and there was also that pesky language problem.

## Contents

<b>PROLOGUE .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 SACHAWARMI .....</b>	<b>6</b>
COCA, ECUADOR: MAY, 2001.....	6
<b>CHAPTER 2 A CRAZY, BEAUTIFUL JOURNEY.....</b>	<b>21</b>
COCA, ECUADOR, SEPTEMBER 17, 2012.....	21
<i>Francisco de Orellana, 1511-1546.....</i>	<i>34</i>
COCA, SEPTEMBER 19, 2012.....	38
<i>El Barco, March-October 1541 .....</i>	<i>41</i>
<b>CHAPTER 3 MILLENNIUM VILLAGE.....</b>	<b>46</b>
PAÑACocha —SEPTEMBER 19-22, 2012.....	46
<i>A Plain and Unaffected Virtue (1504-1584).....</i>	<i>61</i>
<b>CHAPTER 4 I PULLED MY DREAM DOWN FROM THE SKY .....</b>	<b>65</b>
SANI LODGE, 2012 .....	65
<i>Rio Napo, December 25, 1541 .....</i>	<i>72</i>
YASUNI NATIONAL PARK, SEPTEMBER 23, 2012.....	74
COMUNIDAD SANI ISLA 2012.....	77
<b>CHAPTER 5 ANYTHING THEY CAN DREAM OF .....</b>	<b>92</b>
PIRANHA LAKE, SEPTEMBER 25-30, 2012.....	92
<i>Maps.....</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Rio Napo, Dec 27-31, 1541 .....</i>	<i>106</i>
<b>CHAPTER 6 I DIE FOR MY BELIEFS .....</b>	<b>109</b>
NUEVA ROCAFUERTE, SEPTEMBER 30, 2012 .....	109

<b>CHAPTER 7 THE FRONTIER .....</b>	<b>122</b>
<b>ECUADOR-PERU BORDER, OCTOBER 5, 2012 .....</b>	<b>122</b>
<i>Aguarico River, January 1 or 2, 1542 .....</i>	<i>127</i>
<b>ECUADOR-PERU BORDER, OCTOBER 5, 2012 .....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8 THE EARTH'S LUNGS .....</b>	<b>141</b>
<i>Rumi Tumi, December 30, 1541-January 2, 1542 .....</i>	<i>141</i>
<b>RUMI TUMI, OCTOBER 6, 2012 .....</b>	<b>147</b>
<i>Imara, January 3-February 2, 1542 .....</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>Lower Rio Napo, February 2, 1542 .....</i>	<i>160</i>
<b>SANTA CLOTHILDE, OCTOBER 8-11, 2012 .....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9 THE CHICKEN SHIT BOAT .....</b>	<b>169</b>
<b>CHAPTER 10 THE RIVER SEA .....</b>	<b>189</b>
<b>WORKS CITED .....</b>	<b>194</b>

## Prologue

The summer I turned five, my parents took my four sisters and me from our home in Upstate New York to California in a pizza sauce delivery truck. I sat up front on the engine block and a world full of things I couldn't have imagined appeared right before my eyes.

I didn't want it to end. I wanted my whole life to be like this—a journey into the unknown, where amazing sights would mysteriously appear, daring me to explore them. I've spent half a century following opportunities into unknown territory, just to see where it would take me. I get antsy staying in one place—"itchy feet," my mom called it. I think Francisco de Orellana also had itchy feet.

In 1541, bored with governing half of Ecuador, Orellana invited himself along on an expedition with his cousin, Gonzalo Pizarro. He found himself swept by circumstances and currents through unmapped territory toward an uncertain goal. "One of the most remarkable journeys in the history of the Americas almost ended before it began," as one travel guide book proclaims.

He didn't plan to take a boat down the Amazon River. They were looking for cinnamon and *El Dorado*, neither of which was to be found on rivers. Yet, Orellana ended up on a voyage that was "simply marvelous, through nearly 6000 miles of an unknown region, without guide, without compass, without provisions," according to Jules Verne. The Scientific Monthly called it "sensational," the American Geographic Society called it "stupendous" and Chilean historian Jose Medina referred to it as "one of the greatest things that ever happened to men."

That's travel -- mysterious, unpredictable and exciting.

I've lived for that kind of excitement. I avoided the commitments, like careers, marriage and babies, that limit most people's options. My "career path" looks like a pinball game. I went to three colleges before quitting to join the Army. I never intended to go to law school but, when offered a full tuition scholarship, it seemed rude to decline. Even then, I didn't want to practice law, but I also didn't want people to think I failed the bar exam. Once I was admitted, it seemed foolish not to give lawyering a try, so I joined Legal Services, representing poor people who needed an ally. Anyone with an eye for opportunity will find lots of it in Legal Services. I threw myself into hearings and major litigation, negotiated policy changes, commented on regulations and testified at legislative hearings. I loved it.

Until it became predictable. Routines don't agree with me.

Start and stop, go here and then somewhere else. That's my life. I've followed a zigzag path. Adventure and social justice are my only organizing principles. Maybe it's an odd combination, but it's who I am.

In addition to practicing law, I worked as an anti-hunger advocate in Upstate New York and spent six years as a policy analyst for a think tank in Washington DC. Between "real jobs" I was a photographer, English as a Foreign Language teacher at the Korean Naval Academy, and I tracked wild bears through the Andes Mountains. Of course, I can't discuss what I did as an Electronic Warfare Signal Intelligence Voice Intercept Operator in the Army. All that gave me plenty of chances to traipse around much of Asia and South America with a backpack and camera.



So nobody who knew me was surprised when I quit a great job, and something that came dangerously close to a career, to write. My friends and family expected far more than just volumes of fabulous prose. So did I, but I didn't know what it would be.

When I first went to Ecuador, I saw a text box in a guidebook I borrowed from another traveler. I don't remember what book it was, but the box was entitled, "Francisco de Orellana: Hero or Traitor?"

When I researched Orellana, I found an intriguing dearth of information. Everything online consisted of the same few cut and pasted paragraphs, and history books barely mentioned that he "discovered" the Amazon River. I didn't get the real story until I found a book that reprinted the journals of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal, as well as many documents from the time—letters and petitions to the King, affidavits sworn by members of the expedition, and documentation from official proceedings in Spain.

The journey was every bit as remarkable as the quotes suggested. Orellana and his small crew were swept down the Napo River through what is now Ecuador into Peru, where it meets the Amazon. Their journey down the Amazon to the Atlantic Ocean was an unrelenting string of battles, including the fight with the women warriors they compared with the mythical Amazons.

When I decided to follow Orellana's trail, I was familiar with the complex issues facing the Ecuadorian territory along his route. The last half-century of oil exploitation has left behind devastating environmental damage. Efforts to force oil companies to clean up the mess led to twenty years of litigation that recently ended in the largest judgment in Ecuador's history—18 billion dollars. The plaintiffs, indigenous Kichwa people, are now trying to collect.

An aging pipeline carries oil to the coast through volcano- and earthquake- prone mountains, causing frequent oil spills. Oil refineries burn off natural gas left over from their processing. Residents report high rates of cancer and skin diseases that were previously unheard of in the Amazon. As the Ecuadorian government insists on extracting oil, the indigenous people of the region are faced with a stark choice: agree, and negotiate the best compensation they can get or blockade the route armed with blowguns and spears?

The next portion of the trip—the lower Rio Napo—runs through an area that was the subject of a long-standing border dispute between Peru and Ecuador. As a result, the region was legally inaccessible when I was in Ecuador in 2003; it was also largely neglected by both countries. The area remains relatively innocent of Western influence.

The Napo then pours into the Amazon River, where the rubber boom swept through more than a century ago, bringing European and American “rubber barons.” Some native tribes were displaced and the rest enslaved as rubber traders pushed farther and farther East in their search for more rubber and the labor to process it.

So my trip would take me through three generations of Amazonia.

Of course, do anything means not doing something else. For every person who has asked, “Is there anything you *haven't* done?” there are three who asked when I was going to settle down. Our society is designed for people who get an education and a job, get married, buy a house, have kids, then retire to play with their grandkids. All five of my sisters have made good lives by following large parts of that plan. They have kids, careers, homes, and retirement funds.

I have passport stamps, boxes of journals, and a way of looking at the world skewed by years of wandering in unfamiliar places and meeting people who don't think and live like me.

I've lived as if there was no future. I would never get old. But now my body is betraying me. My ears ring so loud that sometimes I can't hear the outside world. If I stay up all night, my brain is scrambled for two days. Every miniature Reese's now adds a pound. My left knee gives out at random moments, a result of a ruptured Anterior Collateral Ligament (ACL). I am too old for another surgical repair and not old enough for a fake knee. We don't even have a good name for this time of life. What is this in between place, where we can still do everything we used to do, just more slowly and painfully?

Whatever it is, I know I'm not supposed to wander off into wild places at 52 years old, but I'm not quite ready to concede. So I decided to do something I had wanted to do for a long time: cross South America by river—the Amazon River.

Someday I'll age gracefully, but not yet.

## Chapter 1 Sachawarmi

### Coca, Ecuador: May, 2001

The young man with short, straight black hair waded through murky waist-high water. Only his shoulders and head were visible above the anaconda that wrapped around his chest and arms like a big inner tube. This picture filled the entire poster hanging behind the reception desk in the El Auca hotel in Coca, Ecuador. Bold green letters in the brown water above the man's head advertised "Emerald Forest Expeditions." I walked back to the lounge area where the other two tourists in our party waited for our tour guide, Luis Garcia.

"Do you know who that is?" Chris asked, nodding toward the poster. He and Grace were an energetic young German couple, also on their first visit to the Amazon.

"Am I supposed to?" Why would I know some indigenous guy on a poster?

"That's Luis, our guide. Read the little paper below the picture."

I went back to the registration desk and squinted at the note pinned to the bottom of the poster. It said "This anaconda was saved by our staff from an oil spill that was flowing downstream on the Napo River. It was not so difficult to seize it since it had recently eaten, and for that reason it couldn't move rapidly so as to save itself from oil pollution. Our staff then released it in a nearby lake where it remained safely protected in unpolluted water."

I was going to the jungle with either a lunatic or a snake charmer.

"I'd like to ask him about it," Grace said.

I'm incurably curious. I always ask.

I would never have planned a trip to a jungle. I had been in Quito, Ecuador trying to decide what to do with the last few days of my vacation from my job fighting hunger in New York State. After law school I worked for Legal Services representing poor people for more than six years. Crap pay but fun work. I quit that in 1995 to go to Korea and travel in Asia for a couple of years, and when I returned I started doing policy work for a state-wide nonprofit anti-hunger organization instead of directly representing individuals.

Thursday night was Cuba Libre night at the Hostal El Centro del Mundo. I curled up on a floor cushion in a corner and flipped through a stack of guidebooks borrowed from other travelers, looking for phrases like “not for the faint of heart,” “little-known,” and “for those who can do without creature comforts.” *Hostal* staffers circled the lounge ladling rum and coke with lime from a soup pot into plastic cups.

Increasingly incoherent backpackers competed to outdo each other’s lavish descriptions of their wild and dangerous Amazonian adventures.

“We were in this little canoe and an anaconda swam right by us!” one girl exclaimed. “I could have reached out and touched it.”

“We saw a jaguar in the forest, just staring at us from a tree branch.” I’d bet that guy is lying. I think that jaguars are smart enough to avoid humans.

Then there was the guy who drank ayahuasca, the hallucinogenic used by shamans in spiritual rituals.

“We were all sick,” he said, “but I didn’t throw up like the others. They all went to bed and I was sitting on the edge of the platform where we were sleeping and I saw my hands turn into paws and just like that I was a jaguar. I felt like a jaguar, and I could see

so clearly in the dark and I smelled the animals and I was hungry so I took off looking for prey and I ran and ran through the forest.” The room fell silent, absorbed in his tale. “I think I could have run forever, but I heard my mate calling me and I snapped back to my senses—my human senses—and I looked down and I was lying naked and barefoot in the forest. The guides had to come get me.”

It’s a great story and might even be partly true. He probably did hallucinate being a jaguar. Experimenting with drugs isn’t my thing, but the jungle might be interesting.

I remembered a friend once saying, "Waking up in the Amazon is like being present at Creation." What did Creation look like? How did it smell? How could you ever leave Creation? I flipped to the section of the book about Amazonia.

Of course, I didn’t want to go, I reminded myself. It was jungle, not mountains. Not my thing.

I didn’t have anything in particular against jungles; I just didn’t like snakes, mosquitoes, and things that crawled into boots at night. In fact, one three day tour in northern Thailand was my entire jungle experience. We rode elephants and rafted, although the river was so low that we had to push the raft with long poles. I wasn’t sure how similar the Amazon was, but I was betting against elephants.

I visited a rainforest on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State that looked a lot like the pictures of the Amazon—trees with roots taller than me and vines slapping me in the face. But without intolerable heat, monkeys, and anacondas, did it qualify as jungle? The Amazon was definitely a jungle, though, complete with creepy-crawlies.

This might be my only chance to experience Creation, an opportunity most people never got. Here I was, just an overnight bus ride away. When opportunities volunteer themselves, I accept.

Ignoring warnings of bus thieves who made everyone strip naked to be sure not to miss anything valuable, I contacted Emerald Forest Expeditions the next day and climbed on the overnight bus to Coca.

I wanted to know what Creation looked like.

Our boat pilot, Ramon, navigated between submerged sandbars and fallen trees on the Rio Napo. City noises had faded, and we were headed for Pañacocha, Piraña Lake. I rested against the side of the canoe, soft sounds floating over me -- birdsong, sluggish current, the buzz of the small outboard motor that propelled the boat downstream, and conversation in English, Spanish, German, and Kichwa. We were alone on the wide river, a small party of explorers, steering a 15 foot canoe into the unknown.

As much as I didn't like snakes and bugs, this one moment on the Napo River was worth a lot of creepy creatures.

Thatched huts on stilts lined the river banks; naked children splashed in the water while their mothers washed clothes. Everyone stopped to stare and wave as we passed. Did anyone live here when Francisco de Orellana travelled down this river 500 years ago then? Did they stand by the river to wave? How did it feel to travel into the blank part of the map?

I was starting to understand the Creation remark.

My mind wandered this way until I was convinced that I must live here.

Could I get enough solar power to run a computer, or would I just have to write in notebook and try to keep it dry? Pencil doesn't run, but only writes on dry surfaces. What would I eat? I had to have my coffee. I would bring a burner and haul a tank of gas down on a boat. That would be safer than open fires. But could I find chocolate that wouldn't melt?

Luis Garcia, sitting next to me on the wooden plank that serves as a bench, was talking to Chris. Unlike me, Chris had studied before taking this trip. I liked to explore places without knowing anything about them. I said it was because I wanted to go with an open mind, but I was really just trying to maximize the adventure. To keep it mysterious, as if nobody had been here before me. I wanted the combination of excitement and trepidation the first explorers must have felt. Of course, Luis swore he had never lost a tourist, so my chances of leaving unharmed were about 100 percent, barring stranded anacondas. Still, I could try.

Luis was saying that scientists think this little pocket of land was the last to remain under water when the glaciers melted. That's why there was more diversity of plants and animals here than in the rest of the Amazon Basin. We might even see the rare pink dolphins, which the indigenous people considered sacred.

"Is that really you in that picture in the *hostal*?" I asked eventually.

"It was a long time ago," Luis said. "A tourist took that picture."

"You hauled that anaconda around with tourists?" I asked. It was no baby. I couldn't tell how long it was, but it had to be nearly a foot in diameter.

"They were very brave tourists," he said. "Don't worry, that won't happen on this trip."



Was he avoiding the question or did he just not like to talk about himself? Either way, I had worn down opposing attorneys and judges with sheer persistence. I kept asking.

“I used to take tourists out with just a canoe, hammocks, and tarps,” he said. “We went everywhere, looked for whatever they wanted to see. We were in a different part of the jungle far from here and we came across an oil spill. Of course, we could canoe right through it, but that anaconda was trapped. He was surrounded on all sides by the oil, and if he went through it, the oil would damage his skin. He would definitely have died if we did nothing.”

“Why didn’t it squeeze you to death?” I asked.

Luis shrugged. “It could have, but I had an assistant with me who could take the tourists back.” He apparently saw in my expression that I was not thinking about the tourists. “There is a technique that sometimes works, where you can squeeze a little just below the head and it sort of paralyzes the snake. It works if you get it just right.”

“So you waded out into the water and let it wrap itself around you. Then, what? Gave it a lift?” At about 5’9”, Luis had the stocky build of his native Cofan tribe. He was no weakling, but didn’t look like a match for a creature that size.

“Like I said, they were very brave tourists. They didn’t want the anaconda to die, and kept asking, ‘What can we do?’ So I said we could take it to a safe place, and they wanted to, even though it meant sharing their canoe with the snake. It was safe, though.”

“What did you do with it?” Chris asked.

“We took it to a safe place and put it back in the water where the oil would never reach it.”

They were really brave tourists. I wouldn't be quick to share my canoe with an anaconda that was clearly big enough to kill me.

"What do you think happened to it?" I asked.

Luis looked away from both of us, off toward the shore, with a dreamy half smile. "I like to think he's still alive out there somewhere, swimming and eating and doing all the things anacondas are supposed to do."

If the anaconda wasn't a clue that I had entered an alternate reality, Valentino was. When we reached Luis' cabañas in midafternoon, Ramon carefully helped us step up from the deep canoe.

"Don't step in the water," Luis said. "There was an electric eel around here this morning." Electricity and water? There was something I would go to great lengths to avoid.

A long path of wood slats marked the way to the top of the hill and the cabañas. As we carefully step onto the boardwalk, a little chicken-like bird ran to greet us, its fat body waddling back and forth on short legs.

"That's Valentino, a Great Trumpeter," Luis said, as the bird headed for my feet and put its head down like he was going to peck my bare toes. Luis gently rubbed the top of Valentino's head, and the bird curled up into a ball like a contented kitten. "Valentino eats snakes. Everything has a purpose here in the jungle."

Our next surprise showed up in the "community hut," which held two long tables, 3 hammocks, and a small reading area with books about the jungle. Wall posters depicted various jungle creatures -- jaguars, caiman, anacondas, and insects.

"Did that bug just move?" Grace asked as we waited for dinner. We watched carefully and, sure enough, the tarantula on the poster ran up an inch.

"Luis!" we yelled. "There's a big bug on that poster."

"Oh, that's Madonna. Don't hurt her; she eats roaches," Luis called from the kitchen. "She's sort of a pet. Actually, Madonna had a baby but we can't tell them apart, so we call them both Madonna."

No problem. Tarantulas had the right of way.

In the morning the boat pilot, Ramon, and an apprentice guide, Henry, took me out during the dawn animal feeding frenzy. Packs of little Spider monkeys and the bigger King monkeys played follow the leader together in the treetops. Caiman, a kind of crocodile, hovered in the shallow edges of the stream.

Ramon shut down the motor and we listened silently to the water against the canoe, the screeches and howls of the monkeys, and birds singing, calling, and answering. Henry and Ramon's softly spoken Kichwa blended into the hum of the jungle. I have completely forgotten the struggles of poor and hungry New Yorkers.

Henry spotted birds everywhere. In the top of the tall trees what looked like an oddly shaped branch was actually a big brown bird. "That is a strange, prehistoric bird," Henry said. "The baby has big claws because it does not fly. When it flies, the claws go away."

He struggled with the English names of birds. I identified birds by such scientific terms as "the pretty blue ones" and "the parrot looking ones," so I whispered that Spanish or Kichwa names were fine. We quietly debated possible spellings of Martín Gigante and

Mosquerito Colirrojo and I dutifully misspelled them in the three by five inch notebook I always carried.

That afternoon, with the rain pelting, Luis gave us knee high rubber gumboots for a walk in the forest. Tall Ceiba trees with buttresses taller than me formed a canopy to shield us from the sun and rain as we entered the dark underworld of the jungle.

Luis picked up a white mushroom about 5 inches wide. "When I was a child," he said, "We had no paper or pencils, so we did our schoolwork on these. See?" He writes his name on the mushroom with a stick.

It was harder that it looked. When I pushed with the stick, chunks of mushroom come out instead of little lines. I would have flunked kindergarten. Everyone scratched something resembling a name on the mushroom, and I was relieved that the others also had trouble.

"My father was Ecuadorian," Luis told me as we walked. "He was the schoolteacher in my Cofan community, where he met my mother and raised us until I was ready for high school. Then he wanted us to have a Western education, so he took us to Quito. My brother and sister were okay, but I hated the city."

I had some idea what he was talking about. I grew up on a farm and it took me decades to feel comfortable in cities. I was still more comfortable away from signs of humanity. Or civilization, as some people might call it.

"I tried," he went on. "I even went to the University of Baltimore on a scholarship for one year and studied biology and environmental science. I learned a lot that I still use, but I just couldn't live in a city. So I went home."

“Where is home?” I asked.

“It was far from here,” Luis said, “but it doesn’t exist anymore.”

He stopped to give each of us a sliver of bark from a tree to taste. Chris and Grace looked to me, apparently having decided I was crazy enough to try anything. I chewed on a small piece, but quickly spit it out. The flavor was three parts wood and one part bitter cinnamon. Orellana’s expedition was initially looking for these cinnamon trees but soon abandoned that plan. I saw why. I pulled out my water bottle to wash the taste away.

Luis laughed and continued his story. What began as a private conversation now included Chris and Grace.

“When I got back to my hometown, everyone was gone. It was completely empty. The small lake we used for a water supply was full of oil waste. Texaco was drilling in the area and they dumped their poison into our lake. So everyone just left. I think they went further into the jungle.”

None of us spoke. He seemed to have forgotten us.

“That’s when I started taking tourists into the jungle. I was looking for my friends. For ten years I took anybody who would pay for food and gas, and we went everywhere. I showed them the things they wanted to see, but everywhere I was asking for my friends.”

He has finished his story but I had to ask.

“Did you find your friends?”

He stopped to pull a bit of bark off another tree and I thought he was not going to answer.

“No,” he finally said as he held the bark out to us.

I chewed off a tiny piece. It was bitter, with a dry aftertaste.

"Be careful what you eat." Luis laughed. "This is curare. You've heard how people in the jungle hunt with poison darts? This is what they use," I stopped chewing. I didn't think he would give me anything dangerous, but he did haul a big snake into a tourist canoe.

"Don't worry; you won't die," he said. "It has to be boiled before it's effective. You probably know that the discovery of curare by Westerners made the first surgeries possible, but indigenous people here have used it for hundreds of years."

As we walked, Luis continued, "One time I was hunting with an old Waorani man when he shot a small animal, but just scratched its ear. It fell over, stunned from the curare. I went to check on it, and accidentally scratched myself with the arrow. My hand and arm went numb, and I thought I was going to die. I cried, 'I'm dying, I'm dying!' The old man looked at me, laughed, and walked away."

"I thought, 'Maybe this is their custom, to let people die alone,' so I laid down and waited to die. Of course, curare is not really poison; it is a paralytic. Soon the effect began wearing off and I realized I would not die. So I got up and walked back to the camp."

Luis stopped at yet another tree to cut a small slit in the bark. A dark red liquid oozes from the slit. "Sangria de Drago," he said. He caught a couple of drops on his machete and smeared it on his wrist. Rubbing lightly for a few seconds, he showed us how the liquid became a white lotion.

“The native people think this prevents cancer if you take a few drops of it in tea. It will kill viruses—if you have a cut, it can help it heal. Some Western research suggests that it is good for arthritis. It is still being studied.”

A hot pink mushroom grew out of a rotting fallen tree. These were called “mother trees” because a whole new generation of forest life grew from them as they rot.

"Anything that is brightly colored like that, you have to wonder why it is there, and has not been eaten," Luis said. "It has no spines, no camouflage, no visible defense; how does it survive? It's probably poisonous. The best way to know if something is safe to eat is to watch the animals. If they aren't eating it, you'd probably better not eat it."

A little further on, I spotted a vivid purple mushroom growing in the middle of the path.

“What's this?” I asked.

“Oh that's a Trumpet of Death,” Luis said. “You can eat it.”

“Thanks a lot,” I joked.

“No, really, you can. It won't hurt you.”

I didn't see any animals eating it, so I passed.

We emerged from the forest for lunch, served in long canoe-shaped banana leaves. Luis picked a small fuzzy fruit from a tree near the clearing.

“Achiote,” he said as he chops the fruit in half with a machete and mashed the orange contents into a liquid inside the skin.

He dipped his finger in the juice to write on my forehead. The mingled juice and sweat dripped down my cheeks.

“It says I heart NY,” Grace told me, drawing the heart shape in the air.

“The indigenous women use this for make up,” Luis explained. “It was traditionally used to paint faces to identify the tribe a man was from. That way when strangers met in the woods they knew if they should kill each other.”

“It will wash right off. There is another kind of fruit, a blue one,” he said. “It stays on for seven to ten days.”

For the next two days I kept asking about the blue fruit. “Is that the blue fruit?” “Will there be blue fruit on today’s walk?” “Can we get some blue fruit when we go fishing?” Luis ignored me, but Henry said he will get me some blue fruit. I made him promise.

On the last afternoon Henry stood in the canoe, reached up, and grabbed a limb off an overhanging tree.

"Blue fruit," he announced proudly, waving a branch with innocuous-looking lime sized balls hanging from it. They were brown, not blue, but I guessed he knew what it looks like.

That evening after dinner, when it was dark and Grace and Chris had disappeared into their hut, Henry appeared with the blue fruit. Henry, Ramon, and I carried candles into the deserted kitchen as if we were preparing for a séance.

Henry chopped a fruit open with the ubiquitous machete and mashed the contents, much as Luis had done with the achiote. "Blue fruit," he announced. It looked clear in the shadowy candlelight. Just a clear pulpy mush. I dipped a finger in it and it still looked clear.

"This is blue?" I asked.



"Yes, blue," he said, unfazed. He picked up a twig, dipped it in the mush, and smeared the stuff on my upper arm. Henry painted silently, squinting at the skin dampened by the fruit juice, dabbing a little more here and there.

Finally, he stood back, inspected his work carefully, then turned to Ramon and said, "Sachawarmi."

"What does it mean?" I asked. All I saw was bits of pulp sticking to my upper arms.

"This is my mark. For my clan. You are my family member now. Really, my clan has marking on the face, too, but I think maybe you don't want those," Henry said with a grin. He inspected his nearly invisible handiwork, and then said, with a decisive nod to Ramon, "Sachawarmi."

"What's that?" I asked. I picked up my notebook and try to spell it. Henry repeated it slowly for me, and we debate one last spelling.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"How do you say Sachawarmi in English?" Ramon yelled to Luis in the other room.

"Jungle Woman," Luis called back.

"Yes." Henry grinned. "You are Jungle Woman now."

The next day I had five blue stripes about half an inch wide on each upper arm. I went back to my job in Albany, New York with a blue-striped sunburn. I dreamed rainforest. I smelled it. In the dark hours of the morning I saw scarlet, green and blue macaws and heard the conversation of monkeys and believed I was Sachawarmi again,

living in Creation. I woke with the sick feeling that something was very wrong. My life was wrong. Artificial. Drab. I stayed in bed to hold onto the Amazon of my nights. I was late to work.

I wanted to be of Henry's jungle family, to know Spanish bird names and which mushrooms were safe to eat. I wanted to belong in the home of curare and Trumpets of Death.

## Chapter 2 A Crazy, Beautiful Journey

### Coca, Ecuador, September 17, 2012

There is no sign of the Emerald Forest Blues bar. The shopkeeper on the corner assured us that Luis' bar is there, but he is not.

I am completely disoriented. The dusty two street town of Coca had vanished since I first went to the jungle with Luis eleven years ago. That Coca had a few pickups acting as taxis on rutted tracks that served as streets and the Occidental Petroleum truck lumbered through twice a day to tamp down dust with a layer of petroleum. In this new Coca, with a population of more than 40,000, a maze of paved streets with signs and traffic lights swallowed up the airport that used to be outside town.

“He's at home,” a little girl states with confidence, pointing down the street. She looks about eight years old, which means that she is probably 12.

“I'll give you 50 cents if you take us there,” Geran offers the girl. I met Geran—like Karen only with a “G”—my first day back on my second trip to Ecuador in 2002. She was a retired psychiatric social worker, so we had a common frame of reference. Many of my clients could have benefited from her kind of help.

Representing poor people is challenging and rewarding work but it doesn't pay. I graduated from law school near the top of my class, but while my classmates were honing resumes and dressing up for interviews, I was flying to Syracuse, New York to watch my mother's body wither away with cancer. She passed about a month before I graduated.

Between Mom dying and a guy who tried to kill me, on felt raw, exposed. I saw vulnerable, hurting people everywhere. I was a walking mass of nerve endings, and every guy asking for money or harried mother in the grocery store touched painfully. I couldn't

contemplate going to a high-rise, slaving over documents, and racking up billable hours. It wouldn't be worth living. I couldn't ease my own pain, but at least at Legal Services I could make life better for someone. It wasn't so much a career choice as a survival mechanism but, as it turned out, it was the right place for me. I helped people get food stamps so their kids could eat. I got families off the street, into shelters and, eventually, into apartments. I made the county distribute the child support money they were collecting, so moms could pay their rent.

I once jokingly said to a stressed out co-worker, "Well, nobody is going to go hungry because you didn't make that phone call." That was the reality of my work. If I didn't get the caseworker to input the change by 3:00, these kids sitting in my office are not going to eat tonight. If I don't get the shelter director on the phone by 5:00, this family is going to get kicked out of the bus station again tonight.

I made \$23,000 at my first Legal Services job, when associates at firms were starting at about \$70,000. I never thought about the money. Money can't relieve make life worth living. I paid rent and put every extra dime onto my student loans, until finally paid to start saving like crazy. I managed to scrape together about \$4000, quit my anti-hunger job in Albany, New York, and come back to Ecuador to stay until my money ran out.

While I was looking for something useful to do, Geran and I spent two weeks helping at a high school in Limoncocha, downriver from Coca. We travelled together many times after that.

The little girl obviously doesn't think anybody could possibly need a guide from here to Luis' house right down the street

Geran gives her with the smile she saves for kids, “But I don't see very well and I'd feel happier if you could walk with me.” She waves her walking stick to show how incapacitated she is and keeps smiling. The girl shrugs and heads down the street.

Geran retired, gave up her apartment, and set out travelling alone despite a number of limiting conditions. A congenital condition makes her vision very poor, so her depth perception is questionable. Stepping off a curb is a crap shoot. She also has two bad knees, perhaps exacerbated by being overweight. She doesn't let anything stop her, though. She eyeballs every situation to see if she can manage it or not. She usually can, by going slow, using chairs and steps, and leaning heavily on her trusty fiberglass telescoping walking stick. Her big smile and gregarious nature don't hurt. Whenever people tell me all the reasons why they can't travel, I think of Geran.

The girl stops at a locked gate in front of small wood building set back from the street. The house looks like a thousand others in the Amazon. Bare wood planks raised on stilts to protect against flooding. Since the surrounding modern constructions don't have this feature, I guess that this place was built before Coca modernized and instituted some kind of flood barrier.

There is no sign of life and I am glad the girl is with us. I would probably have stood there feeling foolish for a while and then gone asking somebody else where I could find Luis. But this little girl, undeterred, starts hollering for Luis. Before long he comes out on the porch.

I suddenly wonder whether he will remember me at all. I went to Luis' cabañas with him three different times when I was in Ecuador before—I dragged every visiting friend to Pañacocha. I took Geran once. She was a great sport, but not entranced by the

place as I was. I saw Luis a couple of other times when I was in Coca for other reasons, but I had not been in touch with him since, well, my last visit there is in the summer of 2003. Nine years ago. I'm sure that he has no idea of the impact he had on me, converting me from jungle apathy to fascination. He molded my view of everything Amazonian.

“I'm Colleen,” I say in English. “I don't know if you remember me because—”

“Colleen!” he exclaims with his big grin. “It's so good to see you again. Come in.” Luis is about my age—50ish. He isn't physically overwhelming, but his force of personality and passion for every living thing in the jungle makes him an incredible guide. A smile blooms on his round face at any mention of the forest and its labyrinth of rivers.

He unlocks the gate as Geran gives the girl a dollar. I'm still not sure if he remembers me or is just happy to see a new face, but it doesn't really matter.

We enter a long narrow room with a bed in the corner to the left of the door. The room to the right barely holds a single bed. A small table and three mismatched chairs stand at the far end of the main room facing a kitchen nook with barely enough room for one person to turn around. The old anaconda poster that used to hang behind the reception desk at the El Auca Hostel is propped against the wall, a little more battered than when I last saw it, but aren't we all?

I give Luis the short version of my last ten years-- six years working on domestic hunger policy in Washington D.C., and then going back to school to study writing.

His life has also gone through some transitions. He split from his wife; since his residency in the Pañacocha was based on his marriage, he is no longer part of the community. His lodge was on community land so he gave it back to them. His son, ten

years old and a national chess champion, lives with him. Luis now works as a freelance guide for a couple of lodges on the Napo. The bar is just a little thing, he says, it is nothing.

After a few minutes of small talk Geran says, “Colleen has some pretty exciting news to share.”

“A friend and I are following the route of Francisco de Orellana in 1542.” I had my spiel down pat. “The idea is to compare our observations with what Orellana's team reported 500 years ago.”

He looked to Geran, who shook her head. She wasn't planning to make the whole trip. Dave Jackson, my biologist friend, is supposed to make the trip with me, but he tore a ligament in his ankle trying to dodge a burned out car in the middle of a soccer game. I finally got tired of waiting for him in Quito so Geran and I started on our own. The idea is to meet up with Dave when he makes it this far. Three other people are joining us for the first part of the trip, as well.

“Orellana went all the way down the Amazon,” Luis says, “Are you going all that way?”

“That's the plan.”

“Do you have a boat? A canoe? How long will it take?”

The trip took Orellana over eight months, but he had to stop to build a boat, raid villages for food and fight off unhappy locals, so our trip will go faster. Besides, we don't have enough money to spend eight months.

“About three months, we think. Orellana and his guys built a boat just up the Coca from here, but we're not going to do that. We'll just use whatever transportation we find. People live there, right? They must get around somehow.”

Luis shook his head and I waited for the inevitable explanation that there weren't any boats on the Napo. A man at the tourist information office had told us that the only boat that went to Iquitos would leave on Wednesday. It carried 80 people, cost \$160 and only went about once a month. Even after we explained that we wanted to stop in Pañacocha, he is sure we didn't understand how lucky we are to have encountered the rare boat.

Luis understood our plan, though, and says, “I wish I could go with you. I've only been as far as Iquitos. I know a guy—a guide here—who took a paddle canoe. It took two weeks from Pantoja to Iquitos.” Pantoja is the town on the Peruvian side of the Ecuador-Peru border downriver from where we are on the Napo. “It can take a long time when the river is low like it is now. Just to get from one side of the river to the other around sand bars can take hours. And when it has been dry, you get really hard sudden storms. That's the dangerous part.”

“Do you remember that time we got caught in a huge storm and took refuge in an oil company camp?” I asked.

It happened the second time I went out with Luis. This is not the usual steady drumming of rainforest downpour. This rain hurled itself from the sky, attacking with elemental fury. Drenched, we piled into the equally wet canoe and the guys hauled the



trusty blue tarp over us. My fellow tourists, German Greta and Layla from Liechtenstein, and I all hung on to it.

I couldn't see the bank, although it couldn't have been more than 10 feet away. The canoe slowed to a crawl, inching along as the guys fought the wind and water. The engine stalled and they struggled to restart it. Luis and Ramón yelled to each other in Kichwa and used hand signals when the wind took their voices.

Finally the underside of the canoe scraped as we found shore.

“We can stay here and hope the rain passes,” Luis hollered, “or we can go up the hill. There are buildings up there.”

“I vote for buildings,” I shouted back under the dubious protection of the tarp.

Greta and Layla agreed but Luis didn't move.

“They might not let us in,” he says. “It's the oil company's camp. They know me.”

People who crossed oil companies tended to disappear and Luis had been a vocal opponent of letting the oil conglomerate Occidental Oil or Oxy, as it is called, drill on Pañacocha land.

“A German, a Liechtensteinian, and an American,” Greta yelled in my ear. “They can't make us disappear.”

We climbed out of the canoe, almost tipping it over in the turmoil of water. We splashed and stumbled our way to the shore—it wasn't like we were going to get any wetter. What used to be a trail up the bank is now a river, so we climbed on either side of it.

Gumboots are not made for climbing up mud banks. They have no tread, no traction, just smooth rubber soles sliding on slick mud. There weren't any big trees along the trail so I grabbed at scraggly shrubs, bamboo stalks, and anything else that might keep me from sliding back down the hill, taking a chance on getting spines in my hands. A lifetime later, I reached the top as muddy as I was wet.

I stumbled against the door of a Quonset hut, like the ones in war movies. It is a cafeteria hut, about 40 feet long and 20 feet wide, full of long rectangular tables – enough to seat probably 50 people. I smelled some kind of soup from the kitchen area at the back. A man looked up from sweeping.

“Hi,” I say in Spanish. “It’s raining.”

I suddenly felt like a trespasser. I am sure my guilty conscience is glowing through my skin.

“Yes, it’s raining,” he agreed in Spanish, “*muy fuerte*.” Really strong.

“*Por cierto!*” That’s for sure, I agreed wholeheartedly. That about exhausted my Spanish vocabulary.

Ramón talked to the man, who finally directed us to a table near a wood stove. We gratefully took cups of weak coffee he brought us.

After a few minutes I wandered over to look at the maps covering the wall to our left. Some areas are striped, some covered in hash marks, and some shaded gray, green or pink. There are three red asterisks. The national park and nature reserve had not been spared from the lines. I tried to decode these— asterisks where they found something? Their camps? Stripes where they have done seismic testing? Seismic testing is the first step in looking for oil deposits. They sent small seismic waves through a grid of wires

and measured the response of the ground beneath. From this, engineers can make fairly accurate inferences about mineral deposits and the presence of oil.

Luis appeared beside me.

“Where are your cabañas?” I asked. The area is a maze of rivers and lakes. I saw Pañacocha Lake near the bottom of the map, covered with lines, but couldn’t identify anything else. Luis pointed to a spot on a small river that flowed into the Napo. The cabañas—the center of my world here—are just a small bend on an unremarkable river on the map.

The oil company man came over and I froze. He looked at the map.

“What do the lines mean?” I might as well ask now that I am busted.

He shook his head, “I don’t know. It is for research.” He walked away.

Nobody seemed to be watching so I pulled a disposable camera from my pants pocket where it may or may not have been destroyed by the rain. I took a few flashless pictures. I didn’t know what to do with them but it seemed like a good idea. I eventually gave them to an environmental group in Quito.

As soon as the rain let up the man told us to leave. We went out the same way we came in, but with the advantage of vision.

The top of the hill had been leveled to make a helipad. There is no place for animals to hide, no food for the monkeys, no trees for spiders to create their webs. A row of outhouses sat off to one side, draining directly into the river below. The bank on the far side of the hut is littered with beer bottles, candy wrappers and plastic packaging from cookies. Pieces of equipment and spare parts lay scattered around. The town dump had landed in the middle of the Amazon.

Greta motioned me to come up to the helipad. “I feel sick,” she says, pointing down the hillside. To clear the hilltop they had bulldozed everything over the side. As the biggest trees rolled down they had taken all the smaller trees and vegetation with them, baring the entire hillside. The corpses, not just the 500 year old trees, but all the generations since—lianas, ferns, and strangler vines, lay piled at the base of the hill.

Long, solid roots that took hundreds of years to grow stabbed 10 to 12 feet the air over the entire mess. Rain dragged the thin topsoil down the unprotected hillside, creating a field of mud that would eventually erode into the surrounding rivers.

In the dry comfort of his house, Luis thinks for a moment about that rainstorm, one among millions for him, I guess. I’m not sure he remembers that particular one, but he says, “That is when Oxy is doing seismic testing.” Oxy drilled extensively in the area during the 90s and early 2000s. “They found oil but it wasn’t enough, so they went away. Now PetroAmazonas—the new government oil company—is in Pañacocha.”

“Are they any better than Oxy?” I ask. If Oxy ever tried to prevent or clean the frequent oil spills in their operations, nobody caught them at it. Their idea of compensation for taking land was to build a community basketball court.

Ecuadorian law required oil companies to negotiate with local communities for land rights. If negotiations failed, however, the government simply expropriated the land for the company. Of course, this gave the companies—or *impresa*, as they were known—no incentive to deal fairly with local residents. They just had to put up enough of a show to satisfy the very friendly authorities. The oil companies engaged in some devious tactics, leaving communities divided and feeling betrayed by their own members.

“They now negotiate compensation with the communities. PetroAmazonas has 11 wells in Pañacocha. As compensation, they are building a city from the ground up in Pañacocha,” Luis says. “They call it *Ciudad Milenio*, Millennium City. The idea is to create another business center between Coca and the border.”

“Is this what the community wanted?” I asked.

“Right now people are getting things,” Luis says. “So they’re happy.”

Of course, not everyone is happy. Luis tells us about a Pañacocha resident named Jacqueline who went to Quito and returned to find that her land had been taken by PetroAmazonas.

“She never received any compensation whatsoever,” he says. “At least, that is what I have heard. I don’t really know what is happening there anymore, just what I hear.” The dissolution of his marriage took his insider lines of communication with it.

“Remember ITT—that deal where President Correa asked for money to compensate for the lost oil revenues from Yasuní?”

I saw it on the news back home. Ecuadorian President Correa took the position that “developed countries” could not expect a poor country like Ecuador to give up the potential revenues from exploiting their natural resources. I’ve often heard the argument that the United States is in no position to say Ecuador shouldn’t cut forests or drill for oil after we have already gotten rich by destroying our land.

“Well, it’s just a big scam,” Luis continues. “They are extracting the oil anyway; they are just doing it from a spot outside the reserve. They have ten wells in one place, all drilling in different directions underground. It’s called El Eden. That way they can extract oil from under the protected areas without anybody knowing about it.

“And is it still an Eden?” I ask.

Luis shrugs. “It isn’t good, but how do you measure the environment? Many species of animals are just disappearing, but we never knew how many there are before or what happened to them. Did they die, or just leave the area?”

As a lawyer, I’m familiar of the difficulty in measuring damages. You have to know what the conditions were before and what would have happened in the absence of the harmful activity. If you don’t know how many animals lived there before, you don’t know how many have been lost.

This is the basis of many fights over environmental issues. For example, take polar bear populations. Nobody has ever counted the polar bears, for obvious reasons—how could you ever find all of them to count? Some Russian scientists in the 1960s came up with an estimate of about 5,000 polar bears in existence. Bear populations are now estimated at something in the 20,000 to 25,000 range. One reading of this is that the polar bear population is at all-time high, so any suggestion that changes in climate are endangering the bears is obviously ludicrous.

However, bear scientists call the 5,000 number a “WAG”—a “Wild Ass Guess.” Experts say that their “guestimate” in the 60’s is 20,000 to 25,000. Also, bears populations almost certainly increased after that time because the Soviet Union, Canada, and the United States banned bear hunting in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s, respectively. Limits on seal hunting also caused seal populations to increase, providing plenty of bear chow. Therefore, the bear populations should be much higher than the earlier estimate of 20,000 to 25,000.

Your conclusion as to whether bear populations have decreased depends on what you are comparing to and how you calculate the intervening factors.

In the Amazon, they don't even have WAGs of species populations. Certainly, nobody has ever tried to count the kingfishers and lemon ants. In fact, they have only WAGs of the number of species, since as many as half of the species in some plant and animal groups haven't been discovered and identified. So how can anyone know what has been lost? And if you did know, how could you identify whether it is due to contamination from oil and mining operations or from overfishing and overhunting by growing indigenous populations?

"Did you see the beautiful pink dolphins when you were here before?" Luis asks.

Geran and I both nod. Pañacocha is one of the few parts of the Amazon where the pink freshwater dolphins live. They are both curious and rare, traits that may be sadly related.

"In 2005 there is a population of at least seven adults and one baby in Pañacocha. There may have been more, but we know about these eight for sure. People saw them all the time. If you went out regularly you saw them two or three times a week, maybe. Last year the bodies of two pink dolphins were found. People think somebody murdered them." He doesn't hesitate over using the word "murdered" rather than "killed," even though the Spanish language makes the same distinction that we make in English.

"Do you know who did it?" I ask.

"I don't know," he says. "But I don't think those are the only dolphins that have been killed. Nobody has seen a pink dolphin in months. We ask each other about this, all the guides, and nobody is seeing them. This is the dry season. The water is low, so they

have no place to hide. If they're still in the area they have to come out into the lake. Still, nobody sees them. The pink dolphins may be gone from Pañacocha forever.”

Luis' son comes home from school and we soon say our goodbyes.

“The entire route of Francisco de Orellana,” Luis says as I gather my day pack and water bottle. “What a crazy, beautiful journey.”

### Francisco de Orellana, 1511-1546

On the morning of Christmas Day of 1541 Francisco de Orellana was Gonzalo Pizarro's top Lieutenant, hero of countless battles in Peru, and the richest man in Southern Ecuador. He could not have known that he was about to make the pivotal decision of his life, a decision that would leave him impoverished and labelled a traitor and liar for the rest of his life.

Francisco de Orellana was first of all a warrior, and a good one. He sailed from his home in Spain to Panama at the age of 16 to fight beside his cousins, the Pizarro brothers. In 1535, when Orellana was 24 years old, Inca factions had the Pizarro brothers under siege in Peru. Orellana formed a cavalry with 89 men and rescued Francisco and Hernando Pizarro from sieges in Lima and Cusco. Three years later he led 700 men to help the Pizarros defeat a coup attempt by Diego Almagro. He was running out of fingers to count the number of times he had salvaged a Pizarro disaster.

As a reward, the happy Francisco Pizarro named Orellana Lieutenant Governor of Puerto Viejo and Guayaquil in the province of La Culata, a large area in what is now southern Ecuador. Orellana's orders were to build a city. Resistance by indigenous people had foiled two attempts, but Orellana was undeterred. Instead of butchering the natives,



he gave them gifts and established trade with them. A year later, he had successfully established the city of Santiago de Guayaquil.

Governing may not have been Orellana's thing. He had a large home, staffed by indigenous slaves, where he received important guests and decided administrative matters. It lacked a key ingredient: excitement. About the time the boredom was becoming unbearable, Orellana heard that his cousin, Gonzalo Pizarro, was taking an expedition east to the “Land of Cinnamon.” He might also stumble across the fabled city of *El Dorado* while he was out there. Orellana quickly invited himself along and was named Lieutenant General. Opportunities to satisfy his craving were what his value to the Pizarro brothers bought him—chances to explore, find places nobody had ever seen and, just maybe, make his fortune.

This is Orellana’s appeal to me—at 29 years old, he was rich and powerful. He had the favor of the Pizarro brothers, who ruled everything from Honduras to what is now southern Peru. He had it made. But he left all of that, for what? Adventure, to go where no one—at least no “Christian”—had been. The frontier of his time. Guaranteed discomfort and likely death. None of this fazed him; in fact, it obviously excited him, given the decisiveness with which he moved when he saw the opportunity. He lived by at least one of the principles that governs my life. When an opportunity goes to all the trouble of presenting itself, it’s just rude to decline.

Orellana spent his personal fortune to buy horses and hire men, handed off his responsibilities in Guayaquil and, in February of 1541, left for Quito. About the same time, Pizarro left Quito with great fanfare, in a procession that included more than 300 Spaniards, 4000 porters and slaves, 4000 pigs, a herd of horses, and dogs.

When Orellana reached Quito in March with his contingent of 22 men, local leaders told him not to go. It was suicide. If the altitude, snow, and diseases didn't kill them, the unfriendly natives would. Such a small group couldn't survive. Orellana didn't hesitate; he took off promptly, trying to follow exactly the route that Pizarro had taken.

He found Pizarro's expedition in late March, camped near the Sumaco Volcano, in the Quijos valley in eastern Ecuador, where the Andes meet the Amazon region. Only three of his horses had survived, and he and his men were exhausted and nearly starved, but all alive. Pizarro welcomed him and made him second in command.

Pizarro's expedition was also in sad shape. The group was disheartened, having found only a few isolated cinnamon trees and no hint of the dreamed-of *El Dorado*. The men, the strongest and best soldiers to be found in all of Ecuador a few months earlier, were skeletal and weak. Many of them were delirious with fever from some strange new disease. Most of the dogs, horses and pigs were gone, eaten. The native guides and most of the slaves had run away or died, and the only source of information was indigenous prisoners, who were not particularly forthcoming. Quito, the nearest "Christian" settlement, was months away and few of the remaining men were strong enough to make the return journey.

Gonzalo Pizarro was a man of his time. He asked local Indians where he might find more cinnamon trees and gold, but they didn't know anything. According to one of his soldiers, "He ordered some canes to be fixed across poles, like hurdles, about three feet wide and seven in length, and the Indians to be put on them and tortured until they told the truth. The innocent natives are promptly stretched on the frames or barbecues. . . And some of them are burnt."

When that didn't do the job Pizarro threw the natives, including women, to the dogs, "who tore them to pieces with their teeth, and devoured them."

The Pizarro brothers were famous for their atrocities, and Orellana could not have been innocent after serving with the Pizarros for most of his life. Yet, torture was not Orellana's first instinct. He understood that communication was often effective and likely more reliable. With his knack for languages, friendly questions were an option for Orellana at times when it might not have been feasible for a less skilled leader.

Returning by way of the Coca River, they encountered the dramatic San Rafael Waterfall, nearly three times as high as Niagara Falls. They built a bridge across a gorge just downriver from the falls. The gorge was reportedly only 20 feet across and 1500 feet high. That height was apparently an exaggeration, as it would make the gorge more than three times the height of the falls. The gorge was no doubt terrifyingly high for the men tasked to build a rope bridge over it and then haul heavy equipment and horses over the construction. They encamped on the north side of the river, where the full expedition was reunited.

*Indigenas* paddled canoes out to see the newcomers, and Pizarro offered them trinkets in exchange for information on where he might find cinnamon or gold. The Chief, Delicola, did the smart thing—he told Pizarro that further downriver are great settlements and rich lands. Pizarro, thrilled to finally get the information he wanted, decided to go downriver at all costs. He expressed his gratitude by capturing Delicola and the other chiefs as guides.

The expedition slashed a painfully slow path along the river bank, staying as close to the Coca as possible. It was tough going. Swamps forced them to stray from the river

and they had to haul animals, equipment, and fast dwindling resources across several small rivers every day. Attrition by nature cut their ranks from 4000 to 400; they lost more than three times the entire K-12 student body of my high school. It did, however, have the happy side effect of leaving fewer mouths to feed. The remaining horses, however, became a liability, unable to function in the thick underbrush and having trouble crossing the rivers.

The expedition was at a turning point. Orellana wanted turn north, where they might find a road back to Quito while they still had a chance of surviving the journey. Pizarro intended to continue down the river where, he was certain based on Delicola's information, riches waited.

### **Coca, September 19, 2012**

By 6:30 Wednesday morning Geran and I are hiking toward the *malecon* and the "blue boat" that we had been assured would go to Pañacocha at 7:00. Geran's stuff fits in a tiny pack like one a kid takes to school. She slings her ukulele in its soft black case over her shoulder and clutches her walking stick in her right hand. I carry clothes, hammock, and sleeping bag in a smallish backpack and wear my daypack, about the size of Geran's, on my chest, holding the Toughbook, camera gear, my medications, and my expedition map. It is generally a good arrangement except that it is bulky enough that I can't see where I am putting my feet. I eye Geran's walking stick; I could use it like a blind person's cane, to feel the trail in front of me. But she only has the one, so I have to get by the best I can.

I feel carefully for each step before putting my weight on it. I reach the deck by the water, slowly but safely. My next step is directly into a hole in the wooden plank of

the deck. My ankle twists and slides through the gap, scraping my shin until my right knee slams onto the deck. Before I can work my foot from the hole, men surround me, pulling me up by my arms and my pack, and slamming my ankle into the sharp edges of the broken plank. They are trying to help but only succeed in bruising and scraping the skin from my ankle.

There was a time when I could have caught myself. Then there was a time when I would have had my balance and had my foot out of there before anyone noticed. Now I am at the mercy of well-meaning by-standers; nothing is more likely to get you hurt than a bunch of guys trying to help. Fortunately, Geran gets them under control, handing them my packs and extricating me before they do too much damage.

It is not the first time I am happy to be travelling with Geran.

The blue wooden canoe has benches along each side. Each bench holds about 30 people, leaving eight or ten feet in the front and back for the engine, driver and cargo. About 50 people are already in the canoe when we arrive, with burlap sacks, plastic bags, and backpacks stacked in the aisle between the passenger benches. Precariously balanced on top of grain sacks in the prow is a double bed, complete with mattress, box spring, heart shaped headboard and footboard.

We buy tickets but can't board until 7:00, the woman in charge tells us cheerfully, when the Army arrives.

“Did she say the Army?” I ask Geran.

“That's what it sounded like. Maybe it's an identity check?” In border areas it isn't unusual to have random identity checks as the military tried to catch drug runners and smugglers. We're near Peru to the east and Colombia to the north.

I'm not sure why all those other people can board but we can't. Is it a gringo thing? Being a foreigner gets you special treatment, sometimes in a good way, but mostly not. Once, in Korea, a woman strip searched me before I boarded a ferry. "We only do that to Americans," the supervisor explained, not suspecting that I understood Korean.

At some level, the reason doesn't matter. We aren't getting on the boat until the lady okays it, and she is waiting for the Army.

At around 7:15 two soldiers showed up, looked at the manifest and list of passengers, then broke out cigarettes and lounged on the dock. They never even looked at us, but the boat lady seemed satisfied and directed us toward the back of the canoe, where there is room for about five more people on each side. As baffled as we are, I've learned to take victories where I find them. We hustle onto the boat.

Some guy tosses my pack into the space between the benches and we are off to Pañacocha. The other passengers are scrunched in tight while we had plenty of room, but no matter how much we invited them to move down they shook their heads. Two young guys in jeans, T-shirts, ear buds and sunglasses hopped in the back of the boat with us. They had no compunctions about enjoying the extra space, stretching out along the bench opposite us to doze.

The water is low. Luis told us that and we hear it again as we wait for the boat to leave. The trip will take a little longer than usual because the pilot has to navigate around sand bars and snags. Mid-September is the middle of the dry season, which runs from about July to November. Many rivers get so low that even the little piqui-piqui boats like Luis' can't go up them, but the Napo should be navigable for a boat this size, even during the dry season.

We are going to leave Coca *ahorita*. *Ahorita* translates as “right now,” although I’ve heard it described as meaning *mañana*, only without the urgency. Geran and I once waited two hours for a bus that is leaving *ahorita*, before we realized that there was no bus.

We think of time as going slower here, where it is not the obsession that it is at home. I wouldn’t mind slowing time down if it would also slow down the aging process.

When my mother was my age, she had three years to live. The cancer that would kill her was growing undetected in her belly. Of course, we’re all dying. Mom said, “The difference is that I know it will be sooner rather than later.” Death had transformed from a specter of an inevitable fate in the foggy future to the sharp realization that our days here together are numbered. A small number. When we turn 50 we think of ourselves as being in the second half of our lives but we may be in the final 10 percent, or two percent. We may be in our last day.

Sometimes, it’s just as well for *ahorita* to take its time.

Today, though, we are hopeful that our boat will leave in a short *ahorita*.

### [El Barco, March-October 1541](#)

Poor Pizarro, Orellana, and their crowd didn’t even have a boat. They slashed their way down the river bank in heavy armor, lugging tools and weapons.

Looking out from the high vantage points along the gorge, Pizarro and Orellana saw the river snaking its way through a forest that stretched to the horizon. Coming to Peru by way of the Pacific, they never imagined that the mountains hid this seemingly endless jungle. They were starting to suspect that this river led all the way to the Atlantic Ocean, which they called the “North Sea.”

It had been 40 years since Vincente de Pinzon, one of Columbus' captains, had spotted fresh water pouring a good 300 miles into the Atlantic Ocean. A river that could do that had to be huge. He named the river Santa Maria de la Mar Dulce, literally the “Sweet Sea,” the Spanish term for fresh water. Pinzon went up into the mouth of the river but didn't find the main river among the maze of islands. He realized that such an expedition was beyond his means, and decided to come back better prepared. However, he died before he was able to return.

Orellana and Pizarro would have known about the Sweet Sea and, overwhelmed by the hugeness of the wilderness in front of them, started to think that they had found Pinzon's river. Pizarro was determined to follow it.

They had no concept of the size of the continent. Any competent sailor with a sextant could estimate latitude to within about four degrees. Longitude, or distance from East to West, was a trickier business. Longitude corresponds directly to time. The earth rotates at a constant speed of 15 degrees longitude every hour. Therefore, if you know the time where you are and the time at another fixed reference point, you could know exactly how far east or west you were from the reference point. However, 16<sup>th</sup> century clocks weren't very accurate on land and even less accurate at sea, where they were affected by temperature and humidity.

All that was left to the hapless sailor was a method called “dead reckoning.” This was very simple—estimate your speed and direction. Then it's a simple matter of division. If you travel east for an hour at 60 miles per hour, you know that after an hour you are 60 miles east of where you started. Unfortunately, sailors didn't have speedometers and direction of travel wasn't stable, especially in storms. The result was



that early explorers knew how far south they had travelled but they had no idea how far west they had gone.

Based on maps of the time, Pizarro and Orellana probably imagined South America being hundreds of miles wide, not thousands.

They found many people living along the shores of the Coca and Napo rivers near the modern-day city of Coca. They were impressed by how “civilized” these natives were, by which they meant that the natives wore clothes. Apparently Pizarro was in the Mark Twain camp regarding clothes—“Clothes make the man,” Twain says, “Naked people have very little influence in society.”

Finding these civilized natives was the best news the expedition had gotten in weeks, so they decided this was a fine place to stop and build their boat. Pizarro was determined to go down river. He had apparently given up on the idea of finding cinnamon, which grew in the forests away from the rivers, and thought his best chance at salvaging something from the expedition was to go downriver in search of new lands to conquer for the King. They had snagged a few canoes from the natives and quickly got the hang of steering the crafts in the swift current.

This got Pizarro thinking. Twenty years earlier, Cortez had defeated the Aztecs by setting up a makeshift shipyard and building himself an armada. Surely, Pizarro could manage to build one measly boat to haul some of this stuff.

They found a wide beach a few miles upriver from here and stopped to build a boat, which they called a “brigantine.” They creatively dubbed the place “*El Barco*,” the boat.

Once Pizarro overrode Orellana's objections and decided on his course of action, Orellana pitched in wholeheartedly. He organized the men and was among the first cutting down trees.

He also took charge of the prisoners. He spent as much time as possible with Delicola and the other prisoners, learning their languages. He wrote their vocabulary in a notebook that he kept with him all the time. As they went down the river, Orellana continued this practice, talking with natives, friend or foe, and learning the languages as he went. Father Gaspar de Carvajal, who chronicled the trip, credited Orellana's facility with languages with saving the lives of the expedition, saying, "His understanding of the language is, next to God, the deciding factor by virtue of which we did not perish along the river."

Orellana gleaned an important piece of information from Chief Delicola: the location of a food supply. Delicola described a place a few days down the river where another river joined the Napo. A couple of days up that river was an abandoned yucca, or manioc, farm. Even though it was not being tended anymore, plenty of yucca would still grow wild in the area. Yucca is a root crop, like potatoes, meaning that it is necessary to identify the plant and pull it out of the ground to get at the fat edible roots. Yucca was, and still is a staple of the Amazonian diet. However, it has to be cooked; it is poisonous if eaten raw.

The men, however, did not have to cook yucca while they built the boat that October on their beach in El Barco, because the native people fed them in exchange for "trinkets." Or perhaps it was in exchange for their lives.

The expedition, having been planned as an overland journey, did not include a boat-builder, but some men volunteered to take charge. They melted down armor and horseshoes from the dead horses to make nails and felled trees. The natives taught them how to make rope from available trees and plants. In a matter of weeks they had a boat, which they called the *San Pedro*. It was propelled by 6 to 8 oarsmen and large enough to carry 20-30 men plus the heaviest of their equipment and some food.

Pizarro was convinced that they had found the Marañon and that, if they followed it, they would reach the North Sea. He would not stop until they got there. Unless he found something better, like *El Dorado*, along the way.

## Chapter 3 Millennium Village

### Pañacocha —September 19-22, 2012

It's unclear what the *San Pedro* looked like, but our "blue boat" to Pañacocha is almost certainly a better bet. Going down the Napo in a passenger boat full of bored locals is a whole different experience from the same trip with Luis, his indigenous guides, and some wide-eyed tourists in an outboard motor canoe. People are crammed on the benches with feet propped on the cargo piled up in the middle. A blue canopy covered the seating area.

When I went to Pañacocha with Luis, I always tried to memorize landmarks, imagining that I would recognize them when I came through again. Of course it was futile. The river changes constantly, seeking the easiest course. It carves a new route with every rainfall. It cuts off points of land, converting them into islands. It buries old islands, the sandbars of tomorrow. It probes the roots of a fallen tree to burrows new passages into the soft exposed earth. It bends and winds at its own convenience, without regard to our plans.

Trying to recreate last year's precise route is hopeless. Speculating about the conditions 500 years ago is a task for fools and dreamers so, of course, I am undeterred. We are here at the same time of year, more or less, but the water is very low and this limits the navigability of boats.

Pizarro and Orellana reported fast currents and incessant rain throughout the summer and fall—Pizarro complained to the King that "it did not fail to rain." It isn't like that now. I don't know why. Is the region just less rainy now than it was then? Has

deforestation made the area dryer? Was the dry season at a different time of year back then? Global warming? Drought?

I am familiar with the first part of the river after leaving Coca. Geran and I came this way back in 2002 when we volunteered at the school in Limoncocha, about an hour downriver from Coca. A dock at Pompeya served a morning market and the road inland to the oil town of Limoncocha.

The history of Limoncocha is a microcosm of the history of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Apart from a couple of Jesuit missions, the native Kichwa and Waorani tribes downriver from Coca, were pretty much left alone between Orellana's time and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A couple of outposts on the eastern slopes of the Andes and a government administrator upriver from Coca were the closest the region came to being settled until the 1950s, when the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) based itself in Limoncocha.

SIL-trained missionaries translated the Bible into the indigenous languages. The missionary linguists had to live with the tribes while they learned the language and created a written form, since Amazonian cultures had no written traditions. After the Bible was translated into the new written language, the missionaries had to teach their hosts how to read. This entailed more years, or even decades, of living with indigenous communities until the Ecuadorian government kicked the SIL out of the country in 1980.

SIL left a mixed legacy. Their work introduced previously isolated tribes to western ways and, according to many detractors, caused them to leave their lands and traditional lifestyles. SIL was also accused of conspiring with oil companies and the CIA against the interests of the native people, accusations they deny. On the other hand, their

work recorded the vocabulary and structure of native languages, many of which might otherwise have become extinct. This kind of dichotomy pervades life in Amazonia.

The SIL infrastructure—a church on what was once the main street and a few large wooden buildings that apparently served as classrooms and housing—was still prominent when Geran and I went to Limoncocha in 2002, well after Oxy headquartered its oil extraction operation there.

Like SIL, Oxy had a mixed impact in Limoncocha. It provided jobs for local residents and instituted projects to help the town, such as an experimental farm to develop more efficient cultivation practices. It also sprayed the roads with oil to keep down the dust—dust that it caused by clear-cutting the forest to build roads and a processing plant. The kids sometimes ran behind the oil truck letting the petroleum spray on their skin and hair. I heard that Oxy hired kids to clean up contamination from oil spills in Limoncocha Lake with their bare hands, although I don't know if that's true. By 2002, Limoncocha had become a world of haves and have-nots—oil company employees and people still living from the land. Many of the “haves” are not originally from the area, but are *colonos*, colonists whose families moved to the area for work with Oxy.

Oil exploration is just beginning further downriver. Luis warned us about the wells in Pañacocha. I am hoping that Pañacocha, despite having permitted extraction, might be able to avoid some of the damage Limoncocha had suffered.

Pañacocha looks like a refugee from a Western movie set.

At about noon, our boat pulls up to a set of wobbly steps that lead to street level. The bottom steps are dark and rotten from being underwater most of the time. Unlike

Coca, there is no platform at river level. The other passengers pile out and pour into the first building, which turns out to be a restaurant. A series of abandoned docks line the riverbank.

Rickety wooden shacks with long porches and sagging thatched roofs stand on six-foot stilts facing the river. Precarious wooden steps lead to a dusty open area between the two serves as a street, although there are no vehicles.

“If you squint, it almost looks like a very shabby resort,” Geran says, crinkling her eyes so hard it looked painful. Community development plans generously refer to this as the "commercial zone."

The owner of the first restaurant says they have rooms for rent, but they aren't very good. She recommends Señora Ana's Pension Las Palmas at the end of the row. Señora Ana is a brassy, short, rotund woman who claims to have been the first person to live in the community almost 50 years ago, although she is not the only person in town making that claim.

Señora Ana shows us a room with one real bed and one frame with wood slats and a thin pad. The floor is unfinished planks, worn smooth by thousands of footsteps. Each bed is equipped with a mosquito net and the room comes with one wobbly end table, plenty of dirt, a few cobwebs, and miscellaneous insects. It is hard to believe this is better, but we agree to stay here.

The communal toilets and two showers are down the hall. The women's toilet doesn't flush, so we use pails of water from a big garbage can in the hallway. The shower usually trickles, but sometimes, maybe one day in three, there is no water in town. Then Señora Ana pumps water from the Napo River to fill the garbage can for shower water.

Some kids are swimming, so Geran suggests that we wash in the river. However, Señora Ana says we shouldn't because an anaconda was seen there recently. Another woman I ask assures me that there weren't *many* anacondas, but one is enough for me. I stick to the garbage can of water.

One woman I travelled with said that you can tell everything you need to know about a culture by their bathrooms. Given some of the sanitary conditions I've encountered, I hope that isn't entirely accurate. Still, Geran and I rate bathrooms on a one-to-10 scale. We give credit for walls, a door, a roof, running water, an actual toilet, a toilet seat, a sink, privacy (measured by an absence of uninvited guests of any-legged variety) and bonus points for things like toilet paper and towels. We would probably award bonus points for cleanliness if we ever encountered a facility that qualified.

Señora Ana's bathroom rates a six or seven on our scale. It has walls and a roof. The door gets a minor ding because it doesn't close all the way. There is a bona fide toilet with seat and, even though it doesn't flush, we do have water to flush with. There is a sink with a faucet, although running water is sporadic and there are regular six- and eight-legged guests.

Still, this is place a way ahead of the miserable facilities Geran and I shared back when volunteered in Limoncocha. Those rated a four, since we grudgingly awarded points for walls, roof, and doors.

In Limoncocha we were told that there would be electricity and water at 7:00 every evening, so we worked up a sweat scraping slime from the showers and toilets. We waited for 7:00, anticipating streams of clean, clear water spouting from shower heads.

7:00 came, no lights. No water.



7:15, nothing.

7:25, not a flicker.

Geran snagged an eleven-year-old boy named Francisco as he dashed by.

“Is there going to be light?” she asked.

”*Si, hay luz,*” Francisco said with confidence. Yes, there is light.

“At what time?”

“7:00, *en punto,*” he replied. Seven on the dot.

“It's 7:25,” Geran said.

He nodded, unfazed. “7:30 *en punto.*” Clearly, *en punto* is similar to *ahorita*.

The power finally came on at 7:55, *en punto*, casting a faint glow from the single light bulb in the high ceiling, but not producing water in the shower, faucets or toilets.

According to Señora Ana, Pañacocha has electricity from 8:00 to 1:00 on weekdays (school hours) and six pm until ten pm. Nobody seems surprised when the power is AWOL many mornings, but it comes on at some point every evening. Only one thing is reliable—the lights go out at 10 pm *en punto*.

“I feel like a kid at summer camp,” Geran says one night when the lights are extinguished before she ventures down the hall and around three corners to the bathroom. Electricity is really handy when you needed to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night or want to use a computer. On the other hand, it also brings blasting music and Gilligan’s Island, so foregoing a few conveniences isn’t so bad.

This place seems to have only aged a few years since Orellana went through. Maybe time has actually crawled to a stop. We are right at sea level. Time goes slower at low altitudes because there is less gravity. Physicists have proven it. Denver time runs

faster than New York time. By only a few milliseconds in the course of a lifetime, but still, if you think about it, that means that by going to the center of the earth we could live a lot longer. We have all seen this when our sci-fi heroes get sucked too close to a black hole.

Time here seems to have stopped. The thatched outside sitting area along the river and crooked log benches where we hang out, are serene. Put another way, nothing ever happens. It reminds me of Mark Twain's description of life on the Mississippi, where the big event of the day was when a boat arrived.

Boats pass by here all day—dugout canoes, small motorboats, fancy speedboats owned by the *impresa* and more than a few tug boats pushing barges with tractor-trailers, bulldozers, and building materials. Every evening, spectacular mixtures of reds and purples of sunset silhouettes the trees on the opposite shore and dugout canoes on the river. Unfortunately, some of the shows are not the result of the sunset. PetroAmazonas is burning off waste gas from its oil wells.

Señora Ana points out into the river. “See that island there? My house used to be almost there.” She points to a spot in the river somewhere between us and an island. “That’s where my husband built our first house. Now look at it. The water is so much higher now.”

Her neighbor, Juan, disagrees. The river has simply changed course, he explains. Water levels are actually much lower than they were when he was a child 40 years ago.

Geran and I fall into a pattern consistent with her assessment of the place as a shabby resort. The 5:30 A.M. breakfast probably resembles every other meal of every

day—soup, rice, yucca fries, a hunk of meat, and Kool-Aid—so we aren't missing much when we skip it. When we finally stumble out around 9:30 or 10:00, the cooks fry us eggs—which we bring from Juan's *tienda*—with tomatoes and onions.

Geran invites Señora Ana to join us for coffee. Geran chatters. She loves conversation, whether it is with kids or old people, the cabbie or the farmer, she will engage anyone in dialogue. I benefit from the connections she makes and the stories she elicits from people, but I also need silence sometimes. While she lounges by the pool chatting up young moms, I will hike an abandoned trail. Sometimes I just stare off into space and let my mind wander. After a ten-hour bus ride in Peru one time, Geran said, "I ran out of things to think about. What do you think about for so long?"

I can't imagine running out of thoughts. I was watching the scenery go by—the huts and little communities with their *tiendas* and churches and town squares—and was wondering what it would be like to live there. How do they survive? Where do the kids go to school? How long do they walk to get there? Is there any mail delivery?

"I think about all the things I don't know," I told Geran. That could occupy me for lifetimes.

I'd like to say I think about nothing, but nothing is complicated. I mean, what is it, really? The absence of anything? But how can something be defined only by what it is *not*? It's like the idea of "empty mind." When I lived in Korea I studied meditation at a local Buddhist temple, but I never could make my mind empty. The closest I could get was focus on breathing, a decent substitute for purposes of meditating, but not the same thing.

Whatever nothing is, it happens a lot on Pañacocha's old commercial strip. The highlight of the slow days, at least for me, is the instant Starbucks' VIA coffee that Geran brought from home. Even though coffee is one of Ecuador's larger products, the huge Swiss conglomerate, Nestlé, dominates the markets in Ecuador. As a result, little jars of Nescafé sit on restaurant tables all over the country in place of "real" coffee. Of all the coffee consumed in Ecuador, 85 percent is instant. Geran's VIA, while still instant, is a real treat after weeks of Nescafé.

I'm afraid I tend to make coffee just a tiny bit strong; Señora Ana's makes faces and we add more hot water until she nods her approval. She has a raucous laugh and an opinion on everything including, I suspect, things she knows nothing about. She is like the blind men with the elephant—each drew a different conclusion from the part he touched.

"Americans are good people," Señora Ana declares. "An American company was here ten years ago and they were nice. But the French are dirty; they never wash. There was a French company here telling us how to grow food, and they were rude." Geran and I exchange looks. Next week, our friend Laurence—a Frenchwoman—will join Geran here. We'll see whether she can change Señora Ana's opinion of the French.

"A couple of German guys stayed here once. I told them the rates and they stayed for a week." Señora Ana snorts in disgust. "When they left they said I was overcharging so they refused to pay. They paid nothing. Germans are bad."

Señora Ana does not suffer from self-doubt.

The *pension's* big dining room fills up three times a day with all the workers from the Millennium Village construction project. The lucrative contract with the contractor

rotates among the dining rooms on the waterfront and this happens to be Señora Ana's month. A few of the men stay in the rooms, too, but most just pour in for the company-provided meals.

At the end of the row of huts, a rutted path that serves as a road for the one ATV in town passes about 15 other houses scattered around with no discernible organizing principle. Many are built on stilts so they won't flood during rainy season, although the waterfront buildings are not. If there's logic behind that, it eludes me.

The rainy season is just starting, and most afternoons bring sudden, torrential rains that stop just as quickly after an hour or two. Though most roofs are thatched, they are often repaired with sheet-metal that magnifies the sound until conversation is a lost cause. Geran retreats to the waterfront pagoda.

Chickens run free and dogs bark half-heartedly from the shade under the houses. They get more enthused during the cool nights, when they bark, howl, and fight.

Further along, on the other side of another quagmire, is the new Millennium Village that Luis told us about. When Oxy did seismic testing in 2002, the community didn't receive any compensation or benefits. Oxy abandoned the project as unprofitable but, with improvements in technology, the area is of interest again.

President Correa stopped the practice of pouring 15 percent of the profits into end of year pay bonuses, and a portion of those funds are allocated to compensating communities affected by extraction. Compensation is negotiated with each community. President Correa convinced the community here in Pañacocha to opt for a "Millennium Village." They are building a town from scratch, complete with a school, clinic, supermarket, stores and a hotel. Every family will get a cookie cutter house and there will

be a market, a sports center, and paved roads with sidewalks. This is supposed to benefit only Pañacocha residents, who have been promised all the businesses, with outsiders allowed in only if nobody in the community is qualified to run the business. I doubt that anybody in the community will meet the “qualifications” the government will require to run these businesses.

Right now the area is one big construction zone. Three yellow Caterpillar bulldozers are clearing an area about a quarter mile by half a mile. Row after row of four foot high cement block piles are stacked up and down the old street where they are unloaded from the barges on the sandy boat landing on the river to the right. Hard packed dirt that will soon be a road winds behind, out into what used to be forest. A parallel road picks up on the other side of the clinic.

The new medical-dental clinic is staffed with a “full-time” doctor and dentist. All medical and dental services are totally free, but they are only available when there is electricity. Most of the patients are workers, but locals use the services, as well. Generally, if the shaman can’t fix something they will try Western medicine.

In the middle of all this stands a big, three-story hotel enclosed by eight foot high fences, used exclusively by the *impresa* personnel.

The new school and playground lie beyond the new construction.

Dixon, the tall, thin 20-something school director, is from Guayaquil, the city Francisco de Orellana founded on the coast, although the city has since changed locations. He is always in motion and talks with the fast, smooth chatter of the region, which I have never been able to decipher. He is in his third year on a five year tour of duty as the director of the school here. Although the assignment wasn’t his choice, it isn’t

a bad gig. He got to add grades nine and ten, and is planning to add grades 11 and 12 in the next two years, so kids will be able to finish high school without leaving home.

Dixon proudly shows us the new middle school with four classrooms. Until they build the new high school complex with classrooms, dorms, and sports facilities, these rooms have to accommodate all 123 students. Some of them come quite a way on the daily “school boat.” Their families are likely to move into town once the new school and houses are ready. There is a bathroom for the kids, though one of the sinks is already lying on the floor.

The school has solar panels on the roof, making it is the only place in town to have electricity all the time. The medical clinic keeps supplies in a cooler against the back wall of Dixon’s classroom. Despite the 20 million dollars they are putting into construction, they aren’t planning on installing any more solar panels. The project promises electricity “all the time” but it isn’t coming from water, solar, or wind power so I guess it must be from fossil fuels. It is hard to imagine a legitimate reason for keeping the communities dependent on fossil fuels, but maybe I’m cynical. Dixon just shrugs.

Judging by the square root division problems on the board, Dixon’s students are far beyond the level of our Limoncocha kids, who could barely add and subtract.

The school has a metal roof and, when it starts pouring, we can’t hear a word. Geran and I try yelling at each other but Dixon just stands and smiles until it slows. I guess it isn’t so different from the earthquakes when I attended law school in Los Angeles or the trains that barrel through campus at the University of Memphis. You just have to stop and wait for it to pass.

Dixon is thrilled when we offer to give the kids an English lesson, so the next day we set out to do just that. After slogging through the mud again, we encounter the kids outside the school. It is recess.

Geran has endless patience with kids, maybe a result of raising three boys, but after an hour or so I get tired of them. People say it's different with your own kids, but I wouldn't know. When I was thirteen, my sister got pregnant and, for the first time, I seriously pondered how that baby was going to get out of there. All the possibilities were horrifying.

One of the happiest moments of my young life was when my mother said, "You don't have to have babies if you don't want to."

Talk about no-brainers. I was a member of the first generation of women who grew up knowing we could choose not to have children. Any guy who wanted kids would have to look elsewhere. They say that everyone has five major turning points in their life. This was my first—the realization that I didn't have to be tied down to a husband, house and kids.

Geran produces a balloon and soon the kids clamored around her, reaching for balloons and trading colors with each other. Soon the whole school yard is full of colorful balls floating through the air as they made up new games.

After recess we went to Dixon's classroom, where he introduced us to his kids. These are the oldest kids in school—seventh through tenth graders. I explained in Spanish that this location, Pañacocha, is a very important location in the history of Ecuador and the Amazon. They are astounded.



I try to hand it back to Dixon at that point, saying that my Spanish isn't good enough, but he isn't having any of that. He just smiles and waves his hand for me to go on. I suspect he don't know the story himself, so I don't put him on the spot.

"Does anybody know who Francisco de Orellana is?" I ask. I get a room full of blank stares but one boy has that look, like he almost wants to say something. I ask him, "Who was Francisco de Orellana?"

"He is an explorer," the boy says. "He explored the Napo River."

"That's right."

I tell Orellana's story briefly in my very limited Spanish, emphasizing that Pañacocha is where the decision was made for Orellana to split from the main expedition. The kids look to Dixon from time to time as if to question whether this could possibly be true. I don't mention that I am only guesstimating about the place. Let them think it is here; nobody can ever prove them wrong.

"So at the time, almost 500 years ago," I conclude, "The whole Napo River all the way to the Amazon and the whole Amazon River, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean all belonged to Ecuador. And it is only because Francisco de Orellana and his very brave men survived this dangerous journey and got back to claim the territory."

"And now Colleen, who is also very brave, is going to make the same trip all the way to the Atlantic Ocean," Geran adds. I'm signing her on as my PR person.

Then we teach "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes."

Geran and I got this routine down ten years ago in Limoncocha. There we used "Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes" and "The Hokey Pokey."

Now, Geran says she doesn't have the energy for "Hokey Pokey" and I get to pretend I really wanted to put my right foot in and shake it all about.

It's hard to imagine a bunch of American junior high and high school kids singing this children's song, but these kids take it very seriously. First we teach them the words, pointing to our own body parts. Then we say the words and make them point to their eyes and ears, and finally we point at our own heads and noses and they yell out the words. They pick it up pretty quickly and in a few minutes are belting out, "Head and shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes."

The whole lesson takes about 20 minutes, and then we moved to the next classroom. These are the littlest kids—grades one through three. We go with "Old MacDonald" for them.

"What is your favorite animal?" Geran asks.

One little boy yelled out, "*Chanchó!*" so Old MacDonald gets pigs. No matter what animal's name we sang, they snort like pigs.

We hand out plastic Dollar Store rings in the shapes of spiders and skulls.

There's a certain irony in giving petroleum-based rings to the kids in an oil town. The oil that comes from the ground here is processed and sent through a pipeline to the Pacific Ocean. From there it goes to a factory somewhere, gets turned into plastic and poured into molds to make little rings, packaged in more plastic and shipped to the United States. A Dollar Store will order batches of them and some minimum wage employee will hang them on a rack. I'll come in looking for dry erase markers, see the rings and think they would make good trinkets to hand out when I travel. I pay my buck

plus 9.75% sales tax, put them in my luggage, and bring the well-traveled trinkets to kids in Pañacocha. Better traveled than these children will ever be, for sure.

We finish with the two middle-grade classes, which are in two adjacent rooms with no door. We each choose a room and I tell my kids it is a competition to see which classroom could learn the song best. Geran later says that is cheating, but it works. After they all sing together, we each declare our own classroom the winners.

We are only at the school for a little more than an hour, but for the kids it is a memorable hour.

#### [A Plain and Unaffected Virtue \(1504-1584\)](#)

“I, having in mind nothing more than to communicate the truth to him who may wish to know about the matter and read my plain and simple account, without circumlocutions, with that straightforwardness with which the man of the church is duty bound to testify to what he has seen, shall relate the story just as it happened.”

Gaspar de Carvajal, *Account of the Recent Discovery of the Famous Grand River which is Discovered by Great Good Fortune by Captain Francisco de Orellana*.

If Dominican Friar Gaspar de Carvajal had not written his account of Orellana's journey, the specifics would be lost to the passing time.

Friar Carvajal was part of Gonzalo Pizarro's expedition, but when Orellana was sent down the river, Friar Carvajal went along because he was too sick to walk. Friar Carvajal was a young man, but already well-established as a religious leader. He had been in charge of the friars sent to establish missions in Peru, and had founded the first monastery in South America. When Gonzalo Pizarro came through Lima on his way to take over as governor of Quito, Carvajal had already made a name for himself by refusing to let military forces take a prisoner who had claimed asylum in his monastery. As a young, strong and brave friar, and a native of Pizarro's home district of Extremadura,

Carvajal was a natural choice to act as priest for Pizarro's expedition, accompanying him to Quito and then on the expedition to the Land of Cinnamon.

After the trip, Friar Carvajal wrote two versions of a journal reporting the events of Orellana's journey. The two are consistent but he included different details in them. The one that I think he wrote second excludes anything he didn't personally witness and emphasizes that he saw all this "with his own eyes." Apparently responding to skeptics who accused the men of making up tall tales, Carvajal invoked his duty to a higher authority, as a man of God, in support of his veracity. However, these journals did not become publicly available until much later.

Early historians, probably unaware of Friar Carvajal's accounts, reported Gonzalo Pizarro's version of the events. Those historians were more like reporters than anything we would recognize as historians. Some of their accounts are laughably unreliable in light of available documentation.

For example, we know that Friar Gaspar de Carvajal was with Orellana for the entire trip because he wrote about it. Yet, one historian claimed that Orellana abandoned Carvajal and a man named Sanchez in the wilderness to die. None of the principals—Pizarro, Orellana and Carvajal—ever reported any such incident. The only source credited for this information was Sanchez himself, who does not appear to have even been on the expedition. Others repeated that story, which became widely accepted as true, being included in most early historical accounts of the expedition.

Another historian attacked Carvajal's credibility on the basis that the historian did not believe that women archers would need to cut off their breasts, as they supposedly did

in the Greek myth. Had he read Carvajal's journal, he would have seen that Carvajal specified that the "Amazons" they encountered did not cut off their breasts.

These men apparently asked around and tried to get an idea of what happened, and then wrote a good story. We call it history but they typically called them "accounts" or "chronicles." In this case, the early sources were Gonzalo Pizarro and the angry handful of men who eventually made it back to Quito.

Even today, information about Orellana's journey is hard to find. This entry from the Encyclopedia Britannica is typical: "In April 1541 [Orellana] is sent ahead of the main party to seek provisions, taking a brigantine with 50 soldiers. He reached the junction of the Napo and Marañon rivers, where his group persuaded him of the impossibility of returning to Pizarro. Instead, he entered upon an exploration of the Amazon system."

That's mostly accurate—Orellana left Pizarro's expedition on December 26<sup>th</sup>, not in April and they decided to continue down the river long before they reached the Marañon--but pretty thin on details. A few sources will go a step further and say something to the effect that Orellana "abandoned" Pizarro or something about how extraordinary his journey was, but details are scarce.

Fortunately, some original documents, including Friar Carvajal's journals, survived.

After his adventure with Orellana, Carvajal returned immediately to his duties in Peru and his reputation only grew, adding to his credibility as a source of information. He was apparently highly trusted, as he was given a series of politically sensitive duties. In 1550 he was named "Protector of the Indians." In that capacity he wrote to the King

asking for an end to virtual slavery of the Indians, “[i]t being, as it is, so contrary to divine and natural right that free men should be forced and compelled to perform tasks so trying, so injurious to their health, so endangering to their lives and so obstructive to the gospel preaching.”

He travelled throughout Peru, visiting monasteries, deciding on administrative requests, and advising the monks. One friar wrote, “[He] is succeeded by the great Friar Gaspar de Carvajal a priest of great valor and of no less virtue—a plain and unaffected virtue—who left all the monasteries to which he went on his tours of inspection improved both spiritually and temporally . . .”

Carvajal was made archbishop of Peru and elected to be Peru’s representative to the Vatican, although he apparently never went. When he became too old to travel to the remote monasteries, he retired to the monastery of Lima—the first one he had founded when he arrived in Peru as a young man. He died there in 1584. He was 80 years old.

## Chapter 4 I Pulled My Dream Down from the Sky

### Sani Lodge, 2012

Dave is still on crutches. Dave Jackson is a 32-year-old British biologist I met in 2003 while working with Andean bears in the Ecuador's cloud forest. He was in Quito getting his torn ligament checked out when Geran and I went to Pañacocha without him. He's finally made it to Coca, so we're meeting to head out for our first official stop of the expedition—Sani Isla.

With Dave are an indigenous friend of Dave's, an Achuar man named Oswaldo, and Laurence, a Frenchwoman who is establishing a research farm near Oswaldo's community. The last member of our expedition is an American friend of Dave's named Jon, who has been living in Quito and is looking for a little adventure.

This is a bigger group than I wanted for this trip. At first I thought I would go alone, then I decided that a second person made good logistical sense; it's easier to search out rooms and transportation with two people. The downside of travelling with someone, of course, is that you have to make joint decisions. As more people are added to the group, it becomes decision by committee. As a policy analyst in Washington, DC, I saw firsthand the dysfunction of committee-based decision making. However, I feel good about these individuals.

Our guide for the canoe trip to Sani Isla is Javier, a cute guy who looks to be in his early twenties, with the straight black hair and high cheekbones reminiscent of American Indians. His English is excellent and he has a casual, relaxed way about him that exudes confidence. Javier sits in the front of the boat and I am two rows back, with Dave in between, foot safely propped out of harm's way.

“They are building here the “Manta to Manaus Highway,” Javier tells us as we pass Pompeya. “The plan is to build a road all the way from the city of Manta on the Pacific coast, across the Amazon, and reaching to Manaus, Brazil. From there it is easy to get river transport to the Atlantic and to Europe—anywhere you want to go. Right now, the road ends at the next village, La Independencia.”

The road from Pompeya connects with the main road that goes over the Andes Mountains to the coast. It will provide an alternative to the Panama Canal for Brazilian companies shipping to Asian markets. However, larger boats would get stranded in water this shallow and a part-time commercial route isn’t likely to lure merchants. The Manta to Manaus project will require serious dredging during the dry season.

“We cannot keep people away from our land if there are roads,” Javier goes on, “so we will not allow the road to come through our reserve. It is part of a larger issue of the oil companies that want to develop our land. When an oil company came here ten years ago, our community says that instead of money we wanted the oil company to build us a tourist lodge. That way we have our own income that we can control even after the *impresa* leaves.”

We pass the Sani Isla community to dock a short way downriver. While the community of Sani Isla is on the Napo, the lodge is on Lake Challuacocha, an oxbow lake north of the river. Separating the two helps the community maintain its independence from the lodge.

Don Orlando, the visionary behind Sani Lodge, meets us at the dock. He is a weathered, middle aged man without Javier’s height, charm or language skills. You wouldn’t pick him out of a crowd as the revolutionary. Yet, he is almost single-handedly



responsible for Sani Lodge, which, as far as I know, is the only completely community established and operated tourist lodge in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

After an overland hike on a wooden boardwalk we hop—in Dave’s case, literally—into paddle canoes. People magically appear, transferring our bags so all we have to do is watch the birds flocking from tree to tree and listen to the frog chorus. They have frogs here the way we have crickets at home. Motorized boats, hunting, and fishing are banned on the lake.

The Lodge is like something from a glossy travel magazine. A guide greets us at the dock with cocktails and leads us into a thatched-roof cabana lounge with a bar and a menu of tempting cocktails. We offered to just sling hammocks anywhere but they insist that we stay in their “camping” accommodations. Their idea of camping includes tents on wood platforms with mattresses, sheets, and turn-down service complete with a mint on the pillow. One night in this place costs as much as an entire three-day tour to Luis’ lodge.

That evening, after a candlelit three-course dinner, Don Orlando takes us on the lake to look for caiman. Caiman are a kind of crocodile, and the largest predator in Amazonia.

The last traces of the fading sun reflect orange and pink on the water and on Don Orlando’s face as he perches on the front of the canoe. There is no hurry to get to the other side. His voice floats across the water in a traditional song, a quiet, reedy falsetto that is half-melody, half-chant.

The bass of the frogs, tenor of crickets, and soprano of parrots accompany him. It's dinner time for the jungle creatures. Sitting cross legged on the floor of the canoe, I close my eyes and let the peaceful evening float over me. I hear the water parting before the boat and the occasional swish of the paddle directing the canoe around rocks and submerged trees. This is the Amazon I picture myself in—worlds away from fire sirens and alarm clocks.

Don Orlando paddles a couple of times then floats toward the shore, where black caiman live in the shallow water. The eerie red glow of their eyes reflected in our flashlights is the only visible part of the crocodiles. Dave and Oswaldo direct beams into the bamboo and high grass surrounding the lake, looking for telltale reflections. I let them look, lying in the canoe and feeling the moist air on my skin and listening to the night sounds. Our breathing feels loud against the stillness.

We are in a pocket universe, suspended in time. Without light switches, Netflix, and text messages, it could be 1512. The breeze and the moonlight haven't changed. The caiman lounge on the same rocks, hide in the same reeds watching with those same creepy eyes. A thousand years from now this scene will still be playing for anyone here to see.

Excited whispers signal the first sighting and I open my eyes. We are an island on a sea of darkness. I sit up and follow the beam of Oswaldo's light. For a moment it's just more darkness then a slight movement turns the crocodile's eyes toward the light and they glow bright red.

Don Orlando looks like he was born to sit across the bow of a paddle canoe. It's hard to picture him in a hard hat on an oil field. Yet, he spent more than 20 years away

from home on the Oxy's payroll. As he watched the destruction of other communities—water contaminated, like in Luis' community, and people turned against each other by oil company bribes—he swore he would not let that happen to his home.

“I contaminated the Amazon,” he says quietly, “I contaminated my own land because I had to get money for my children. For twenty years I was a machinist for the *impresa*, and I saw what they did, and I am part of it.”

The most obvious contamination is from oil spills. The pipeline that carries Amazonian oil to market crosses the Andes, with their frequent earthquakes, landslides, and volcanic eruptions. The resulting oil spills are not easily cleaned up, as the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster demonstrated. After that disaster, astonished Americans watched nightly reports of BP's increasingly farfetched experiments—put on a hat, plug it with garbage, catch it in a barrier, soak it up, burn the Gulf, and so on. They seemed baffled, as if cleaning spilled oil was a brand new idea.

Spills aren't the only problem. Drilling produces natural gas and briny water, along with the petroleum. They burn excess natural gas around the clock, shooting arrows of flames and residue into the air. For every gallon of oil a well produces, it also spits out 20 gallons of brine, complete with petroleum, natural gas, chemicals used in the extraction process and, sometimes, radioactive particles. This is probably what Texaco dumped into the water in Luis' community. Companies now dispose of this water in cement “re injection wells.”

Don Orlando says that he has questioned engineers from around the world about this and learned that the 3000 pounds of pressure used to reinject the brine will inevitably force it into the ground and water, spreading all over the Amazon.

“This contamination is killing all natural life,” Don Orlando says. “The consequences aren’t now, or even for my children, but for their children and their children. So I say, the company is going to try to enter here and we need to be prepared. They need technical workers for a few months, but then what? The company's not going to be here at some point.”

“I thought, we have this camp and lake here in our political area, so I say, if I can do this hotel, like I have here, then even people who don't have diplomas can work.”

The community would control the tourist lodge, giving them an independent source of income for the future. The lodge would supply the benefits the oil company is promising, making it harder for the *impresa* to buy loyalty.

“That is the idea, the dream that I had.”

When Oxy moved too close to Sani Isla in 2000, Don Orlando quit his job and went home.

“My wife and I studied this idea. It needed a lot of money, but one well was producing \$2 million a day at that time. One well. That's money!”

He first got community buy-in, and then began negotiations with Oxy. Even though they promised to build a small lodge, they refused to follow through. Don Orlando describes more than two years of meetings, demand letters, and rallying outside pressure before Oxy finally made good on its promise. During the first years of its operation, the lodge reinvested its earnings to train workers and expand facilities.

The lodge does more than just provide employment. It sponsors English teachers in the school, maintains housing in Coca for students finishing high school, and provides college scholarships. Our guide, Javier, is a beneficiary of one of those scholarships and

is now the only community member with good enough English to be a guide. The lodge pays for all emergency medical care, an increasingly important service, since they are seeing more cancer and skin problems in recent years, according to Don Orlando. When the Lodge goes to Coca to pick up and drop off tourists, it also transports community members and their products to the market and brings goods from Coca to stock a store. The lodge buys its fruits, vegetables, and chicken from community members at outside market prices and lets community artisans sell handicrafts directly to Lodge guests. Finally, it pays a monthly fee that the community may use in any way it sees fit.

However, for all this, the lodge can never compete with what oil companies can offer. Since the lodge's support depends on the fluctuations in the tourism business, services have been reduced during the recent worldwide recession. The schoolteacher in the community was quick to say that the school the lodge built was not big enough. One small ecotourism project can never make the kinds of money that oil companies can offer.

As Javier put it, "They promise university scholarships, a new health clinic, electricity and clean water, and enough money for every family to buy a motor boat. Anything they can dream of, the company will promise."

Don Orlando's experience proved that words are easier to get than action. After 15 years of struggle, Don Orlando's vision has put Sani Isla on a road to sustainability. They no longer permit any hunting or fishing on their land, instead raising chickens and building a fish farm. They are developing coffee and cacao (chocolate) groves for cash crops. The school now goes up to tenth grade, so kids only have to go to Coca for two years to finish high school.

“I had to pull my dream down from the sky,” he says. With a sly grin, he adds, “In 20 years of working for the oil company, they gave me the experience I needed to succeed.”

### Rio Napo, December 25, 1541

By Christmas Day in 1541, dreams of finding the rumored city of gold were no longer mentioned in Pizarro’s camp. The *San Pedro*, the small boat the expedition had built at El Barco, would carry only the heaviest weapons and the men who were too weak to walk. The rest were whacking a path along the side of the river, spending more time building bridges over the seemingly endless tributaries than walking, it seemed. This exhausting work got them about a mile on a good day. Worst of all, General Pizarro had no plan for either accomplishing their mission or getting back to Quito, and he wouldn’t listen to anything Orellana suggested. If something didn’t change soon they would all die.

This was not Orellana’s idea of how to run a mission. He had settled his region of Ecuador and established a city where others had failed by developing relationships, not by killing and conquering. Of course, they were conquered, they just didn’t know it, and that was how he liked it. There was no joy in unnecessary misery. The joy was in the challenge of finding a way to accomplish what nobody else could, to discover what nobody had found. As a Conquistador in the service of God and King, and the Pizarros, of course, he had proven over and over the value of ingenuity and clear thinking.

He had gone to great trouble and spent a small fortune—his personal fortune, he was quick to point out—to join this jungle expedition, only to find that it was a disaster from the start.

Their original goal of finding marketable cinnamon was a bust. Dreams of finding the rumored city of gold were dead. Both Pizarro and Orellana knew that the best they could hope for was to return to Quito with the few survivors, but even that would be impossible if they didn't find food soon.

Orellana pulled General Pizarro aside and offered to take a small party down the river to the abandoned farm Delicola had told them about. By taking healthy men and the boat, Orellana figured he should need three or four days to get there, and twice that to get back against the current.

Pizarro liked the idea. They agreed that Orellana should go with 50 men, plus a few more who were too sick to walk.

At this point their accounts differed slightly. Orellana said that he told Pizarro not to worry if he did not return on time, and to continue downriver until they met. Pizarro was to wait "as long as he should see fit" and not be worried if Orellana didn't return. Pizarro told Orellana to do "as he thought best." Pizarro's version of their agreement was slightly different. He said he had told Orellana to "see to it that he returned within 12 days and in no case went beyond the junction of the rivers."

The answer to the question that text box had posited—hero or traitor—hinges on this seemingly minor difference. If he supposed to return within 12 days whether he found food or not, he violated Pizarro's trust by continuing down the river. If, however, Orellana's version of the agreement was accurate, he was free to use his judgment in deciding if or when to stop and wait for Pizarro.

Orellana and his small group left the next morning, December 26, 1541 with the *San Pedro* and some canoes. They never returned.

## Yasuni National Park, September 23, 2012

We are in the treetops. Specifically, the treetop with 15 stories of metal scaffolding that leads to a platform in the branches. This is the Sani Lodge bird observation tower.

We are right on the edge of Yasuní National Park, the most biologically diverse place on Earth. The statistics are overwhelming: at least 150 species of amphibians, 121 of reptiles, 596 of birds, and 382 of fish. An average hectare, about two and a half acres, has more tree species than the entire continental United States and Canada combined.

It also has about 6 trillion insects. I feel justified in using DEET.

Much of Yasuní has also been designated an “intangible zone,” making it off limits for any kind of development or extraction activities, a protection even national parks and nature reserves do not have. This intangible zone was established to enforce a provision of the new Ecuadorian Constitution guaranteeing the protection of uncontacted groups from genocide and ethnocide. At least two uncontacted tribes were known to be living in the area in 2007, when the zone was established.

I scan for birds but all I see are treetops after treetops, shades of green on green. A few old growth trees tower over the surface, breaking the landscape. Some of these are Ceiba trees, sometimes called Kapok. They produce cotton-like balls in the treetops that were used for filling in, among other things, baby crib bumpers. I only know this because that’s how my mother discovered that I am allergic to Kapok. It is very flammable, so isn’t used much commercially any more, but it makes a good seal for blowgun darts because it is waterproof and a little waxy.



Javier points off in the distance to the south. “See? There?” I squint through the binoculars, but all I see is more green. A bumpy blanket of green.

“It’s a Crimson-mantled Woodpecker,” Javier says. I still don’t see it until he gives me directions. “See that big tree there? The one that’s kind of darker than the others? Just to the left of that and in front of the evergreens?” I search more until I spot the right tree but I still don’t see the bird. “At the top of that tree there’s a branch that sticks out to the left. You should be able to see a spot of red. That’s the woodpecker’s head.”

I move the binoculars slowly, scanning until I finally spot the speck of red.

My mother loved birds but I never paid much attention to them until her last year, when there was nothing to do but sit together and talk. I flew east from law school in Los Angeles, to find her sprouting more tubes each time. A nurse told me that I was the only one of her kids Mom didn’t worry about, because I made good decisions and lived with them.

I wonder what she would have thought if she had lived to see my next 25 years of decision-making. Maybe she wouldn’t have been surprised. When I told her I didn’t want to practice law she said, “It’s still good to have a ‘back-up career.’” I’m not sure what she thought my primary career would be. She probably realized that I wasn’t destined for babies and white picket fences, but I don’t think she envisioned me chasing wild bears and trekking across the Amazon jungle.

In less than two hours Javier and Dave spot more than 50 different species of birds, including the Amazonian Umbrella Bird, a variety of Parrots, and some macaws. They spot a Red Howler Monkey, but I don’t see it. Howler monkeys are the loudest

animal, relative to their weight, in the world. A 20-pound critter can let loose a foghorn-like howl that carries two or three miles.

About half of Sani Isla's land is inside the Yasuní Reserve, which happens to sit on about seven billion dollars in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil field. Unfortunately for the Amazonian tribes, mineral rights in Ecuador do not go with the land like they do in the United States. Rather, all mineral and water rights belong to the government. This oil became the center of an international drama as the Ecuadorian government seeks to capitalize on the nation's resources.

In 2007, the Ecuadorian government came up with the Yasuní-ITT initiative that Luis had mentioned, in which it promised to preserve the Yasuní Reserve in return for \$3.6 billion, half of the estimated revenue from the oil. Many countries and private citizens, reportedly including Leonardo DiCaprio and Edward Norton, pledged money.

However, some critics called it environmental blackmail, pointing out that Correa was never an environmentalist. Others suspected more sinister motives, suggesting that Correa didn't intend to keep his promises and would exploit Yasuní regardless of the agreement. Luis told us that the wells at El Eden, are drilling under Yasuní by angling the drills underground. Also, recent reports suggest that the Correa administration is negotiating to sell the ITT oil rights to China, even while it is promising to preserve them. That may not be surprising, considering that Ecuador owes China something in the vicinity of 17 billion dollars.

In the end, Correa canceled the project, saying that the international community did not contribute enough money. He cited a responsibility to his nation's poor. Oil brings in about one-third of Ecuador's national GDP.

He also blamed "the great hypocrisy" of nations who emit most of the world's greenhouse gases. "The world has failed us," Correa says, "It is not charity that we sought from the international community, but co-responsibility in the face of climate change."

A few months later he opened the area for drilling, although oil companies, showing a more pragmatic assessment of international sentiment than Correa, have thus far been unenthusiastic. In a savvy PR move, they cite concerns about local opposition.

### **Comunidad Sani Isla 2012**

The community of Sani Isla sits on a bluff overlooking Rio Napo. We backtrack from the lodge, following the boardwalk across the spit of land to the Napo River and chugging upriver to the Sani Isla community. I climb a well-worn, zigzagging path about 15 feet up the bank, another reminder that the water is low. A rough circle of huts surrounds the clearing, about a quarter mile from left to right, parallel to the river, and half that distance across. I imagine games being played here on warm evenings with warm beers all around. A tall pole suggests a cell signal at least some of the time, but there are no power lines.

Directly in front of us, two long picnic tables sit in front of the community hut, a traditional stilted structure about six feet off the ground, with stairs leading up to it when the water is low, like now. Don Orlando introduces us to Frederico, our guide for the day. Some women bring us chicha as we sit at one of the long picnic tables under a thatched roof in front of the community hut to discuss our plans for the day.

Chicha is the all-purpose drink here, like coffee in the States or tea in Britain. It is made by pounding cooked yucca into shreds in a wooden bowl like a little dugout canoe about three feet long. The shredded fiber is cooked in water again, after which old ladies

chew and spit bits of yucca back into the pot. The enzymes from the saliva are necessary for fermentation. A sweet potato will do the same job, but the age and status of the woman is symbolically important. The chicha supposedly tastes different depending on who spit in it. It is then left to ferment for a few days until, when it stinks enough, it is served by passing around a communal bowl.

The process is a little gross, but not nearly as awful as the taste. I take a few obligatory sips, but leave the drinking to the others.

Oil company representatives will be arriving soon to meet with the community and Federico suggests that we attend the meeting, although it will be held mostly in Kichwa. I know from other meetings I have been to that the locals tend to tune out discussions in Spanish. Spanish is associated with outsiders; real Kichwa people speak their own language. I don't expect to understand much, but attending will be interesting and, if we can record it, we can translate later.

The community hut is divided into two rooms. I enter the bigger room, which in a home would be the living/sleeping area. Here, the larger room serves as a showroom for the women's artisania and includes a sitting area with some tree stumps for chairs and an open area for eating in the traditional style—sitting in a circle on the floor.

The smaller room off to the left is the kitchen, dominated by a big stone cement cooking pedestal similar to what you might find at a camping area in a public park. About two thirds of it—an area about 2 feet by three feet—holds a wood fire kept low enough that it will roast but not burn the food on the grate above. The rest is at the level of the grate and holds clay pots.

Three women between about 30 and 50 years old stand around the fire, poking and turning the food with the bare hands. They all keep their hair long and straight in the traditional way, but wear brightly colored western skirts and blouses. A little girl, maybe three or four years old, peeks out from behind the youngest woman's skirt to check me out, but hides again as soon as I wave.

They are preparing a traditional meal. When they said we were invited to stay for lunch, I thought they meant the usual fare of yucca fries and rice and some kind of tough meat. This, on the other hand, is the full treatment—fish wrapped in leaves for grilling, some kind of nuts on sticks like kebobs, boiled yucca and grilled plantain, all cooked on a wood fire. The traditional Kichwa-style meal isn't typically eaten anymore, just as we don't usually sit down to meat, potatoes, a vegetable and bread and butter like in the old homesteading days.

Near where I enter is a bowl of grubs. These guys, which look like very fat caterpillars, are more than an inch long and bigger around than my thumbs. I wonder whether they are chonta grubs. There are at least two kinds of grubs. It's okay to eat the other kind but not the chonta grubs; they might be your ancestors.

Of course, Kichwa beliefs are much more complicated than that. Here's the story as far as I understand it:

In the Time Before, animals and people all spoke the same language and were very close to each other, seeing as how they could communicate. Everybody got along great. Of course, not all animals talked and I think some plants could communicate through their songs (wind through branches and such, I guess.) Anyway, the Earth got too

crowded and the people and animals started competing for space and then pretty soon people were fighting and there was conflict.

Conflict is the worst possible harm in the traditional Kichwa culture, so the situation was intolerable. Something had to be done. They couldn't expand the space, so some of the people decided to turn into animals. By becoming birds and trees and grubs, they used different space and freed up room for the humans to live without conflict.

Changing from people into animals was possible but, as you can imagine, would cause chaos if it was done all the time, and the ancestors realized that they needed to maintain a separation from humans. So they stopped talking to people and inter-species communication gradually ended. This was the change from the Time Before to the current Time.

Of course, those original human animals and grubs and what-not have all died, but their descendants live on. Many Kichwa still carry names associated with and feel an affinity for a particular species. In a less direct way, these people feel that the tree or bird still communicates with them, and they still seek out these species in nature. The descendants sing songs to and about them, thanking them for their wisdom and guidance. In this way, the Kichwa retain a connection to their heritage.

Even though the ancestors are dead and the current specimens of the species were never people, they are in a remote way related to us, so they should be treated with respect and not eaten. Chonta grubs are one of these species that should not be eaten.

However, this is the old Kichwa tradition. Most people no longer believe these things. Some Kichwa I have met say that only unbaptized people—savages—believe these things.

I poke at one of the grubs and it shifts slowly away from my finger.

A young man standing to my right, near the back entrance, says, “Lunch,” with a grin that suggests that he doesn’t think I would enjoy this particular course. He is probably right.

“I thought they might be new friends,” I say.

He laughs. “No, you can’t eat your friends.”

“That’s my idea,” I say.

He laughs and I am proud of myself for making a joke in Spanish.

A very large traditional pot sits on the end of the “stove.” It is round, with ridges like scallops, stands about 15 inches high, and appears to be about 12 inches in diameter. It looks old, with a charred bottom from sitting on many fires, but it might just be well-used.

“It’s very old,” one of the women says when I ask. “We found it in a field near here.”

“You found it?” I ask.

“Not me,” she says, “but somebody did. They were digging to plant the *chagra* and found this pot. Near here.” *Chagras* are family garden plots, the household’s major food source.

I won’t be able to figure out when it was found; it might have been last year or 50 years ago. Physics tells us that time is relative, and the Kichwa agree. One woman told us all about Noah and his ark. She didn’t know if this happened everywhere but she knew for sure it happened in her community because her grandfather saw it with his own eyes.

“How old do you think it is?” I ask. “It’s 300 years old,” she says without hesitation.

“It’s pre-Colombian,” another, younger woman says. “We don’t know exactly but we think it’s pre-Colombian.”

The first woman nods in agreement. Pre-Colombian—does that mean pre-Orellana in these parts? When Orellana came through there he found no signs of human habitation, but that could just mean that the huts were far enough back from the river that the explorers didn’t see them as they hacked a path along the bank.

Dave comes in and says we needed to interview the schoolteacher, who is coming *ahorita*. The kids are having breakfast in the next hut, but there’s no sign of the teacher. The hut is one of two that are connected by a platform, making it unnecessary to go down into the water to walk between the two buildings when it floods.

I’m particularly interested in food programs; in the States I represented low and moderate income people’s interests in government food programs, such as school meals. Ecuador used to provide free breakfast and lunch at school, which makes sense when you consider that some kids walk a couple of hours to get to school. Even if they eat before leaving home they are probably hungry again by the time they get there.

However, the Correa administration places a premium on scientific proof—documents, licenses, and the like. In the case of school lunch, they decided that they couldn’t prove its “efficacy.” I don’t know how they tested or measured efficacy—the United States school lunch program was started to fatten the kids up because the military complained that too many of their draftees weren’t fit to be cannon-fodder—the opening of the National School Lunch Act of 1946 reads, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of



Congress, as a measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation's children. . . .” In the absence of a war machine, I’m not sure what Ecuador tried to measure.

Measuring the effectiveness of nutrition programs is tough because people eat in many different places, so you can’t isolate the benefit of any one nutritional intervention. That is, you can’t tell if school meals are helping because you don’t know what else the kids are eating at home, or would have eaten if they hadn’t been fed at school. If their nutritional status is still bad, does that mean it would be even worse in the absence of the meals?

In the U.S., research has shown that when kids eat at school they behave better, are on time more, and miss class less. Breakfast is a concern even for middle class kids who, regardless of what their mothers think, often don’t eat breakfast at home before going to school. Still, Ecuador somehow concluded that school breakfast is efficacious but lunch is not. Sani Isla’s answer to this, apparently, is to serve breakfast in the middle of the school day.

Kids sit in groups on the floor, on benches along the walls, and on the grass outside. A few little ones had been plopped onto tables, presumably by older siblings. They drink a white, watery beverage called *colada* and chew on pieces of rubbery-looking muffin-like things of unidentifiable origins.

One toddler is wearing a white frilly dress like a confirmation dress with knee high rubber gumboots. Teenaged boys sit on benches at the edge of the room trying to look cool but, of course, start giggling as soon as I look at them.

The teacher is older than Dixon and less excitable. He talks about his expansion to grade ten casually, pointing out that students will have to spend only two years in Coca to finish high school. He has plans to expand to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, but he is more concerned that they have two school buildings—the new one I saw before and one of the plain wooden structures across the way where the older kids have classes. The two buildings, although not too far separated geographically, are essentially across town from each other. They need an expansion or another building by the new school, the teacher says.

He doesn't mention that Sani Lodge built the new school, or suggest who should finance the new building he wants. Maybe he just doesn't want to venture near the question that is dividing the community—whether or not they should let Petroamazonas explore for oil. Sani could take the oil shortcut, like Panacocha has, to things like new schools.

By the time we finish talking with the schoolteacher, the meeting with the oil people is already underway. I grab the tripod and camera without breaking them down. The new Ecuadorian Constitution guarantees indigenous people "free, prior and informed consultation, within a reasonable period of time, on plans and programs for exploration, exploitation and sale of non-renewable resources located on their lands which could have environmental or cultural impacts on them." Although this guarantee has never been codified into statute, these community meetings are required before the oil company can start drilling. The deal with Pañacocha and a few other towns to build Millennium Villages resulted from meetings like these. However, President Correa has taken the

position that a few *indigenas* can't be permitted to keep the nation from oil reserves it needs, so the "efficacy" of these meeting is dubious.

Also, oil companies have a long, sordid history of dirty tricks when dealing with communities—"disappearing" opponents, bribing community members and breaking promises. Local residents say that, with collaboration from the Ecuadorian military and police, drilling opponents are sometimes arrested and held for months without having charges filed against them. I once met a girl in Coca whose face was a mass of scar tissue. Her mother blamed the oil company which, she said, torched her village and burned down her home. As a result, she had to cook on an open fire, which the little girl fell into, causing the burns. Luis was trying to get medical care for the girl.

"Anything they can dream of, the company will promise." Javier had said.

Promises are just sound waves floating on air.

Getting results is more like trench warfare, as Don Orlando's fight to get the promised eco-lodge built demonstrated

The meeting is being held next to the old school, on the ground floor of a building with a cement floor, wood walls, and an actual door. Unlike the school, it is not on stilts. We approach the building as a group. Frederico steps into the room and turns to the left where the PetroAmazonas people are sitting at a table against the wall on the same side of the building as the door where we are huddled. I can't see or hear what is being said. Then Frederico turns to us and says "It's okay."

I turn to Dave, "What did they say?" I ask, thinking that he might have a gauge of the situation in the room. With the Kichwa dislike of conflict, making a scene is never wise.

“He says it’s okay, so I guess it is,” Dave says.

“Did the community people say it is okay, or the oil people?” I ask. The oil people are required by the new transparency laws to keep these meetings public, so I’m pretty sure they have to let us in, but I want to know what the local people say. In my experience, if they trust the *impresa*, they do not want outsiders there. If they are suspicious, on the other hand, they usually welcome outsiders as witnesses.

“They say it’s okay, so go in,” Dave says. I seem to be the only one with reservations.

I go in at the back of the room. Inside is one big open space. To the left, rows of folding chairs face the front of the building where the oil people sit at a long table. To the right, the chairs sit perpendicular to the table, facing the other community members and the far wall instead of the speakers.

I cross to the back wall and adjust the tripod to point toward the front where the PetroAmazonas people sit. One of the women from the company is speaking passionately in Kichwa but I can’t catch much of it. I hear, “that’s not how we do things,” and “we never, never do that,” and “we are a community, just us, together, we don’t need outsiders telling us what to do.”

I look toward Dave, who is still by the door talking with Frederico. I can’t catch his eye so I keep setting up. About the time I hit “RECORD” Dave scurries over.

“She’s making people very uncomfortable so I really think the best thing is to leave,” he says.

I feel like a child being sent to her room. I grab the tripod by the stem and walk to the door without turning to see if everyone is staring at me.

When we get outside, Dave goes on and on about how we shouldn't make them uncomfortable and it's just not correct to do so, and so on, as if I don't know anything about Kichwa culture. I barely restrain the "I told you so," but I'm not going to say anything in public.

After the meeting breaks up, the woman who was ranting against us in the meeting talks to Dave.

She pastes on a smile. "Of course, it is not personal; we just want to maintain our trust with the people here."

If she wanted to "maintain trust," she would have addressed our request to the group for their decision before we entered. Instead, she played on their dislike of conflict by putting us in the role of intruders after we were in the room. A good political move on her part. I give her a mental pat on the back.

"She's really nice," Dave says. "She is just explaining that she didn't want to make us leave, she's just in a difficult position because these are very sensitive subjects and people in the community are very divided."

"She's a politician and she gave a political answer," I say. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Maybe I spent too long in law, sat across too many tables from people not saying what they mean, and read too many press statements. Giving the politically expedient answer is neither good nor bad; it just goes with the job.

"No, really," he insists. "They're nice people." I don't think he knows it's a non-sequiter.

"Most politicians are nice people. It's a job requirement."

“You shouldn’t prejudge people,” he says. “Just because they work for the oil company doesn’t mean they’re bad people.”

Nothing is decided that day, but a few months later the community votes overwhelmingly to reject PetroAmazonas’ proposal. The following January, they discover that the community president has signed an unauthorized deal permitting PetroAmazonas to drill. The compensation is much less than what had previously been offered. Not surprisingly, community members believe the oil company, using a time-honored strategy, bribed him. Luis once told me that Oxy scheduled a meeting in Quito with Pañacocha’s anti-oil faction, and then held a community meeting to win a vote in their absence. The Sani people refuse to be bound by the invalid agreement.

“The Sani people have experience watching the bad experiences from oil in our neighboring communities,” community leader Freddy Gualinga says in a public statement. “[Oil companies] create huge roads, like 40 meters wide. All the animals are gone. The people can’t fish—the fish are gone so the communities need to go into other areas to fish. The land is totally destroyed. We are so happy to continue working in our ecotourism project, which will help us to continue protecting and conserving forests for a long time.”

In January, PetroAmazonas tells the community that they will arrive, with military backup, to begin exploration on January 15<sup>th</sup>. In response, the community stocks up on spears, blowguns, and borrowed rifles, prepared to fight if necessary.

“The oil company is treating us like dogs. There is no deal. The people do not want the oil company,” Freddy says. “We have decided to fight to the end. Each

landholder will defend their territory. We will help each other and stand shoulder to shoulder to prevent anyone from passing."

Shaman Patricio Jipa, a nephew of the man who signed the invalid agreement, is more resigned. "'If there is a physical fight, it is certain to end tragically," he says. "We may die fighting to defend the rainforest. We will not start conflict, but we will try to block them and then what happens will happen. It makes me feel sad and angry. Sad because we are indigenous people and not fully prepared to fight a government. And angry because we grew up to be warriors and have a spirit to defend ourselves."

Blanca Lourdes Tapuy Grefa says "I have my machete and I have my spear, and I'm going to defend this place. I'm not afraid. No matter what."

Without explanation, PetroEcuador does not show up on January 15<sup>th</sup> and the crisis passes. For the moment.

We are being called in for lunch. When I was a kid we sat down to "supper" at 6:15 on weeknights. "Sunday dinner" was on the table about an hour after we got home from church. Even then, in the 1970s, I don't think the practice was common in my classmates' families. Now it is practically unheard of. A plate of spaghetti scarfed down in front of the TV works for me. Sitting down to a full meal is an event—Thanksgiving, birthdays, or entertaining guests.

Customs have also changed in Sani Isla. With the arrival of gas stoves, school and jobs for some people at the lodge, meals are simpler and quicker than they once were. However, we apparently qualify as guests. VIPS, by the look of it. The ladies of Sani Isla have prepared the whole traditional equivalent of the Thanksgiving dinner.

We sit cross-legged on the floor around a leaf the size of a small table.

Like drinking chicha, eating is a communal endeavor. We don't have individual plates; we just eat from the food on the leaf. Oswaldo, Dave and I sit on one side of the "table" with the oil company representatives and a couple of men from the community on the other side and the ends.

The ladies bring yucca and plantains. And the inevitable chicha, of course. Next comes piranha, which they wrapped in leaves and roasted slowly over the fire, a technique that adds flavor and keeps the cooking fish from flaking into the fire. I went fishing for piranha with Luis but never caught anything, so I haven't eaten it. Everyone says it's bony, and everyone is right. There isn't much meat on the skeleton. Of course, the most intimidating part of the piranha is its two rows of razor-sharp teeth, which cut through prey like buzz-saws.

Contrary to what the movies might suggest, piranha attacks on humans are rare. Little Francisco in Limoncocha was close to the truth when he assured us that piranha don't eat people because we're too big, but they will bite your fingers if you pick them up and play with them. I don't want to know how he picked up that bit of wisdom.

Still, human-piranha encounters are not mythical, either. The little fish are apparently attracted to churning water like sharks are attracted to blood. The disturbance of water stirred up by a panicked person, signals the fish that vulnerable prey is available. Then they will attack, regardless of size. This is why Luis wasn't afraid to take us swimming in Lake Pañacocha.

While we munch on yucca and fish, the ladies set down wooden skewers of nuts and last of all, a skewer of grubs. Oswaldo and Dave take grubs without hesitation, then



hand the skewer to one of the community representatives—the same man I had talked to over the live grubs earlier. He offers the skewer to me.

“No, you go ahead,” I say.

“Have you ever eaten grubs?” he asks.

I can honestly say yes, and hope that will satisfy them. But, no.

“You just don’t want to eat your friends,” he jokes.

“We had such a nice chat earlier,” I say, again pleased that I am able to joke in Spanish. But I’m not getting out of it, so I might as well give in as gracefully as I can.

I take a grub from the skewer and inspect it. Its appearance hasn’t changed much since morning, except that it isn’t moving now.

With everyone watching intently, I bite into the chubby grub.

When I ate a grub before its skin wasn’t very tough. It was sort of like eating an M&M—the outside gave a little resistance, then my teeth sank all the way through.

Not this grub. This guy puts up a fight. He’s so tough that my first bite doesn’t even break through the thick skin; it gives a little but doesn’t break. I bite harder, then a little harder. I don’t want to bite down too hard because I don’t want to spray grub innards all over everyone, especially me. Finally the skin gives way and my teeth sink into the slimy interior. I make a show of chewing and swallowing and everyone seems satisfied. Something more seem to be expected of me, so I looked down at the remaining half of the grub and says, “I’m sorry, *amigo*.”

Everyone laughs and the test is over. I’m pretty sure I passed.

## Chapter 5 Anything They Can Dream Of

### Piranha Lake, September 25-30, 2012

By the time we get back to Pañacocha, Geran has an entourage of kids. They hang around on the porch of the pension singing with her and her ukulele. They play *Are You Sleeping, Brother John?*, which only uses one chord, and dance the Hokey Pokey in the mud pit that serves as ‘main street’. They play War, Slap Jack and Go Fish. She makes them count their cards in English, “Wahn, Tooo, and Treee. . . .” They trail around after her as she shuffles to the shaded sitting area by the river with her book, and tease her until she gives up on reading. The only peace she can find is under her mosquito net in our luxurious room.

Right now, I envy her cheery disposition.

Dave and Jon get a room at the first place on the wharf—the one that sent us to Señora Ana’s. The difference between the two places turns out to be that the other place has no shower at all, just a bucket of water. On the other hand, it only costs four dollars per night, where ours is a whopping nine dollars.

Luis mentioned Juan, who runs one of the little tiendas where we bought all the water in stock at \$2 per liter, as one of the people who opposed oil and might be willing to talk to us. People generally don’t want to talk about any subject this controversial because of the inherent conflict. Oil, in particular, is taboo because of the history. One oil opponent in this area survived three mysterious plane crashes. I haven’t heard of those kinds of things happening lately, but the caution is deeply ingrained.

“We know the oil people are contaminating the land,” Juan says as we sit at the table in front of his tienda on the waterfront, “because the animals are disappearing. A lot

of them haven't been seen much lately, in the last ten years." He starts listing them off—aguanta, huagana, paujil, harpia and so on. Luis says much the same thing, with a similar list, when he told us about the murdered dolphins. I don't know any of these species. Apparently, I never will.

To the traditional Kichwa way of thinking, the absence of a species may not mean anything. Their time is a circle. In the center lives Sachamama, like our Mother Nature, with both the past and the future. The present is the outside of the circle. Sachamama manages everything—people, crops, weather, animals, and so on. If there are fewer monkeys than there used to be, it's because she doesn't think we need as many as before.

One consequence of this concept of time is that there is no cause and effect. They see time more like Doctor Who, the Time Lord from the popular British TV show, who says, "Humans view time as linear. . . cause and effect. Really, time is more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff."

When time is a ball, effects can move in any direction. The past and the future are interchangeable. The future can change the past. This isn't as unbelievable as it might seem. Einstein said that the only purpose of time is so that everything doesn't happen at once. Quantum mechanics has introduced what scientists call "The Problem of Time." Their problem is different from mine. My problem with time is that it keeps going forward and never backward. I get older but not younger. The scientists' problem is that time doesn't seem to exist, except in our perception. They can show photons communicating retroactively, they just can't explain how or why. So the Kichwa might be right; the past and future may live together, and not be linear.

The problem is, if time is only in our perceptions, why do we all perceive it going in the same linear direction all the time? Why don't we all experience things happening in different orders? Why do people only get older and frailer, and never younger and stronger?

I just need the physicists to get on the ball and figure out how to de-age me. There's still hope.

Dave, Jon, Oswaldo, Laurence, and I hire a local man, Pedro, to take us up the Pañayacu—the river Luis' cabañas are on—to the lake. Halfway there, Pedro sees a canoe and pulls up to a clearing to talk with the other guide. This is a stopping place for meals or breaks on the way to and from the lake, he says. I recognize Luis' place before we even set foot on shore.

Only the community hut and the bathrooms have survived. I wander through the area where our sleeping huts were, but there is no sign of them. The boardwalks we followed on my first visit have been reclaimed by nature, as well.

When I went back to Pañacocha with Luis in 2002, a year after my first visit, I wanted to repeat my first hike, but Luis didn't want to take me.

He just said, "We can't go there." He eventually gave in, though, warning the other guests and me that there wouldn't be any birds or monkeys.

I remembered being engulfed in a maze of trees and lianas within seconds of leaving the boardwalks connecting our cabañas, but the trail Luis took us on is straight. We walked for about five minutes before the canopy hid the sky from us. Luis showed us

many of the things I had seen the previous year—the centipede that left the smell of amaretto where it walked, *matapalo* strangler vines, the bitter bark of the cinnamon tree, Cat’s claw and Sangria de Drago.

Then we entered a clearing with bare earth—none of the fallen trees, mosses, and ferns that usually coated the forest floor.

Oxy had been there.

“There used to be a tree here,” Luis said. “They pulled it up and dragged it away because their line needs to be straight.” He indicated the straight path to our right where vegetation and small trees had been knocked down as they dragged the larger tree out of their route.

“They run lines across in a grid, like on a chess board. We can only hope they don’t find anything here and they will go away.” They will move on to another part of the jungle, he meant, always looking for more oil. “It’s like this all through this section of forest all the way to the lake.”

We all wandered the clearing, alone together. The oil company people had cut a straight trail a couple of yards wide. Vines and lianas were slashed; plants had been dug from the ground, roots and all, and lay where they were tossed. It is the careless carnage of people in a hurry.

Coming across this area yet again, this time so unexpectedly, I wonder how much has recovered. I want to hike through there again now, ten years later. The old trees obviously cannot be replaced in just a decade but smaller fast-growing species, as well as

undergrowth, moss, and ferns, should be filling the empty spaces. But we don't have time for a hike. We have hired Pedro for only two hours and we want to get to the lake.

Pedro claims that you can often hear loud drumming and war cries of ghost villages from ancient civilizations as you enter and leave the mysterious lake. Apparently, burial grounds of pre-Columbian tribes have been uncovered in the region, and he thinks that more remain hidden. Almost nothing is known about pre-Colombian civilizations in areas not controlled by the Incas.

I want to see the dolphins, but I doubt that will happen. Pink river dolphins, known locally as *boto* or *bouto*, are one of many endangered species in the Amazon. They were probably separated from salt water dolphins when the glaciers melted, leaving pockets of fresh water in Amazonia.

Pink dolphins are very curious and will approach boats, to the delight of tourists. I watched them play around our boat with Luis a few times, and went swimming with them. Whether we are in the boat or in the water, they circled us, showing off their smooth leaps and aerial twists. However, their friendly nature may also contribute to their scarcity because they can easily be injured, accidentally or intentionally, by boats or their occupants.

*Boto* plays a major role in Amazonian folklore. Legends vary but all imbue the dolphins with magic. Many Amazonian people feel the dolphins bring bad luck, while some shamans claim to have learned healing techniques from *boto*. One popular theme in the folk tales is that the dolphins take human form and appear as beautiful men or women to seduce humans. In some versions they lure men to live with them in their underwater palaces, never to return to the surface. In others, they impregnate innocent girls. If the

girls are to be believed, *Boto* is remarkably fertile. When Geran and I were in Limoncocha, we were told that one kid's father is *Boto*, meaning that the father is unidentified. Or maybe they really believed that a dolphin is responsible. At the time, we couldn't understand why the deadbeat dad was called Dolphin.

Pedro takes us to the same parts of the lake where Luis took me. We troll the shoreline and visit the two high-end tourists lodges now operating on the lake, both of which are empty.

I went swimming with a sea monster here in 2003, with Luis, of course. The fact the name translates as Piraña Lake worried me a little but Luis said, "If you trust them they will trust you," so I jumped in, trusting the little piranhas not to eat me.

As we putted away an hour later, a creature swelled from the water, all scales and arched back, by the raft I had just abandoned.

"Is that an anaconda?" I asked.

Luis shook his head. "Snakes don't move like that. They go like—" he wiggled hand and forearm side to side.

I never saw a head but I imagined the Loch Ness Monster. Maybe this was where she hid when they looked for her in Scotland. She had found a secret tunnel through the middle of the earth. We could follow her home.

"You took me swimming in a sea monster's living room?" I said it like I was scared but he knew better. He shrugged.

"We left her alone so she left us alone," he said.

He thought it was a *maitu*, a scaly Amazonian fish that can grow to 30 feet long.

I prefer my Nessie theory.

The raft is gone now but, using the entrance from the Pañayacu River as a landmark, I can identify where we saw the dolphins before.

We stop, hoping the dolphins will appear. No signs of movement under the water. No sleek leaping bodies. After about half an hour we move to the lagoon near the entrance of the lake. Pedro cuts the motor and we sit silently, as I had on at least three different trips ten years ago. Three times the dolphins had eventually come to visit us, circling our boat and showing off their synchronized leaps. Not today.

The boat rocks gently in the peace of the parrots' calls and crickets' buzz. It's hard to imagine this peace being broken by contamination, the Kingfisher's feathers coated in oil when it dips into the lake to snag a fish. We sit for half an hour as dusk darkens the shore and the rain starts drizzling. Finally Pedro is impatient to get back and we have been out longer than our agreed-on two hours, so we head back.

"Do you see dolphins out here often?" I ask.

"Oh, yes," he says, "they are always here. Most times when you come here you will see them."

"Have you seen them recently?" I ask.

"Yes, all the time." Time is as vague when referring to breakfast as it is when referring to evolution.

"When is the last time you saw them?" I ask.

He seems puzzled by the question, so I rephrase.



“Have you seen them this dry season?” When the water is low, the dolphins have fewer places to go so it’s harder for them to hide. The last rainy season wasn’t very rainy and the water is exceptionally low right now. Our chances—anybody’s chances—of seeing a dolphin right now should be very good.

“Not this dry season, no.” he says. “But I haven’t been out here a lot this dry season.”

“Do you know if anybody has seen them this dry season?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did you see them during the last rainy season?” I ask. It’s starting to sound like a cross examination but that’s the only way to get specific information from many indigenous people. They just don’t have our obsession with specificity.

“It’s hard to see them during the rainy season,” he says. “When the water is high they can go anywhere.” He sweeps a hand to indicate the lake, suggesting that in an area so large you couldn’t expect to see them.

I take that as a no, he didn’t see them during that last rainy season, which takes us back almost a year since his last sighting. I suspect he hasn’t heard of anyone else seeing one during that time, either, but I have exhausted the limits of courtesy and the cross is over.

Pedro had promised to show us the Pañacocha oil well, so we stop at some seemingly random farm, which turns out to be his. A narrow trail of mud leads between barbed wire fences that enclose crops—I recognize potatoes and yucca. A dog barks from the other side of the crop fields, from over by the house. Chickens squawk as if we are attacking them and fly a few feet away in great inefficient flurries of feathers. Chickens

are perhaps the best food source to grow out here since they do not require deforestation. There is lots of forage for them. The trick, of course, is in finding where they have laid their eggs.

It's only about five minutes to other far side of the farm, where we come out on a road. An actual hard-packed-nothing-growing-wide-enough-for-big-trucks road.

"I think we should play dumb tourist," I say, but everyone ignores me. I've had good luck with the dumb tourist routine. I just wander in as if I am lost and say hi. Maybe ask for water or a bathroom. They never know what to do. It works better with a cute, young, scantily-clad blonde in tow, but that isn't vital. That's what we did the time we escaped the deluge with Luis ten years ago and took refuge in the oil headquarters camp. We wandered into the camp looking sad and wet—easy enough to do—and the guy let us in because he didn't know what else to do with us. If anything, it seems like Petro Amazonas would be more worried about not making foreigners go missing than Oxy was back in the "bad old days".

Nobody else wants to play it that way, so we just follow the road about 20 yards until it ends at a six-foot chain link fence with a guard shack next to it. We approach, me with my camera up ready to take pictures before the guard can get his gun up and threaten us.

The kid who emerges from the shack looks more afraid of us than we ever could be of him. He stands on his side of the gate staring at us like we are an invading military force. Never mind that we have not so much as a jackknife among the lot of us. I move to a side so I will have a clear shot of the well but with the fence and the kid and our group I

can't really see much. I have to move closer to the fence. He watches nervously, putting his right hand on the butt of the pistol at his waist but making no move to raise it.

The clearing enclosed by the fence is about as long as a football field—American football, that is—and maybe a little wider. We are standing at the 25 yard line. A couple of pre-fabricated metal buildings sit in the end zone to the left. Directly in front of us is a smaller fenced in area—maybe about six feet square—that enclosed the well. It isn't much to look at. It looks more like the hand pump behind our farmhouse when I am a kid than the big derricks in Southern California. It's hard to tell from the distance, but it can't be more than five feet tall. Really unimpressive. Innocuous-looking.

Pedro talks to the boy, who watches us with suspicion. I decide to take the chance before it's gone, step up to the fence and press down on the shutter release. I get a couple of shots of the well before Dave pulls me back.

“He doesn't want us here,” Dave says. “He's very nervous.”

No shit.

“I don't think they can do much to us,” I say. “We're on public land.”

“Still,” he says, “let's go.”

I have all I'm going to get anyway.

## Maps

My map has no dragons. I want to draw some like they did on old maps.

I love my maps. I have boxes of them. I'd rather read a good map than a good book. A map—with a little imagination mixed in—holds the entire story of the land, communities, and people. Where they get their water, how they make their livings, where their food comes from, how they are governed—it's all there on paper. And the best part

is that it isn't spelled out. It's like a puzzle, and you have to put the pieces together to see the whole picture.

Sometimes I think that if I study a map long enough I don't need to visit the place. I can create whole sagas to go with the lakes, towns, and historical sites. But if the picture I come up with isn't exactly how it is on the ground, there are still surprises waiting for me. Author Neil Gaiman wrote, "The more accurate the map, the more it resembles the territory. The most accurate map possible would be the territory, and thus would be perfectly accurate and perfectly useless."

I just have to find places where the maps aren't very accurate.

My Expedition Map fills the front and back of a full sized 36" x 28" sheet, to show the Amazon Region—Southern Colombia, Ecuador, half of Brazil, Venezuela, the Guianas, Suriname, and Bolivia. It's an area bigger than the continental United States. I ordered five different maps of the region before I found one that satisfied me.

I want to draw my Nessie-monster on my map, filling in the big empty spaces of Amazonia, so it will be like the old ones, but every inch is veined with thin blue slivers of rivers that some explorer already traveled. Everything has been measured and drawn. There are no blank places for Nessie-monsters.

There is no room for a dragon to live.

I spread my map on a table in an abandoned nightclub behind Señora Ana's *hostal*. I covered it with clear plastic shelf liner from a dollar store so it wouldn't crease, fade, or dissolve. I dunk it sometimes, just for fun. I mark our route in blue dry-erase curves I can rub off and redraw. I aim green arrows at our main stopping points and write

notes that have meaning only to me, like “The Split,” “tall white strangers” and “fish story.”

Dave and I compare my map with Carvajal’s journals and historian Jose Toribio Medina’s authoritative work on Orellana’s journey. Carvajal isn’t specific enough to let us pinpoint the exact location of the Orellana’s split from Pizarro. Based on travel times Carvajal reported, we think it has to be somewhere near Sani Isla and here. We place the next major stop, the village of Imara, near Rumi Tumi – a tiny settlement a day or two past the Peruvian border by piqui-piqui motor boats.

Our map also shows where the ten oil wells are located, but it’s just a dot labelled “El Eden.” We try the detailed local maps (on a scale of 1:50,000) that we got from the Ecuadorian Military Geographical Institute in Quito. However, these are 10 years old and omit militarily sensitive information, like oil wells. The only other resources are commercial satellite images: Mapquest, Googlemaps, and other similar services. I saved some satellite images of the area before leaving home, even though I didn’t know then what I was looking for. On these we can see the brown lines of small roads and lighter brown blobs of clearings for wells, processing plants and buildings. We can even see little brown rectangles of buildings that may be offices or housing for workers.

Some supervisors with PetroAmazonas have agreed to come by and talk with us, so we gather chairs and pull out our printed maps of the areas. I have read as much as I can about oil drilling techniques, but I am hopelessly unqualified to interview oil experts. Still, it is great that they are willing to talk, and we will to find out what we can from them.

Part of the reason we chose this place is that nobody comes here, and the men can come in unobserved through the back of the restaurant. There is no need to make problems for them with their higher-ups, who might not approve of them talking with us.

Three men enter the room. The leader, who I will call Mike, is a hard, lean man in his late thirties. He has a quick smile and seemingly endless energy. The second man is shorter and perhaps more mellow by nature. The third stands back and doesn't take part in the discussion.

They begin by introducing the PetroAmazonas Pañacocha / El Eden project, mostly repeating what we already know. Mike says that he shares our concerns about the environmental impact of drilling; his degrees are in environmental conservation and engineering.

"We use the latest technologies to operate as safely as possible," Mike says. "PetroAmazonas pays for safety measures that are not required by law because we think they will prevent potential harm to the environment. We inspect our sites more often than is required to be sure that all the sites are following procedures."

"Do you reinject?" I ask.

"Yes, our reinjection wells are one mile deep. The tube is surrounded by five feet of cement."

That sounds right, but what do I know?

PetroAmazonas, Mike explains, is in competition with the old government oil company, PetroEcuador, to be the national oil company. PetroAmazonas won, proving that investing in safe practices can be part of an effective, profitable oil extraction plan. Mike is obviously proud of the results of this competition and feels that his pro-

environmental philosophy has been vindicated. Both Mike and his colleagues seem to be sincere, open and honest. They answer our questions in detail and their explanations seem consistent with what we have heard elsewhere. They reiterate what we have heard about the reinvestment of 15 percent of the profits for social benefit, including the Millennium Village.

I want to ask about the woman Luis mentioned. Jacqueline. In my experience, systems run by humans are rarely perfect. If something went wrong, I want to see how they handle the question. I explain the question to Dave because his Spanish is much better than mine. I don't want to risk misunderstanding on what I know will be a sensitive point.

"We have heard," he asks carefully in Spanish, "about a woman who received no compensation." They exchange puzzled looks.

"Jacqueline," I say.

Mike freezes. He obviously knows the situation. He mumbles something and the other man's eyes widen slightly. For a split second they share a stricken look, and then Mike makes a decision.

"I know the woman you are talking about," he says, facing us directly. He's not lying. "She says she lived here but her relative—a brother, I think—also claimed to live on the same land. We had already reached an agreement with him and paid him. She admitted that she had not been there in many months, while the brother is living there. It is a very complicated situation."

The fact that he knows and is explaining the details suggests to me that he is being straightforward.

“We met with both of them and there is obvious conflict between them. We offered her a smaller sum, in addition to what the brother had received, but she refused. We referred the matter to the community and agreed to abide by their decision. They say the woman did not live in the community and the brother is entitled to the full settlement.”

It sounds likely.

“It is a very unfortunate situation,” Mike says. “But it is not possible to make both of them content.”

I’ve watched a lot of officials try to talk their way out of difficult situations and I’m pretty good at reading them. I believe Mike, and I cannot fault their actions.

We talk a little more but they have been with us for two hours. If they don’t leave soon they will miss the last boat to El Eden, which will raise questions.

I have one last question.

“Is it possible to extract oil without damaging the environment?”

“No. It is not possible,” Mike replies without hesitation. “All we can do is use the best possible technologies and practices, and repair any damage as quickly as we can.”

#### [Rio Napo, Dec 27-31, 1541](#)

On the second day after leaving Pizarro’s Christmas Camp the boat hit a log that “stove in” one of its planks. In danger of sinking, they jumped into the rushing water to drag the boat to shore. They hurried to cut a plank to patch up the boat the best they could. They were underway again soon, but had to be cautious, watching for more submerged obstacles, and they began stopping when it got dark.



Chief Delicola, before he escaped, had described a river that would enter the Napo after “a few days” travel. After travelling a three or four days without finding this river, they began to suspect that they had missed Delicola’s river. The little food they had brought with them was gone, and they were getting weak from hunger. They were concocting a soup from “leather, belts and soles of shoes, cooked with certain herbs.” Some men couldn’t walk. Others ate “very dangerous unknown fruits” and “certain herbs with which they are not familiar, and they are at the point of death, because they are like mad men and did not possess strength.”

“From the great hunger thus endured there died several Spaniards,” the men later said, in an affidavit signed by almost all of them, about those first days on the river, “and those of us who were spared became quite ill from the said suffering, because, as Your Worship knows, it was very great, not only as consequence of not eating but also because of the constant rowing from sun to sun, for this alone was sufficient to kill us.”

As December was drawing to a close without signs of life or nourishment, Orellana called the men together to discuss their options. Orellana seems to have run a very democratic operation. He certainly didn’t hesitate to take command in battle, but his day-to-day operating style was a different matter.

A representative of the King who was supervising Orellana once said, “[Orellana] is so kind-hearted that every time that a person tells him something he believes it and acts on it, and [he fails to see that] so much gentleness at times is of little profit to one.”

The kind-hearted Orellana consulted with his suffering contingent. Should they stop and wait for Pizarro to catch up, although they had not found food for the main force? They hadn’t seen any signs of habitation, so they didn’t hold out much hope of

procuring food on the stretch of river they had just navigated. They couldn't even feed themselves, so what good could they do the larger force?

There didn't seem to be any point in finding Pizarro's expedition if they had nothing to bring back. Orellana and his men agreed that going back upriver against the strong current was impossible in their weakened condition. On the other hand, there was still a chance that they could find food further down the river. It didn't make sense, they decided, to try to go back up the river without food, both to regain their own strength and for Pizarro's force. The only thing to do was to keep going.

## Chapter 6 I Die for My Beliefs

### Nueva Rocafuerte, September 30, 2012

We arrive in Nuevo Rocafuerte, the last town on the Ecuadorian side of the Napo, at about 5:00 on Monday evening. This is the actual passenger ferry, complete with rows of padded seats. Apparently, the big wooden canoe Geran and I took was the “municipal boat.”

Nuevo Rocafuerte is a desolate border town, forgotten by both Peru and Ecuador during the decades of a border dispute that mostly took place far from here. It is a well-organized rectangle three streets deep going back from the river and about 6 to 8 blocks long, running parallel to the river. Only a couple of hundred people live in the town, although the “community” probably includes a thousand or so.

As soon as I get out and climb up the step from the low river to street level the heat slams into me like a physical force. I am dehydrated and tired and hot, hot, hot. We couldn’t find any information about hostels in advance, but Laurence got a recommendation on the boat and there are a couple of signs on the street advertising *hostals*.

I am sweating and thirsty, and I’m approaching migraine territory. It’s one of the joys of old age that nobody tells you about—migraines get worse. My main migraine trigger is dehydration.

We heft our bags and head for the Butterfly Hostal, a place Laurence has heard about.

We walk all three blocks away from the river then turn left and follow a trail that leads away from town. Objectively, it isn’t all that far—maybe half a mile—but it feels

like a season in hell. The hostel looks like an oasis with hammocks, shade and thatched roofs, but they are full.

My skin is clammy. I need water. The *hostal* don't have any purified water, just sugary orange Fanta that makes me feel like I'm choking. I weigh the relative evils of dysentery and migraine.

I decide to risk the dysentery. I fill my two liter bottle from their sink, guzzle most of it, and refill it. The headache doesn't budge, and I feel nauseous. The water is too late. It's also too late for Imitrex; I would just throw it up. The migraine is in command and isn't giving up control.

Turned away from the Butterfly, we hike aimlessly up the street—which borders the back side of town. Everyone is talking. The noise pounds my head and I can't sort out their voices. Everything is out of focus and I know from experience that if I try to make them come back into focus the pain will be so bad I'll throw up.

I remember the hostel I saw from the dock and say, or I think I say, let's go there. I turn blindly back toward the river, not sure if anyone follows. Back on the riverside street somebody sees the sign for the hostel and I stumble behind them up some narrow cement steps. I walk into the first room we are shown, head for the bathroom, and stick my head under lukewarm drizzle from the showerhead, leaving the others to work out the details. This is a classy joint—it has trickling water and towels. I soak a towel and collapse on the bottom bunk holding it over my eyes.

By the time the migraine passes and I escape my bubble of pain, it's Wednesday evening.

We knew going into the trip that transportation in this stretch would be tricky—there is no public transportation on the lower Napo River between Nuevo Rocafuerte and Santa Clothilde. There are only two cargo boats per month from the Peruvian border town of Cabo Pantoja that travel towards Iquitos and one of them is grounded because the water is so low. To make things more difficult, these boats do not operate on a schedule; they leave Iquitos when they are full, go to Pantoja, and leave there when they are full. It might not go at all with the water so low.

Since we were forewarned, Dave asked around in Pañacocha and got a line on a family from Santa Clothilde, half way down the Peruvian Napo, who might be able to take us that far. From there we could get a public boat. After days of negotiations by phone calls made from the one spot in town that got cell reception when the weather is right, Dave made a deal with a guy named Reynaldo who will take us to Santa Clothilde in his motorized canoe for \$250.

The 50-year-old Don Reynaldo is not only a veteran of this stretch of the river, but I'm pretty sure that he is a reincarnation of Orellana. First off, he also has just one eye. By the time Francisco de Orellana became the Governor of La Culata, he is 29 years old and missing an eye. Nobody knows what happened to his eye. It could have happened in any of the dozens of battles Orellana fought on behalf of his Pizarro cousins.

Whatever "it" is that happened, nobody wrote "it" down. One "historian" of the time attributed the injury to a battle in Peru, but we'll never know the details of how he lost that eye. We only know that it was gone by the time he joined Pizarro's expedition. The more remarkable thing would be for a Conquistador not to have been battle-scarred.

Carvajal never mentioned it, even when he reported losing his own eye in the battle with the Amazons.

We might not even know Orellana had lost an eye if we didn't have portraits. Contemporaneous portraits of Francisco de Orellana show him with a patch over his left eye. When Spain issued a stamp honoring him they thoughtfully restored him to his original condition, but the old portraits survive to tell the real tale.

There is no mystery about Don Reynaldo's eye—he had a common infection as a child that left his eye clouded and useless. That isn't his only resemblance to Francisco de Orellana—he is lean and taller than most people from the area. His face is thin, with dark, weathered skin that testifies to years of hard work in bruising conditions. We're ready to follow him anywhere.

However, a couple of tourists—a Chilean and a Dutch guy—have just arrived at our *hostal* from Iquitos by boat. They are selling their setup, a canoe with motor, camping kitchen, and even hammocks hanging from the frame of the canopy. We decide to buy it and take it down the river ourselves, completely changing our plans. Dave suggests that we take it on a trial run up to a place he knows that is supposed to have incredible wildlife. The guys seem excited about visiting the lake. The idea is that, if everything checks out okay, we will then buy the entire rig for \$800.

In the morning, during the three hours when we have power and water, I'm enjoying a warmish shower when I hear the guys with the boat talking in the room next to me.

"I like those guys," the one says, "and I think that what they're doing is really cool. But I've had it. I'm sick of this place. I just want to sell this stuff and go."

“I hear you,” the other guy says. “Whatever you want to do is fine with me.”

“I mean I really like these guys,” the first repeats. “But I’m sick of sleeping in hammocks and sick of the boat and I’d rather just sell and get out of this hellhole.”

It’s clear that the decision is made by the time I get downstairs. The guys have sold the boat to a group of four guys with motorcycles, who didn’t request a test run.

Dave goes back to Don Reynaldo, only to discover that he has also sold his boat, to the same guys. On Wednesday morning it looks like we might be in Nueva Rocafuerte for a while. There are other boats available, but none that looks like it would make it across the border, much less down the river.

Don Reynaldo knows a guy who is building a boat, which will be finished in a week or so, and Dave goes to check it out. While Dave is working on the boat situation, Laurence and I track down Father Jose Miguel Goldaraz, a missionary Dave met on the boat from Pañacocha, who has lived in the area for more than 40 years.

“People come in here for a year or two—these scientists and anthropologists, and then they think they know the local culture,” Father Jose Miguel Goldaraz says. Laurence and I are sitting in the library of the mission on the edge of town, surrounded by copies of Father Jose Miguel’s three volumes on the Napo Runa—People of the Napo, as the local Kichwa refer to themselves.

“You can’t know a place or people in a year or two. You have to live here with the people. I am teaching people whose parents are my students. Their grandparents are among my first students when I came here 40 years ago. These families know me. They trust me. They are honest with me. That is what it takes to truly understand how the local people

think and feel about things, why they behave the way they do. These anthropologists don't know what they're talking about but they write books and people believe them.”

He shakes his head at the silliness of it. There is no anger in Father Miguel Jose, or at least none that I can see.

Well, maybe a little when he talks about the school. He founded the mission school decades ago when Ecuador couldn't be bothered with the people living way out here in the shadow of the Peruvian Army. His mission built the hospital and brought the nuns who taught students—children and adults—and nursed the sick.

“Now the government comes in and takes over,” he says. I'm not sure how to take this. It seems like some government support would be welcome. The government school, as far on the other side of town as possible, now teaches grades K through six at the Francisco de Orellana Elementary school. The school uniform consists of T-shirts with pictures of Orellana on them. I'm trying to figure out how to get one for myself.

Father Jose Miguel reminds me of my father, both in looks and in how and what he says. Father Miguel says that, of course, the place has completely changed him, including changing his religious beliefs. How could it not? I wonder how my father would have been different if he had come here as a missionary 40 years ago.

Of course, I would have been 13 years old. How would it have changed me?

When I was seven, our family drove to Alaska in a truck converted into a home on wheels. I stood under a tree in a small Inuit village and watched three kids play a game that involved kicking and throwing a ball. Once in a while one kid dropped out and another joined the game. I wondered where those kids lived, what they ate for breakfast, how they stayed warm in the winter, if they had to go to church.



“Why don’t you go over there?” Mom suggested. “I bet they would show you how to play,” she says.

I shook my head. I didn’t want to play with them; I wanted to be them. If I am one of them, would I still be me, or would I laugh as much as they are laughing? Would I fall right to sleep at night instead of lying awake with my mind racing? Would I swear like some of the kids at school? Would I get to watch TV and be one of the cool kids? Or would I just be plain old me?

Who would I have been if I had grown up here in Nueva Rocafuerte? A man named Randy Borman grew up with Luis’ old Cofan community as a missionaries’ kid. Like Luis, he didn’t adapt to life in the United States and returned to the jungle. When the community is contaminated and they had to leave, he led a group deeper into the forest, where he set in motion a number of sustainable living initiatives, including a community tourism project. He is the acknowledged leader of the community, although he is born American.

I think that is how I would have been. Mom said that I never adjusted to the United States after the Army sent me to Korea. She was right. The square of American culture – job, spouse, kids and house – doesn’t fit my trapezoidal personality well.

When Father Jose Miguel came here as a young man, he didn’t know that his mission would be to save the Kichwa and Waorani cultures. The Waorani, in particular, have had a tumultuous recent history. They are fierce warriors who are more vigorous than the Kichwa in resisting contact with outsiders. They live in nomadic groups of 20 to 30, generally members of an extended family, and these “tribes” have always fought. Sometimes the only contact between tribes is during raids in which they claim preferred hunting grounds and capture women, a necessity for avoiding inbreeding.

They are perhaps most famous for spearing a group of five evangelical missionaries in the 1950's. The missionaries had made initial contact by dropping gifts from their small aircraft. In follow-up visits they landed and began getting to know some of the more adventurous members of the clan, even taking them for rides in the light plane. Then, on a routine visit, the community turned on them and speared them all to death. Apparently, they had the bad luck of arriving in the midst of discussions about the appropriate retribution for the murder of a Waorani man. Waorani tradition required another death to avenge the deceased, and the missionaries provided a convenient sacrifice.

Incidents like this reinforced the image of the Waorani as murderous savages. In fact, even today they are often referred to as the Auca, the Kichwa word for savages. Over the years, evangelical missionaries gained the respect of some branches of Waorani, providing refuge and aid as the natives fled oil company incursions in the 1950's and 60s, and many of these Waorani converted to Christianity. Throughout the 70's and 80's, oil companies proved more of a threat, forcing a number of Waorani sub-tribes to centralize around the mission headquarters.

Other Waorani moved deeper into forest, into the Yasuní Reserve to avoid contact. At least four uncontacted tribes are known to be living in the area, including the Tagaeri and the Taromenane. The only information available about these tribes comes from other Waorani who occasionally meet them in the jungle. These tribes struggle to avoid outside interference in the face of oil exploration, illegal logging, and the colonists that inevitably follow wherever roads are built.

Father Jose Miguel's friend, Bishop Alejandro Labaka, also dedicated his life to defending indigenous rights. In 1987, he noticed Waorani huts south of the Rio Napo, in an

area on the verge of being exploited for oil. Hoping to save them from extermination by the *petroleros*, Bishop Labaka and a nun, Sister Ines Arango, tried to contact the Waorani tribespeople on 21 July 1987.

The night before they left, Father Jose Miguel and Labaka discussed the dangers of confronting the Waorani.

Labaka says, “If I die, I die for my beliefs. You will just have to come and search for my body.”

Father Jose Miguel did just that. When Bishop Labaka and Sister Ines did not return, he went looking and found their decaying bodies outside one of the Waorani huts, pierced with spears. They had apparently been mistaken for oil workers.

I used to think that I would die dramatically. Heroically. Maybe that was what motivated me to enlist in the Army. At the very least, I should get a tragic fall or plane crash. A sacrifice for a noble cause, like Labaka’s, would be ideal. But no such luck. I’m going to end up fading away in a nursing home somewhere, alone.

When I was about 35, my grandmother asked me if I was planning to have kids, reminding me that about the “ticking clock.” I had never once doubted my decision not to have children. My sisters generously provided a niece and a batch of nephews, and that was ideal. I like kids who come with mothers attached. When they get tired or sick, you just hand them back.

“I don’t know what I would do without my children,” Grandma said. “They take such good care of me.”

I had never thought of children as old age insurance. For the first time I wondered what would happen to me if I couldn’t take care of myself.

As old age gets closer, in only looks more dismal.

The Waorani tribes that have resisted contact with outsiders are on the brink of extinction. President Correa declared the area just west of here, including part of Yasuni, an “intangible zone” in order to protect Taromenane and Tagaeri, the two known surviving Waorani tribes as of 2008. Despite the creation of the intangible zone, the Tagaeri are thought to be extinct now, leaving the Taromenane as the only surviving uncontacted Waorani.

Violence among Waorani tribes continues today. Some raids may be deliberately instigated by illegal loggers or oil company associates who benefit in two ways: fewer residents means less opposition and conflict among Waorani lends credence to the portrayal of them as violent savages who cannot be reasoned with.

A few months after we left, some Taromenane killed a Waorani couple. Their stated reason was that the man had failed stop the military and oil company helicopters and planes from making noise over Taromenane land, an obviously ridiculous demand. In retaliation, a group of about 15 Waorani raided a Taromenane village, killing between 20 and 30 men, women and children. How many were killed is unclear, but the only survivors were two little girls the Waorani took prisoner. There may be one other Taromenane village, or the Taromenane tribe may be effectively extinct now.

A colleague of Father Miguel Jose wrote a 200+ page book about the incident, including many original documents relating to the events and photos taken by the killers on their cell phone cameras. According to this report, the tribe of the two initial victims requested compensation in lieu of revenge killings. The government refused, describing

the community's request as "blackmail". They then made no attempt to stop the Waorani men from buying bullets in preparation for the retaliatory attack.

Authorities have rescued one of the kidnapped girls and some Waorani not involved with the massacre are caring for the other. They took her to a medical clinic, which confirmed that she is in good health. Seven of the 15 suspects have been arrested and charged with "genocide against peoples in voluntary isolation."

Some people say that President Correa is the one guilty of genocide or "ethnocide." Stress caused by oil exploration underlies much of the conflict between these tribes. As more Waorani are pushed deeper into the forest, their contact with each other and competition for space increases. Critics also allege that when the intangible zone became an inconvenience to Correa's wishes to exploit oil, his aides redrew the maps to make more territory available.

Father Jose Miguel continues to intervene where he can on behalf of the local residents. Although Pañacocha is outside his territory, he has studied the Millennium Village project extensively. He pulls out the government documents, complete with maps and diagrams of the proposed development.

He says that Millennium Villages are an idea the United Nations used in Africa. The true purpose of it, he says, is to get the native people off their land so Correa can reclaim it.

"I give the people here some basic rules to live by," he says. "The first one is, 'never leave your land.'" He ticks them off on his fingers. "Never permit individual ownership of land. Never sign anything. Historically, when indigenous people leave their

land, they almost always lose it. If they want to maintain their culture and keep their land, they cannot move into towns. This is what the Millennium Village does—it makes them move into town.”

Father Miguel also points out that all the houses are one bedroom. He suggests that this is an attempt to limit family sizes. I doubt that people are going to suddenly take up contraception; they are accustomed to crowding lots of people into small houses. However, it probably will break up extended families, moving new generations into their own homes, as happened in the United States when we became more mobile and started relocating for jobs.

It occurs to me that I should have wondered why Correa came up with the name “millennium” village for a project is proposed well into the millennium. I just accepted the otherwise inappropriate name, as everyone else apparently did.

Everyone pitches in to sand and paint the new boat. We sand and pound and paint at the boat owner’s workshop/living room, although Dave is limited to some one-legged nail hammering. I use the royal we, since I actually do none of the work as I nurse a migraine in my darkened room at the *hostal*. Four days, many planks and thousands of nails later, the boat is finally ready. They don’t have tar to fill the gaps between the boards, so they just stuff in pieces of cardboard. The boat is done Thursday night and is christened the *Fiona*. We are supposed to leave on Friday, but they decide they want like to give the final coat more time to cure, so it becomes Saturday.

Our one-eyed boat pilot, Don Reynaldo, is going to take us as far as Santa Clothilde, a three day trip. In his 50s, Don Reynaldo is strong and fit after a lifetime of

hard work. Of course, his bad left eye is an important qualifying characteristic on our mission to follow the one-eyed conquistador, Francisco de Orellana. We don't yet have evidence to support our reincarnation theory, but we're working on it.

It's time to face the frontier.

Don Reynaldo and the *Fiona* will take us away at 6:00AM.

## Chapter 7 The Frontier

### Ecuador-Peru Border, October 5, 2012

If you look at a satellite map of the Amazon you will see the brown line of the River snaking from West to East. Zoom in closer and tributaries—the brown Putumayo, Black Rio Negro, and the deep blue of the Tapajos—emerge. Get close enough and you might see the intricate web of waterways and bruises of lakes that give the region the name “The Flooded Forest.” You might even spot the Aguarico River sliding into the Napo along the stretch that runs oddly straight before the river suddenly hangs a right toward Peru and the Amazon River.

What you will not see is the border that divides Peru and Ecuador along that straight bit. The satellite will never show you the large area, a territory almost as big as Ecuador itself, where Peruvian and Ecuadorian soldiers have been shooting at each other sporadically for 150 years.

When I lived in Buffalo, NY, a wrong turn would put me on the Peace Bridge to Canada. They call it the “Niagara Frontier,” which always struck me funny because it seemed to me like a border, not a frontier.

The frontier was where Daniel Boone lived.

The border between Ecuador to Peru on the Napo River is a frontier.

Ten years ago, I wanted to go down the Napo to Iquitos, Peru, but it didn't take long to realize that entering Peru here was an iffy proposition. Neither country had immigration officials here, so it was impossible to get exit and entry stamps. Travelers had to get their exit stamps from Ecuador before leaving Coca and could not get a Peruvian entry stamp until Iquitos. Officials in Iquitos were naturally suspicious of



people claiming to have crossed on the Napo. Of the many routes to Iquitos, Rocafuerte was the least likely point of entry. The traveler had more likely avoided immigration in order to smuggle goods or carry drugs.

Frontiers are inherently dodgy.

In the absence of a border crossing, there was little demand for public transportation. This was why the man in Coca so strongly encouraged Geran and me to take the “fast” boat to Iquitos—because he knew it might be our only opportunity.

Until 1998, the area down the Napo from here to the Amazon was the subject of a sometimes violent dispute between Ecuador and Peru.

After Orellana went down the Amazon in 1542 his entire route became part of Quito. A narrow 4000 mile strip across the continent. A long skinny province of Peru. All the territory the Pizarro brothers tore through was Peru then. Later, when Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil and Bolivia were carved out, the border through this inaccessible area between the Napo, Putumayo and Amazon Rivers was never settled. Shooting wars broke out periodically without resolving the problem.

In 1942, 400 years after Orellana claimed this land for Spain, the Protocol of Peace, Friendship, and Boundaries—generally known as the Rio Protocol—supposedly ended ongoing tension by awarding the disputed territory to Peru. I found a tattered yellowing copy of the 1942 Rio Protocol in a glass case in the Iquitos, Peru library. The librarian cheerfully pulled it out and dropped it on a table. No gloves. No rules. Just surprise that anybody would want to see this old thing. The Protocol included eight brittle 11” x 17” versions of a map with faded red, blue, green and yellow lines slithering along

different proposed borders between Ecuador and Peru. Everyone except Ecuador agreed on the yellow line, which awarded the entire area in dispute—half of Ecuador—to Peru.

Ecuador was never content with the Rio Protocol and later claimed to have signed under duress. Shooting broke out in 1981 and again in 1995. Indigenous people caught in the crossfire were pillaged for food and forced to fight. Most of the open hostilities happened southwest of here, in an area that we will not pass through, but the entire region existed in an uncertain state and was neglected by both the Ecuadorian and Peruvian governments.

In 1998, after a bloody war that it appeared to win, Ecuador suddenly acquiesced and gave up the entire disputed area, ending the longest-running international armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere.

“Didn’t this used to be Ecuador?” I ask one man in Pantoja. It is the most innocent way I can think of to raise the subject.

“Yes,” he says. He is probably about my age, around 50 years old, maybe born around 1960, well after the Rio Protocol. “I have been Ecuadorian all my life,” he says. He pauses and shakes his head. “But now they say this is Peru.” I notice that he does not say that he is Peruvian, just that this place is now Peru. I wonder if it makes any difference here.

Don Reynaldo is from this stretch of uncertain nationality. One of Geran’s little boys in Pañacocha couldn’t go to school because he was an illegal immigrant. Were his parents born Ecuadorian, only to find themselves cut off from their country?

If Canada were to claim upstate New York would I retroactively become Canadian? Would I need a US visa to stay in Tennessee, where I live now?

The border between Ecuador and Peru was established in 1999 along the yellow line. Although the *frontera* at Nuevo Rocafuerte-Pantoja legally opened, when I went to Ecuador in 2001, the yellow line across the Rio Napo was still hard and solid and politically uncrossable. A phantom barrier that any piqui-piqui canoe could putter across, but with nobody to stamp a passport.

Immigration services have now been regularized, to the extent that anything is at a remote border crossing is ever “regular.” Both countries have authorized military officials, who may never leave their respective border towns, to stamp passports for anyone who may wander this way. There is no customs booth, gate, or even a prominently displayed flag to tell you the one country has ended and another has begun. Without a map you wouldn’t guess that an invisible line ran through here.

I have no desire to become acquainted with the Ecuadorian or Peruvian criminal justice systems so I approach the immigration situation cautiously.

The *Fiona* has to be cleared by harbormasters on both sides of the border and, being new, it has no papers. Don Reynaldo has a plan for this. He will say it is a Peruvian boat and they just brought it over here on a test run. Since we are going to Peru anyway, it won’t need papers to “stay” in Peru. We hope they know what they are doing.

We have a few other problems: the immigration office is closed on Saturday morning when we want to leave. We hope the immigration guy will give us our stamps on Friday. Otherwise, we’ll be enjoying a weekend in Nueva Rocafuerte. We have no contraband, drugs or weapons, but we are not pure. Oswaldo has never been out of Ecuador and does not have documents. He was told he could get an Andean card, which Peru recognizes in lieu of a passport, at the border.

Lastly, I am an illegal immigrant. My visa expired more than a month ago. Fortunately, overstaying a visa here is not considered proof of terrorist intentions, as it seems to be in the States these days. Don Reynaldo says none of this will be a problem, but one guy holds a stamp with absolute power. A one-man office is a dictatorship.

We go to the Ecuadorian immigration building, an undistinguishable hut around the corner from the dock, on Friday afternoon. It looks like all the others on the inside, too—one big open room with a high thatched roof and cross-beams for hanging hammocks. Someone here is living in style, though—two welded metal beds with foam pads sit against the far wall.

When we troop in, a lone military officer sits at a battered wood desk to the right, studying some papers.

“We’re planning to leave here tomorrow morning,” Dave says after introducing himself. We have been in town for five days, so the guy has almost certainly heard about us. “We understand that we need to get our exit stamps now in case you aren’t available when we go.”

The officer silently holds out his hand.

Laurence hands over her perfectly legal passport. She is properly documented and has a French passport, which is much less likely to draw questions than my American one. Maybe mine will get caught in the chaos and he won’t notice the dates.

“I have a resident visa,” she says, indicating the stamped page.

He squints at the handwritten markings that indicate the type, beginning date and ending date of the visa. He carefully checks the data on the first page and compares the

picture to Laurence, then copies it all into a ledger. Then he leafs through to find a blank page. He has not spoken.

We all smile a lot and Dave makes small talk with a second man who has appeared. This man gives us papers to fill out like the ones you get on the airplane before landing. I make a fuss of doing mine while the officer stamps Laurence's passport and Jon hands his over. In the background Dave is explaining Oswaldo's situation and they produce another form.

It's my turn. I hand over my passport opened to the front page with my picture. The man inspects it, writes more stuff in his book, and then flips through looking for my entrance stamp. He finds the right page, looks at it and, without the slightest hesitation, stamps the passport.

Borders are funny that way.

The boat is ready, we have our passports stamped and we are all set to embark, when Don Reynaldo expresses doubts about getting permission from the harbor master to set off in an unregistered boat. He suggests keeping the harbor master happy by plying him with beer and cigarettes at the local karaoke bar. Dave stumbles back to the hotel at about 3AM to report that the harbor master now likes us.

### [Aguarico River, January 1 or 2, 1542](#)

Nobody noticed the pivotal moment of Francisco de Orellana's life. The moment when he deviated from his deal with Pizarro, the moment when his journey became one of survival, the moment he became the most faithless of men, is not marked by anything Orellana did, but by what he did not do.

He did not go up the Aguarico River.

Orellana had told Pizarro he would find food and return to meet back up with Pizarro and the main expeditionary force on the Napo. He said that Pizarro was not supposed to worry if he did not return, and just catch up with him. If that was the deal, then Orellana's decision to continue down the river made perfect sense.

However, Pizarro insisted that he had told Orellana to return within 12 days. When Orellana's 12 days had passed, an angry Pizarro started down the Napo after him. After a few slow, hard days of whacking their way down the shoreline, the expeditionary force came to a large swampy area that is going to be very difficult to cross with the horses, which did not swim well.

Rather than take the entire expedition, Pizarro sent a team of scouts in canoes to look for Delicola's river and Orellana. They returned after 15 days having found neither. Pizarro then sent a second group. This group went farther down the river and reached the Aguarico, which looked to them like the river Delicola had described. They went up that river and, just as Delicola had says, they found mile after mile of yucca growing in untended fields surrounding abandoned villages.

The men were so hungry they fell down, digging the yucca from the ground with their hands and ate it raw with hunks of dirt still sticking to it. What they didn't know was that uncooked yucca has cyanide in it. Some yucca is deadly, while some, called "sweet yucca," is only mildly toxic. Some of them suffered for their gluttony, becoming very sick or even dying.

Canoes loaded with yucca, the scout team returned down the Aguarico and back up the Napo to reunite with Pizarro's force, as Orellana was supposed to have done. After

an arduous two weeks of hauling men and horses across the marsh, down the shore of the Napo to the Aguarico, across the deep, swift Aguarico, and up to the yucca farm, Pizarro and his survivors finally reached the food they had dreamed of for so long.

By then, Pizarro was certain that Orellana was gone and not coming back. His party could have drowned or been killed by natives, although that seemed unlikely given the absence of residents in the area. Or, as Pizarro is becoming increasingly certain, Orellana might have simply abandoned Pizarro, taking off with the boat and equipment. Some “historians” later reported stated that they saw signs that Orellana had camped at the junction of the river. Others also claimed that Orellana abandoned Carvajal and another man at the junction, leaving them to die because they had opposed the decision to continue down the river. Pizarro himself did not include either of these allegations in his report.

After resting for a while, Pizarro and the survivors of his party went up the Aguarico and overland back to Quito. A year after leaving amid such pomp, they stumbled back into Quito, naked and humiliated.

Pizarro didn't hesitate to let the King know exactly who was responsible for the failure of his mission.

“Paying no heed to what he owed to the service of Your Majesty and to what it is his duty to do . . .” he wrote, “he went down the river without leaving any arrangements for the aid of those who are to follow. . .he thus [displayed] toward the whole expeditionary force the greatest cruelty that ever faithless men have shown.”

By the time Orellana and his crew made it to the Atlantic Ocean, his name had become firmly associated with the word "traitor."

## Ecuador-Peru Border, October 5, 2012

We are between countries, watching for the Aguarico.

At this point, the river is the national border. To our right, the south, is Peru. To our left, the north, is Ecuador. I guess if we stay right smack dab in the middle of the river we are straddling the invisible line, just like I straddled the invisible Equator outside Quito.

The Aguarico should join the Napo from the left near Pantoja, the town on the Peruvian side of the border. On our map, the Aguarico looks to be nearly as big as the Napo at this point, so it seems like it shouldn't be hard to spot. The river widens and narrows as Don Reynaldo weaves among the islands and sandbars. It is impossible to tell what is shore and what is just another island.

About the time we think we have missed the Aguarico, Don Reynaldo indicates a wide spot off to our left.

"Rio Aguarico," he calls over his shoulder from the front of the boat. It looks like another wide spot. Dave and I trade skeptical looks.

"Where?" Dave asks.

Don Reynaldo points toward the wide spot, which we have now passed. I look back to see that a river is flowing into the Napo at a steep angle, making a "Y." The Napo makes up the top left branch and stem of the "Y" and the Aguarico is the top right branch. With islands and trees blocking the view, it was impossible to see the river until we were past it. Even then, we wouldn't have identified it as a river.

I'm glad my reputation doesn't depend on finding the Aguarico.



With it behind us I can see that it is a waterway, although I still couldn't tell if it is another river or just another of the dozens of places where the Napo is split by islands. Both rivers are low now in the dry season. What would they look like in rainy season, as it was when Orellana came through? Also, rivers change so much that we can have only a vague idea of what these might have looked like 500 years ago. The angle may have been entirely different. On the other hand, Pizarro's first scouts missed it, so it must not have been all that easy to see.

Carvajal listed the rivers they passed as they went down the Napo—the Canela, Yuturi and Tiputini—but did not mention the Aguarico. It seems certain that he would have mentioned it if they had seen it.

As the Aguarico fades from view, Don Reynaldo is pulling into the Peruvian border town of Pantoja, another row of nondescript wood buildings lining another dirt road.

We are between countries, having left Ecuador but not yet entered Peru. If I have a problem entering Peru, I am stranded. Under Ecuadorian law, I can't reenter the country until 12 months after I left. One guy lived in the Paris airport for 18 years because France refused to let him enter. That long stretch of border between Rocafuerte and Pantoja could be my new home. I have my hammock and water purifier. What more do I really need?

The harbormaster greets us as we pile out of the *Fiona*. He writes our names, nationalities, and passport numbers on his clipboard. Other than the guys we met in Nuevo Rocafuerte, nobody has been through here in almost two weeks.

“*Estampa?*” I ask as he hands my passport back.

With a grunt, he waves his hand off to his right.

Once, some friends and I crossed from Tibet to Nepal, a crossing rarely made by independent travelers. My Chinese-speaking travelling companions were trying to get the obligatory bribe reduced when one of them went into a seizure, fell on the stove, and knocked a big pot of soup all over four Chinese Army guards. The poor fellow in charge, no doubt picturing the international incident he would trigger if he ended up with a dead American on his hands, threw our passports into the Jeep after us and sent us on our way.

We had to hike a few miles down a mountain trail to get to the Nepali side of the border. Unfortunately, in our rush to leave Chinese Tibet, we failed to take into account the time difference between the two countries, and arrived in Nepal after the border had “closed” for the night. That is, an arm like the ones blocking railroad tracks had been pulled down over the road. We couldn’t return to China if we wanted to, which we didn’t. If Nepal didn’t let us in we were screwed.

We ducked under the arm and wandered down the dirt track between two rows of slapped-together wooden structures until we saw a man leaving a hut.

“You’re just arriving?” the man asked. “You need the consul. He is just finishing dinner.”

Sure enough, about five minutes later the consul came out with a big welcoming grin. “You have arrived from China!” he exclaimed, as if we didn’t know. We waited for him to demand passports or scold us for arriving late, but he just went on, “Welcome to Nepal! You must be happy to be here, finally.”

I doubt that the Peruvian authorities will be as welcoming as the Nepali consul was. Laurence and I trek up the road until it ends at the military base. Is this where they detain people that they won't let into Peru? There is no gate and certainly nothing that looks like an immigration office. Off to our right are a couple of cement block buildings that look like a community center.

"I don't think that's it." Laurence says. We stand uncertainly for a minute.

"Do you think we missed it?" I ask. All we passed were a couple of stores.

We wander over to the one building outside the military base. There is no sign and the door is locked. We look in to see wide steps leading up to a hallway. It reminds me of the first grade. Nobody is around. We walk around the building, but there is no other entrance. As we are about to head back down the hill a man coming up yells to us.

"*Por aca!*" he says, waving his hand towards the abandoned building. *That way.*

"*No hay nadie,*" I respond. There isn't anybody there.

"*Si, hay,*" he insists.

We go back.

"Hello," we call out in Spanish. "Is anybody here? We are looking for immigration." Eventually a fellow in uniform comes to the door.

"I am closed," he says, "but come in. I will help you."

He stamps our passports without looking at them.

I am legal again.

Transportation isn't our only challenge on this leg of the trip. There are no boats because nobody goes this way. That means no hotels, restaurants, toilets, or any other

facilities. We figure we can just hang the extra sheets of plastic over our hammocks but Reynaldo says no, that's not how it's done. We will stay in people's houses. He insists that this is what we are supposed to do. When we rented a boat and crew we got license to travel like locals.

The lack of transportation works both ways—while we can't catch a boat down the river, neither can local residents get to a market to buy goods. We can take things they cannot get in exchange for space under their roofs.

I'd rather take my chances on the beach, but our fearless leader travels this route all the time, so we do as we're told. In Pantoja we buy cooking oil and sugar, garlic and rice—things that *ribereños* cannot produce for themselves. And *aguardiente*, the local moonshine, of course. This is the rent we will offer our startled hosts.

At about 11:00, we and the *Fiona* have successfully left Ecuador and entered Peru. We are nine people—my expedition of five, Don Reynaldo and his grandson, Ricardo, and two motormen, Dracington and Jose.

Our little canoe, the *Fiona*, sits at river level, the bottom just a couple of feet below the surface and the sides poking up about a foot above. My head is on a level with the white cranes that perch on driftwood along the banks.

The lower Rio Napo, now part of Peru, will lead us to the Amazon River near the city of Iquitos. One legacy of the border dispute is that this area has missed the development that has enveloped the stretch we just came through. This short part of our trip represents the only part that is untouched by the Western world. There will be no high schools, medical clinics, or “Millennium Cities” here. Also missing are the oil companies and pipelines. However, the river never recognized the national boundary and

has been carrying spilled oil across the border into the communities below for more than 30 years.

Not that the people here are "uncontacted," like the Taromenane. They just have no electricity for television and no contact with tourists, so they have maintained a relatively simple, traditional lifestyle.

We are alone on the river. The cement trucks and bulldozers don't cross the invisible line and the few people who live in the area are not out in their paddle canoes. We settle into our mobile home, each of us finding comfortable spots. Dave sits on one of the wood benches, his bad foot awkwardly propped on the side of the canoe. I pull the blue plastic over the backpacks and sacks of food behind me. Putting my backpack upright directly behind me as a cushion, I have a reasonably comfortable seat. I curl up in my cozy cubby for a day on the river.

The only sound is the quiet thrum of the outboard motor and occasional conversation muffled by the breeze and humidity.

The sun has burned itself out, leaving behind a dismal gray drizzle that seems like it will last forever. Don Reynaldo perches on the front of the canoe watching for ripples in the water that will signal underwater obstacles, while Jose and Dracington manage the outboard motor in the back.

*Fiona's* floor is not as waterproof as the top. The newspaper and cardboard they stuffed between the planks in the floor of the canoe are a poor substitute for tar. The canoe is leaking. The guys calmly and steadily bail water out of the back. The pallets lining the floor are *Fiona's* saving grace, and we try to keep things from falling through

the gaps of the pallets. The rain isn't hard enough to blow into the canoe, so we stay mostly dry on top of the pallets.

The motor hums a lullaby, with flutters of birds soaring over it. I drift between dreaming and lying awake, letting the greens on the river banks float by without seeing them. Tiny circles jumping out from each raindrop tapping the water. Below water level on the floor of the canoe, looking up at mud banks beyond the brown water, I can see only a sliver of the gray sky over the trees.

This rain is a whole different breed from the rain I knew at home. It would be insulted to be compared with that miserable stuff we hurried through as we ran to the bus, heads down to protect our faces. This rain is soft and warm. I like to imagine that it is not carrying soot, chemicals or nuclear fallout.

The low drone of the motor becomes a steady backdrop to our day, like the night crickets at home. A steady, solid foundation to build a life on. When I was a kid and we traveled, the engine sang this kind of lullaby to me. I slept with the reliable thrumming under my ear, and Mom and Dad's voices over it discussing routes and driving times and all the things that I didn't have to worry about because I knew that when we got somewhere, a mountaintop or a rest area with a playground or a welcome center with a big stuffed walrus, an adventure would be waiting. All I had to do is be. Exist. See and hear and feel the moist air blowing across my skin.

With Don Reynaldo in command I can imagine for this moment, this day, that I again have no responsibilities.

The shoreline drifts by, always the same and always different.

We don't meet anyone. Not even little paddle canoes. Every couple of hours or so there is a sign of life in the form of a hut along the bank and, once, a community comes into sight—a cluster of five or six huts in shouting distance of each other and a square cement block schoolhouse. After that, the population tapers off again for a couple of hours more.

I'm content to doze to the sound of the engine.

I should take this chance to update my journal with the Aguarico, border crossing and Pantoja. I ponder the morning's events. I won't forget any of this. Especially now that I have thought about it. The way I remember it right now is how it will be fixed in my memory as much as if I had spoken or written it. It's strange how putting something into words makes it real.

When I open my eyes, the shore keeps up its steady pace. It looks like the same thing over and over—the same greens on green. White herons stand and sit on submerged trees along the shore. I should get some pictures, but I don't move. Maybe Laurence will do it.

At home I always choose high-stress jobs, the kind you don't leave at the office. I mentally sift through regulations as I sit in traffic, looking for the answer to a client's problem. I edit memos in front of C-SPAN at night. I keep the TV or music on for background noise. When I worked from home for a while the silence became oppressive. I wished for the voices and ringing phones of the office, where I always kept the door open so I would know what I am missing.

But here on the river I don't want voices to interrupt my isolation. I don't want to know that that there is a macaw overhead, which would suggest that I should crawl up front to look.

I could look at Carvajal's journal to see what they saw on the river, but that would require sitting up. Besides, I know what they saw. For just this one stretch, which has missed the "progress" of the last two centuries, Orellana saw the same thing we are seeing—green on green on green against the tea-brown of the river.

I bet it looked quite different to them, though, as their stomachs cramped with hunger and they prayed for a village that might offer food. They had been on the river for a week without seeing anyone. They had had enough of isolation. Their prospects weren't promising. When they slept at night, always with guards patrolling, my comforting background noise probably sounded ominous.

I've never felt that kind of hunger, which is kind of ironic, considering that I've made a career of fighting hunger in the United States. I don't want to actually be hungry but it seems like I should know how it feels. I could try not eating for a couple of days. "Fasting," they called it in my church when I was a kid. It is supposed to help you pray, but I never understood that. It seems like all you'd be thinking about would be ice cream. Ben and Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk, the only food I missed when I lived in Korea.

I don't even miss that now. I don't miss computers or TV. I don't want voices to demand my attention. I open my eyes periodically and feel like I've done my touristic duty.



After a while—I don't know how long—I realize that I need to pee. I concentrate on the feeling of pressure in my bladder. I've never thought about how it feels. It isn't like the pressure of a headache; it's more like pressing lightly on a bruise. A steady discomfort, but not quite pain. It isn't bad yet, but I can't hold it as long as I used to. I wonder when we're stopping for lunch.

Finally, I concede the necessity and climb over Jon, who is reading a book, to kneel behind Dave's bench.

"Are we stopping soon?" I ask. "I need to pee."

"So do I," Laurence turns around to say. "We're stopping for lunch soon so we have to wait."

I heard that the bladder will eventually expand a little and that's why the urge comes and goes. I start rooting for my bladder. Stretch, bladder, stretch.

"How soon is soon?"

"An hour," she says. "Maybe half an hour? Don Reynaldo says soon."

Easy for him. He can pee over the edge of the boat.

They say you shouldn't do that because there is a little critter called a candiru living in the water. It will swim up the warm stream right into the urethra and get stuck there. It has little spines that keep it from sliding back out. It supposedly feeds on the blood it draws and will go on to eat the victims entire innards.

Some people say it won't really do that but I believe it, partly because Luis told me and I believe everything Luis says. Also, I once saw a documentary showing one of these creatures that had been cut out of a man's penis. And it just seems like the kind of

thing you would find in the Amazon—creepy and devious and terrifying. True or not, you won't catch me peeing in the river.

Having broken my meditative state, I stay by Dave's bench for a while and watch the water ripple away from the disruption of the boat. It is constant and steady until it hits a barrier, like a rock or tree in the water. The break in the pattern is the only clue that something is hiding under the surface.

Don Reynaldo stands in the front of the boat, his one good eye scanning constantly for submerged trouble. He raises his hand and points to the right or left, telling Jose and Dracington which way to steer by turning the motor in the back.

The pressure finally subsides. My bladder has expanded.

## Chapter 8 The Earth's Lungs

Rumi Tumi, December 30, 1541-January 2, 1542

Death haunted them.

In the entire distance from Pañacocha to Rumi Tumi they never saw a soul, or even signs that a soul had been there. The strange noises must have taken on an ominous tone during those long nights on the river. In addition to the strangeness of the environment, the men were starving. Their food had long since run out, and the boot leather soup had little nutrition. Eating the plant life was a risky business, as they had discovered. Some of the men were only on the boats because they were too sick to walk way back at the Christmas Camp, and none of them had eaten a real meal in weeks.

They had to be nearing a settlement. If not, they were all going to die.

Friar Carvajal, trying to prepare his charges for the inevitable, “said mass as at sea, commending to our Lord our souls and our lives.”

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1542, after a week of nothing—no people, huts, or canoes—to suggest that they were not alone in the universe, Orellana heard the sound of a drum. At least, he said he did, and Carvajal believed him. I can't help wondering whether he wasn't just trying to give the men hope. If that is the plan, it worked. Drums meant people and people meant food.

Amazonian natives hollowed out tree trunks and suspended them on twine so that, when there were struck with a mallet, a long mellow boing-ng-ng resonated through the forest. The sound could travel for miles over the relatively level land in the jungle.

Orellana silenced everyone and listened, but the others didn't hear anything. They listened the rest of the day but if the drums repeated, nobody heard it.

Although they didn't know it, they were entering the territory of the Omaguas. One of the most extensive nations in the region at that time, Omagua territory stretched south and east along the Napo and Amazon Rivers through what is now Peru almost to the tri-national border where Peru, Colombia, and Brazil meet.

The next afternoon, the sound of the drums reached them again, and this time everyone heard it. Carvajal states that "they heard drums very plainly very far from where [they] were."

I hit one of these in the Iquitos library. It was about three feet in diameter, smoothed to a shine, by either use or time. A satiny-smooth stick about an inch across and a foot long served as a mallet. The sound wasn't particularly overwhelming in the little display room where I stood, but Laurence and Dave heard it in the big research room in the back of the library.

As the gong echoed through the jungle, Orellana's men couldn't know how far away it was or what it meant. Were the natives gathering to defend themselves? Or was it completely unrelated to them?

Orellana, in a move that typified his leadership, took no chances. He didn't know how far away the village is, but he wanted to reach it in the morning, not after dark. The group stopped early and, setting guards through the night for the first time, Orellana ordered the men to rest in preparation for the greatly anticipated encounter.

The men couldn't have been happy. They must have been anxious for their first real meal in weeks, but if there was dissent among the men there was no hint of it in Carvajal's journals or the other records from the time. I doubt that anyone was able to

sleep. The gnawing hunger and fantasies of food alone must have obsessed them during the long night.

At first light the men prepared their weapons. They had three crossbows and three primitive guns called arquebusses. Like the muskets used in the American Revolution and Civil wars, shooters loaded balls and gunpowder in the barrel, then put a little gunpowder in a flash pan. A separate mechanism lowered a lit match to the pan, igniting the gunpowder there, which, in turn, lit the powder in the barrel, firing the weapon. The arquebussiers, as Carvajal called the shooters, not only had to keep the mechanisms clean, but also had to keep the powder dry. Wet powder meant no guns.

With the advantage of light and whatever rest they had been able to manage, they headed back downriver as fast as they could row. Their effort to catch the natives off guard failed, however, as people on the shore saw them and ran off to send out an alarm. Within 15 minutes the men heard “many drums that are calling the county to arms because they are heard from very far off and are so well attuned that they have their [harmonizing] bass and tenor.”

It didn't take them long to find the village perched on the river bank more or less where Rumi Tumi is now. If we felt any trepidation about approaching strangers' houses for lodging, it is nothing like these guys must have felt approaching the village 500 years ago.

“Everyone leap out and do what you are supposed to do,” Orellana ordered.

“Look after each other. All for one and one for all!”

The curious natives on the beach scattered into the surrounding forest when the armor-clad conquistadors poured onto the beach wielding shields and swords. Orellana

made the men search the entire village to make sure that nobody remained. Only then did the happy men take turns, between shifts on guard duty, feasting on the food the locals had prepared for themselves. They enjoyed themselves until 2:00 in the afternoon when some of the locals returned in canoes on the river.

Orellana called out to them using the bits of languages he had learned further up the river. When they approached shore, he gave them some trinkets and asked them to bring their overlord. Minutes later the overlord showed up, “all decked out,” Carvajal says.

Orellana had arrived in the town of Imara. The chief was an old man named Aparia, of the Omagua tribe. In one of the greatest strokes of luck Orellana would get in the entire journey, the Omagua were not particularly warlike.

Aparia embraced Orellana and appeared pleased to meet the foreigners. After Orellana gave Aparia clothes and “other things,” Aparia said that Orellana should just tell him what the newcomers needed and he would provide it.

“All we need is food,” Orellana assured him.

Soon the villagers, whose lunches had just been scarfed down by the intruders, were hauling partridges, turkeys, and fish to the boats.

Orellana had not given up on Pizarro. He ordered the men to take the “clothing and bedding” off the boats and load them with food to take back upriver to the main force. The men spent two days gathering all the corn, cured fish, and hot peppers in the village and loading them on the boat, but they weren’t happy about it, insisting that they needed to rest and regain their strength. They later wrote in an affidavit, “[Rest] was not granted to us by Your Worship, rather Your Worship attempted right then to put into

operation the plan of turning back . . . to go in search of [Pizarro] dead or alive; and [we refused to follow] it being evident to us that the return up the river was impossible.”

Orellana called a meeting to talk about “what steps it is proper to take into the interest of their expedition and their salvation and [even the saving of] their lives, giving them a long talk, bolstering up their courage with very strong words.” After that talk the companions are so happy to see the Captain’s courage and patience that “they are not conscious of any of the hardships that they had endured.”

They completely forgot about the hunger, the food poisoning and their dead friends.

Orellana still wanted to at least make contact with Pizarro’s expedition, so he sweetened the pot. “[T]he Captain decided to give one thousand Castellanos to six companions who would go upriver take the news to the Governor Gonzalo Pizarro,” Carvajal reported, “and in addition to this he would give them two Negroes to help them row and a few Indians, in order that they might carry letters to him and give to the governor on his behalf news of what is happening.”

This is the only mention of the two Negroes, who were not counted among Orellana’s 57 men. For all we know, there may have been more slaves with the party. Neither is it clear whether the “few Indians” would have had any choice in the matter. In any event, only three men volunteered. The rest said that going back upriver would be suicide. Anyway, they said, Pizarro had almost certainly turned back. They figured they had gone 450 miles since they had left the Christmas Camp and it would take them months to return that far while fighting the current, even if they weren’t loaded down with food.

Orellana appointed Francisco de Isásaga to be the official scribe and on their third day in Imara the men asked Isásaga to take down a petition begging Orellana not to take them back up the river. After a couple of long sentences describing the horrors of the trip they had just survived, the letter continues,

We beseech Your Worship, and we beg him and summon him, not to take us with him back up the river. . . and let not Your Worship take the position of ordering us to do so, for that will be furnishing an occasion for our disobeying Your Worship, and for that disrespect which such [disobedient] persons ought not to have except with the fear of death, a death which appears to us quite plainly [to be inevitable] if Your Worship tries to turn back up the river to where the Governor is. . . and we hereby exonerate ourselves from the charge of being traitors or even men disobedient to the service of the King in not following Your Worship on this journey.

Carvajal did not mention this document in his journal. The only record of the transaction is the document itself. The next day, the scribe recorded Orellana's response, which said, in part:

[C]onsidering the fact that what [the men] are requesting really is just, inasmuch as it is impossible to go back up the river again, he is ready, although against his desire, to look for another route to bring them out to a point of rescue and to a place where there are Christians, in order that from there they might go altogether with the says Lieutenant to look for his Governor and render an account of what had happened." He also made a condition that they would wait two or three months where they are in hopes that the Governor might arrive.

Thus, showing remarkable political savvy, Orellana went to a lot of trouble to document how he was forced to abandon any effort to return to Pizarro. This was his defense against the inevitable charges of treason. To our modern way of thinking it is suspicious behavior – if he wasn't guilty, why would he need a defense? Historians of the time didn't mention this document. Maybe they didn't find it remarkable or, more likely, they didn't know it existed.



However, historian Medina points out that this kind of defensive record creation was the norm among Spaniards in those days.

### **Rumi Tumi, October 6, 2012**

After we pass Rumi Tumi at about 4:00, the rain gets serious. The guys pull toward a thatched hut on the western shore at Don Reynaldo's signal.

From the river, the scene looks like a National Geographic picture. The home is like all the others we have passed since we left Pañacocha. I already know that the smaller hut to the left will be the kitchen while the larger hut will be the living area. It stands about eight feet off the ground on stilts carved from hard, old-growth trees. I will see the half circle grooves from the chainsaws when I get close. A log leaning against the end of the long hut serves as a ladder with notches a couple of inches deep for toe-holds.

Don Reynaldo goes to the hut. He knows the people who live here. After a few minutes he comes back and tells us to unload and hang our hammocks in the hut.

When we get out, we discover that what looked from the boat like a dirt yard is actually a field of mud. I step up the incline toward the house and my boot slides back down, collecting a couple of inches of slick clay-like mud in the process. Trekking up and down this bank loaded with packs is a lost cause. I slide the straps off my back and hand the pack to Jose, waving my hand toward the bank and back to suggest that he should toss it to me when I get to the top. After a silent day in the boat, words have abandoned me. By the time I turn back to the bank, Don Reynaldo has whipped out his handy-dandy machete and cut steps in the mud with a few efficient flicks of his wrist. At the top, I grab my bag from Jose.

“I will take that,” Laurence says, so I hand it off and get the next bag from Jose. Laurence and Oswaldo have found a clean spot—a big log in front of the larger hut—to put everything. We unload the boat quickly, fire-brigade style.

Don Reynaldo indicates that Laurence and I should get the gear to the house.

The notches that serve as steps aren’t wide enough for even the mud on my boots, much less a true foothold. I kick and scrape off as much mud as I can, but soon I am scraping mud against mud. I finally get enough off that I can get the side of my right boot and the toe of my left onto the notches, and reach the top without falling.

The top of the log opens into the large open sleeping typical of Amazonian huts. A mother, ironically named America, and her daughter sit on stumps at the far end of the hut. We should be able to hang our hammocks and stay dry for the night, without inconveniencing them too much. I pull off the knee-high boots, complete with a couple of inches of the thick mud.

I suspect that the daughter speaks a little Spanish, but it’s easier to communicate with body language. I need to wipe the mud off before setting them aside. I hold the boots away from my body as if the mud is likely to attack. I look their way with an exaggerated expression of alarm—mouth open as if I wanted to scream, eyebrows raised. They laugh at my cartoonish act but they get the message. They point to a post along the wall to the left where I can see smears of mud where boots have been wiped in the past. I grin to show my relief and clumsily try to scrape the great gobs of goo from my boot. They laugh out loud, the uninhibited high shrill he-he-he that I have learned is the correct laughter for women among other women.

Laurence and Don Reynaldo cook wild boar stew from a haunch Don Reynaldo brought. They hold hats over the burners of the propane stove to keep the rain from dousing the flame while they move the pots into place.

We sit cross-legged in a circle around the lone candle on the unfinished wood plank floor. To my left, Laurence and Don Reynaldo scoop soup with chunks of thigh meat into our bowls. The scent of the broth and idea of something hot going into me is ridiculously exciting. It isn't cold out, but the heat has dissipated and my damp clothes cling to me. They might never dry.

It's awkward. I never like being a guest. It's work. You have to figure out your host's routine so you can avoid interrupting it. They are always trying to get you to do nothing and you have to try to find a way to be helpful. It's bad enough in the States, where you can at least clear the table. America's hut has no table.

We take the bowls to the river and rinse them and that is that. There is nothing left to do except socialize, and that is going to be accomplished in Kichwa. I grab my roll of toilet paper and climb down the log.

There is no outhouse or even a designated area for sanitary purposes. Outhouses, when they exist, drain directly into the river, so I guess there isn't much difference. It's best to get drinking water from an uninhabited stream. America's hut sits next to a tiny trickle from the forest, but it is not deep enough to capture water from. I'm glad we used bottled water for our stew.

I wander around the clearing, trying to stay to higher ground where the mud is less likely to swallow me. I have heard that quicksand doesn't kill people. It just holds

them in place while they die of thirst. I would almost certainly have migraines before that. Not the best way to go, so I find the upslope behind the house and stay there.

Two cows stare at me from a pasture; there may be more, but it is too dark to tell. Oddly, I don't see any chickens. Most homes on the Napo in Ecuador harbor mama chickens and broods of chicks under the house with the dogs and occasional pigs. There is no pig here, or dog either. Just cows. I wonder if they sell or trade milk in the community, but don't ask. The language of the day is Kichwa and, although I studied Kichwa for a couple of months, I can barely follow the gist of the conversation.

I give up on any idea of privacy and just hope that nobody will look my way while I pee at the edge of the pasture and hollow out a shallow trench with the heel of my boot to bury the paper.

I scrape off as much mud as I can, climb the log, scrape off more mud at the top, take the boots off, stash them off to one side, and swing my legs around to stand on clean floor, all without mishap. I've mastered the skills of jungle living.

The men, except Jon, who is even more lost than me in Kichwa conversation, are sitting in a circle at the far end of the room. America has broken out the chicha, a sour, fermented liquor that makes me nauseous even from a distance. This truly disgusting stuff smells like baby spit-up—sour and yeasty. However, it is a staple in the Kichwa household and is drunk first thing in the morning and last thing at night. It is alcoholic but weak, so even children drink it. I didn't even drink the chicha that I made myself.

There isn't a whole lot I won't do to avoid ingesting the stuff, but in this case I get away with pleading weariness. I'm not sleepy, but feel drained of energy, which seems bizarre after sitting in a canoe all day. I crawl into my hammock and it is exactly as I

imagined it back in Memphis when I planned this expedition. I wrap myself in a light sleeping bag as the cool breeze drifting through the open sides of the building. The forest blankets me with both the silence and the noise of nature.

Maybe this is how retirement will be. Of course, retirement suggests a career, which I can't really lay claim to. The New York State Bar Association has considered me retired for almost 20 years, since I quit practicing law at age 35. It sounds great, retiring at 35, unless you want things like food and a place to live.

After my father retired at a healthy 55 years old, he said, "They keep sending me checks even though I don't show up for work!" *Jubilados*, they call a retired people in Spanish.

Most people in my generation—the late baby boomers—didn't get that deal. We will work into our 70s and then survive on Social Security and whatever we've stashed in retirement accounts. During my employed stints, I stash the maximum tax-preferred amounts into retirement funds, so I might not be completely destitute, but I may not be as jubilant as I would be if I had my father's deal.

Right now it's hard to remember that actuarial calculations say I need two million dollars in investments to support myself until I die. The chime of a cell phone or chatter of TV shows are vague memories. There is no alarm clock or meeting waiting in the morning.

Just the river and the *Fiona* and a leisurely meander with the flow of the water. It's easy to wish that even that would disappear and let me stay in my cozy cocoon listening to the frogs and birds for days.

I am asleep in minutes.

### Imara, January 3-February 2, 1542

Orellana and his crew stayed in Imara more than a month.

Once it was decided that they were not returning, Orellana laid down the law. The Indians who brought food wore jewels and gold, but the men were not to take anything from them, or even look at the riches. He didn't want to let on that they valued such things. Also, anything from the boat that the men might have been using had to be turned in, "that no one derive personal profit from what belongs to some one else." It isn't clear what was on the boat. Some historians later claimed that the boat carried jewels, but the order only mentions "wearing apparel or any other articles." Jewels wouldn't have been of much use to them, anyway. If anyone kept property that was not his, he would be punished for stealing. The men were supposed to report any "rebels."

Orellana succeeded in gaining the trust of Aparia, who was very forthcoming with information about what they could expect down the river. He told Orellana about the woman warriors downriver. Also, he said, an overlord named Ica, who had great wealth in gold, lived far inland. Aparia knew all this because he had been there himself.

Orellana thanked them and asked the chieftain to invite the overlords in the area to come meet him. Over the next few days the overlords came to meet Orellana. Orellana greeted the overlords and "took possession of them and of the said lands in the name of the His Majesty." Of course, the overlords couldn't have known that they and their land was now "owned" by the King of Spain.

Once the men had eaten and rested for a few days, Orellana was faced with another decision. He was pretty sure that he had missed the river where he was supposed to find food. The men had revolted at the idea of going back up the river, but he had no

idea where Pizarro was, whether he was still alive, if he was still following Orellana, or if he had turned back to Quito. Pizarro might arrive at the village any day.

But first things first. Letting 50 healthy warriors hang around on a beach with nothing to do is an invitation to trouble. Orellana established a few of rules: First, they could not take anything from the natives; second, they could not touch the women; third, they could not keep anything that did not belong to them; and, lastly, they were not to show any interest in the gold, silver, and gemstones the natives were wearing, so that nobody would know that they were interested in such things. Some of the items on the boat belonged to expedition members who had been left behind with Pizarro. All those things were returned to Orellana and secured so that nobody could be accused of stealing.

Orellana wanted to stay for two months to give Pizarro time to catch up with them, but he knew leaving these men of action idle for that long would be disastrous. He called the men together and said, “You can see that with the boat and canoes we’re using, if God sees fit to guide us to the seas, we can’t go out to a place of rescue. We must apply our wits to building another brigantine, one that can carry a greater burden so that we can sail on the sea.”

They started as before, by making nails. They made bellows out of buckskins and made the other tools they needed. They dug pits for a forge. They hiked a couple of miles into the woods in teams of three to cut trees and haul them back. The men who were too weak to haul wood carried water and used the bellows on the fire to make charcoal. They made kilns and melted all the metal they could find, including their body armor. In 20 days, they made “2000 very good nails and other things.”

## La Tempestad, October 7, 2012

The second day on the river is more of the same. We say our goodbyes to America and are on the river soon after it gets light, when the breeze is cool and shadows are long and low on the water. If Don Reynaldo is tired after spending the night bailing out the canoe, he doesn't show it. The fabulous greens are as ordinary as changing leaves every October at home, as normal as the white blankets of snow that followed.

I wish I knew the names of the trees, plants, and birds, but there are so many. I can see in one frame of the camera at least five different kinds of trees, just going by appearances. A botanist would see so many more. Tree species in the Amazon don't clump together in groves like at home. In one hectare—two and a half acres—you might find more than 200 species of trees, but only a handful of each species. This protects them from succumbing to attacks by fungi or blight—if an infected tree is far enough from the next tree that would be susceptible to that strain, the strain can't spread. It dies with the tree.

The river isolates us, dividing us from the shore line with its monkeys, birds, boas, jaguars away by a distance of water. We are mutually cushioned by the natural barrier of the river, a much more real barrier than the artificial lines drawn on maps.

Rivers divide the world in more ways than one. They are boundaries between states and nations, visible in a way that our artificial lines are not, but they are also physical barriers that prevent people and animals from crossing and intermingling. Smaller rivers can be crossed by the treetops that form arches across in the way the trees meet over a narrow country road. The Napo is too wide, even in dry season, keeping the monkeys and jaguars stuck on their own sides, never to mingle with



their cousins across the way. These mini-barriers are part of what creates the microcosms. As species develop they are unable to cross breed with each other, so over the centuries and millennia they evolve somewhat differently, creating subspecies of animals, flowers, and ferns that are unique to the specific spot.

The excitement of mid-morning is a canoe. For the first time since leaving Pantoja, we meet another human being on the river, in the form of two boys who look like they should be in school and not paddling a canoe.

That excitement behind us, I settle back into my nook. I close my eyes and listen to the ringing in my ears. It has been there since my Army days, when I wore headphones for hours at a time listening to radio chatter. I had constant ear infections and apparently burst an eardrum. The ringing is getting worse as I get older. Now it sometimes drowns out what I want to hear, like words or birdsong. Unfortunately, there is no cure for tinnitus.

I usually ignore the ringing because there is so much else to hear. Now I hear it like music. The two ears are in harmony. I've noticed this before. Imagine if they are dissonant. I'd go nuts. But I seem to have a well-tuned chord with two tones in my left ear and one very high note in the right. I wonder if that means that my left ear is more screwed up than the right.

Shortly after lunch, we pass the motorcycle guys' two boats on a sandbar on the far side of the river. Only one of the guys is in sight but I rouse myself enough to wave. They left two days before us, so it seems strange that they are not farther down the river.

“Should we stop and make sure they don't need help?” Laurence asks.

But by then we are well beyond them.

La Tempestad is well named. The Tempest. By the time Don Reynaldo hops out to drag the canoe onto the muddy bank after the second day on the river, the fine afternoon mist has turned serious.

This is solid Amazonian rain. Healthy round drops intending to penetrate the canopy, seeking the layers of life below—long lianas and slick mosses, lichens and mushrooms.

“The Earth’s lungs,” they call this place. Our salvation from global warming.

But the clearing outside the huts is bare. No lacy ferns catch the big drops. Instead, sun packed dirt resists, the moisture sending streams down the cracks and ruts like the rivulets that flow off the blue plastic canopy covering the canoe.

The bank is slowly surrendering, dissolving into a wall of mud. I dig the rubber gumboots and hat out from where I wedged them between the pile of packs and the side of the canoe. With a slash of his hand across his throat, Don Reynaldo tells the guys to cut the *piqui-piqui* motor and the steady thrum that measures time gives way to the pounding of the rain on dirt and water and plastic.

Don Reynaldo squints his good eye at the hut and calls out in Kichwa. A couple of kids who can’t be more than 10 or 12 years old poke their heads out above a log ladder and, after a few shouts that we can’t hear over the rain, Don Reynaldo waves at us to come on up.

I wriggle my feet into the boots and pull the thick poncho over my shoulders before climbing from under the cover of the canoe into the warm shallow water.

I love warm storms. This hard rain is almost like the June thunderstorms back home. When the lightning wasn't too close, Mom used to let us run around outside. We washed our hair in the warm water spouting off the corner of the roof. We thought it would make our hair shiny. That was before acid rain. I wouldn't mind washing my hair in this rain—I don't suppose it's any worse than the river water I doused myself in yesterday.

I pull a couple of the daypacks under my poncho and slither up the bank. The water penetrates the surface of the hard packed dirt to create a slick of clay like the melted ice on the surface of a skating rink. If I could avoid the ruts and deep cracks I could slide all the way across to the shelter of the hut. As it is, I dig the sides of the boots through that layer to get some purchase and manage to half-walk, half-slide across the cleared space. The yard will never have the deep muck we encountered at America's place yesterday. Her ground, softened by the hooves of her milk cow and the pecking of hens, maintained the illusion of life that this space has lost.

I slide between the stilts to join Laurence under the protection of the big hut.

"Are we supposed to go in?" I ask. Unlike yesterday, Don Reynaldo does not know this family. He just pulled up to the first place he saw when the rain got hard.

"I don't know," Laurence says, "There don't seem to be any adults around."

"I think I saw an old lady at the kitchen door," I say, "but she didn't come out."

"Yes. Her husband just died and she doesn't want to see anybody." Laurence must have talked to Don Reynaldo before taking refuge.

We both stand under the hut, uncertain. A hound opens one eye to check us out, then closes it again, obviously unconcerned about the intrusion. Don Reynaldo and the

guys are unloading the stove and pots, obviously intending to start cooking supper. Are we the only ones who think we should speak with a grown-up before making ourselves at home?

We scrape the mud off our feet—not nearly the chore it had been the night before—and climb the ladder to the living space. Two girls, who look to be about six to eight years old and therefore are probably 10 to 12 years old, are playing a game with a soccer ball. They pause to stare for just a couple of seconds when we enter.

“*Hola!*” I say.

They both reply in very reserved voices. “*Buenos tardes.*” A little more formal than I had been. They immediately turn back to their game, keeping it to the far end of the hut.

The hut is a replica of America’s place—about 30 feet long by 20 feet wide—an A-frame on stilts with just a floor. A thatched roof hangs low over the sides, which are open to let the air flow through. The ceiling beams are also bare for hammock hanging but we just leave the daypacks in a dry spot and go back outside. I don’t want to get too settled without some kind of okay from a grown-up.

Down below the house the guys have set up the stove and are cutting onions for a stew. The meat is gone but we have lentils, a few tomatoes, and a package of dry soup mix for seasoning.

“Did you get the hammocks up?” Dave asks.

“Shouldn’t we wait until the parents get back?” I ask.

“Don Reynaldo is sure it’s okay,” he replies. I can’t help remembering the meeting in Sani Isla where I set up my camera and then looked like a jerk having to leave.

“I’d feel better waiting,” I say.

“That’s probably not a bad idea.” He shrugs. “A teenaged boy came home because his soccer game got rained out. He says we can stay. The father is in town getting drunk, so I just hope he’s a happy drunk.”

“I think they sort of have to take us. It’s just how they do it here,” Dave adds.

I agree. Still, I wonder what Don Reynaldo will do if the father turns out to be a mean drunk.

By the time the father gets home it’s getting dark and the soup and rice are ready. It turns out that Dracington knows the man, having worked with him somewhere in the past. So my worry is wasted. We hang our hammocks.

The night proceeds like the previous night. We all share our dinner of lentil soup and their fish. The mother turns out to be as friendly as the father and we make a jolly group around the fire drinking rotgut and telling stories. Most of the conversation takes place in Kichwa, which I take to mean that the adults are not comfortable speaking Spanish. I pick up bits and pieces. I get the tale Oswaldo spins about how he is such an important man that he has nine wives in his village.

After a few shots, I start to feel the liquor. I haven’t had alcohol in weeks and it doesn’t take much. When I excuse myself and crawl into my hammock Dave, Oswaldo, and the man are chugging the last of the five bottles of *puntas* we had brought from

Pantoja. If we don't make it to Santa Clothilde the next day we aren't going to have much to offer our next host family.

The sunshine has permanently deserted our mornings. We keep the blue tarp over the canoe all the time—if it isn't raining right now, it will be soon. I don't mind rain as long as it is warm. I hate the cold. I felt like I was cold my entire childhood. The porous old farmhouse we lived in had something resembling a heating system in the downstairs, but it didn't extend upstairs, where our bedrooms were. We used to put a glass of water on the windowsill at night just so we could brag about how it froze overnight. And it did. Reliably. Sometimes, my sister Kris and I took blankets and our school clothes downstairs and slept in front of the fire. That way, in the morning we could get dressed under the covers and our clothes would already be warm. The fireplace wasn't a great heating source for the whole room but right in front of it was the only place in the house that resembled warm on those winter mornings. The cold April drizzle wasn't much better. We scurried to the bus in our winter coats, hoping it would warm up enough to ditch them for the ride home.

This Amazonian rain is warm and comforting.

#### Lower Rio Napo, February 2, 1542

The food offerings in Imaria dwindled. Clearly, their welcome was wearing thin, yet there was no sign of Pizarro and the main expeditionary force. Finally, on February 2, 1542, one month after his arrival in Imaria, Orellana took the hint. He decided they had to give up on waiting for Pizarro and move on.

Orellana wanted to go up the Pastaza because an important overlord named Irimara, who had impressed Orellana when he visited Imara, lived there.

Don Reynaldo points out the Pastaza; it's just a small opening to our right. The water near there is dangerous because of the narrow river has a strong current. It may have trees and other debris that got washed down the river, and sometimes there are unpredictable whirlpools. However, it's very deep, Don Reynaldo says, so we stay on the far side of the Napo avoid the mouth.

The current was too strong strong for Orellana's crew. It created such an onrush, Carvajal reported, that "here we are on the point of perishing, because, right there where this River flowed into the one on which we are navigating, the one stream battled with the other and the waters thus stirred up sent large pieces of driftwood from one side to the other, so that it is hard work to navigate up it, because it formed many whirlpools and carried us from one bank to the other."

While both Pizarro and Orellana believed that the river they were on would lead them to the other side of the continent, they never imagined the distance that lay between their location and the "North Sea," as they called the Atlantic Ocean. The maps of the time showed South America as being very skinny indeed. Orellana may have thought that he would emerge on the ocean in a matter of days or a few weeks, at most.

But his journey had barely begun.

## Santa Clothilde, October 8-11, 2012

Santa Clothilde is the end of the line for the *Fiona* and our crew. The *ayudantes*, Jose and Dracington, live here and Don Reynaldo lives on a small tributary near here. The *Fiona* can't go up his little river because the water is too low, so he is going to wait a few days and hope for the best.

From the river, Santa Clothilde looks like the other communities on the Napo, only bigger. The houses are thatched huts on stilts, like the ones we have been staying in. The street along the waterside is paved part of the way, but is not wide enough for cars, unless they want to drive partially on someone's front yard. It is more like a wide sidewalk.

Don Reynaldo sleeps on the boat, as he has every night since we left Pantoja but, safely stashed on Santa Clothilde's wide beach, he doesn't have to bail. The *ayudantes* offer to let us stay at their mother's house. We're a little hesitant because they don't live there, but their mother acts like it is the most normal thing in the world for a band of strangers to appear on her doorstep. So, up go our hammocks. Again.

The first order of business, of course, is finding a boat to Iquitos. If it only goes once a week we don't want to miss it. Our hostess tells us that the slow boat, the *Galeon*, will go on Thursday, but people around town say different things—the *Galeon* will go on Wednesday, or it isn't going at all because the water is too low. A fast boat goes every day but it costs three times the cost of the *Galeon*—about \$20 rather than six dollars—and we don't have enough soles. Unless we are able to exchange more, we'll wait for the slow boat. We keep an eye on the river, anyway, in case the Señora is wrong or something else decides to stop.



The entire town is on a hillside that slopes down to the river. I guess that helps them avoid flash floods. From the 15 foot tall watchtower on the hill we can see the whole town, as well as the river. This part of Santa Clothilde still looks like an Amazonian village, not a cement monstrosity like Coca. Street after street is lined with huts made from wood planks. Some have tin roofs but most are thatched. Maybe they heard the din of the tin roof in the rain and thought better of it. Jose shows us where he is living in his new house while he finishes building it. The homes have space around them where chickens, dogs, and kids play. Barrels collect rain, clothes dry on lines and bright flowers and fruit trees surround homes.

From the tower we can see for the first time how low the river is. What should be the middle half of the river is a long sandbar, with only about 30 or 40 feet of water on each side. It is low as far as we can see in both directions, with large temporary beaches on both sides of the river and sandbars popping up where they don't belong. It is much lower here than in Pañacocha, which I don't understand. As we go down the river, with all the tributaries coming in, the river should get bigger and bigger. I would think that the water must be very deep, but the sandbars prove otherwise. It's no wonder Don Reynaldo can't get home.

Off to our right, downriver from where we are standing, is a newer part of town. A wide paved street is lined with stores, and a modern port sits next to an amphitheater lined with bleachers.

On the top of the "hill" is a huge high school complex consisting of four classroom buildings, at least three dorms, an administrative building and a "technical" building. Jose is vague about what is in the technical building but he's sure there are

computers and he thinks there is internet. When we asked on the main drag we were assured that nobody in town had internet, so even a possibility of internet is good news.

Is this what Pañacocha will look like in ten years? The high school attracts families, and I can't say that's a bad thing. On the whole, I approve of education. Yet, the town has expanded outwards to about 20 or 30 times the size it was when they built the big high school in the 1980s, and people came from the surrounding forest or from up and down the river. They have left the land that has always supported them, just as Father Jose Miguel predicts will happen in Panacocha. Now they must rely on outside sources of income. Many of them work in the school or hospital and are paid by the government, but others work for the oil companies in Ecuador and commute home when they have time off. Others help on illegal logging operations.

The town has a well but it does not produce enough water so it is turned on only ½ hour per day—from 6:00 to 6:30AM. Each household can have as much water as they can run in that half hour, and no more, so everyone fills up big garbage cans of water. Store water is expensive, about two dollars for 1.5 liters, and the river water is polluted. We have a very limited amount of soles, so I dip into their water supply and use my Steripen to sterilize about a gallon a day of drinking water for our crew.

The power comes on at 6:00 PM, so I hike up the hill hoping to find internet. I don't meet anyone as I wander among the “technical buildings” that Jose pointed out. Finally, I sit on a bench and wait for signs of activity. A young man rides a bicycle onto the sidewalk and hops off near where I am sitting.

“*Perdon,*” I say. “Do you know if there is internet here?”

“Later,” he says. “The *technico* will be here *ahorita*.”

A little back and forth reveals that *ahorita* means around 7:00 or whenever the technician decides to show up. It’s about 6:45, according to my new friend Felipe’s cell phone.

He asks what I am doing here and I go into my usual recitation.

“Do you want to live here?” he asks. This is not a question I usually get.

“I think this is a beautiful place,” I reply, “but I’m not sure I could live here all the time. All my family and friends are in the United States.”

“You could go back and visit them every year,” he suggests. I’m not sure where this conversation is headed. I used to get marriage proposals every few days but I haven’t been getting them this trip. I figured I had aged out of that category. Anyway, this guy looks about 25 years old. Half my age, at most.

“Maybe I could stay here part of the year and go home during the summer when the weather is nice there.”

This leads to a discussion of seasons and my dramatic descriptions of how the snow gets so high in Upstate New York that we used to toboggan out the upstairs window. I don’t tell him that I haven’t lived there in many years. I move around too much to claim any other place as “home.”

“Here we have rain,” Felipe says, “but it is not cold. You would not be cold here. You can have a nice house—do you like wooden houses?”

I can honestly say that I do.

“If you want to stay here I will build you a wooden house,” Felipe offers. “What kind of house do you want? I will build it any way you like. It will be your house.”

Yep, we're definitely headed into marriage territory.

"I think you're very young," I say. "I'm very old."

"No, you're not old. You're beautiful. I don't have a woman. I want a woman and you are a beautiful woman. But if you don't want to stay with me you don't have to. The house is yours and if you decide you don't like me I will leave."

I'm not sure whether to be flattered or feel sorry for him. He's so very earnest.

"What is your phone number?" Felipe asks. "I will call you tomorrow and I can show you the place where I will build the house. I have a very good place; you will see. What time do you want to see the place? I will call you."

This is definitely more detailed than most of the proposals that have been thrown my way. Fortunately, I don't have a phone that works in Peru. I can also legitimately say that I don't know the name of the people I am staying with or the street their house is on.

Ordinarily I would try at this point to freak the guy out by telling him I have six kids, but I'm afraid Felipe would think that was great, too. Maybe I can marry him off to a hypothetical 22-year-old daughter, who will come here next year to meet him. Just as I'm trying to formulate that offer in Spanish, I spot a man at the next building over.

"Is that the *technico*?" I ask.

Felipe isn't sure, but he dashes over to find out. It isn't clear whether he was the real *technico* or not, but he does have keys to the internet room and lets me in, so the evening is a success.

There is no bank in town so we can't get Peruvian soles and we have discovered that we didn't change enough in Pantoja, so we desperately need more. I ask all over town but nobody changes money. Everyone directs me somewhere else, where they tell

me they used to do it but don't anymore. I finally find one sleazy guy who will change it, but at an exorbitant rate. I don't know why changing money is so hard here. Maybe it's illegal, and this guy is the only person willing to openly break the law. He has probably bribed the appropriate officials.

We ask the family, but they don't know anyone who will change money. U.S. dollars are not useful unless they go to Ecuador, and apparently not many people do that. Finally Don Reynaldo says that he has a friend who might change some for us. We get \$20 worth of soles, which, with every sol the rest of us have, is enough to pay for our boat fare and a taxi to the hostel in Iquitos, but not much more.

The guys who bought the boat show up. They had burned the boat with all their stuff—backpacks, hammocks, computers, passports, and cash. Two of the motorcycles are damaged beyond repair. The German guy badly burned his leg and is headed for the missionary hospital here.

Oswaldo keeps watch. Hour after hour, he stands on the river bank, patiently watching for the long-anticipated *Galeon*.

It finally arrives late Wednesday afternoon.

Laurence and I go to the big modern dock in the commercial “new town.” We expect a crowd to be waiting to greet the boat with loads of produce to be shipped to Iquitos but nobody is there. As we watch, the *Galeon* goes right past us on the far side of the river.

“Maybe they have to go around a sandbar,” I suggest.

“Yes,” Laurence agrees. “I’ve seen boats doing that, they go down a little ways and then return.”

We watch as the boat chugs past the dock, and down toward the bend. If this boat doesn't stop, we are so screwed. There isn't another boat due here until at least Sunday, and nobody is sure if that one will go.

We ask people on the street, "Where is the *Galeon*? Is the *Galeon* stopping?" Some people don't know; others assured us that yes, the *Galeon* will stop here, but they don't know why it didn't stop.

"Maybe there's another dock," Laurence says. "Or another place it would stop farther down."

We jog down the street running parallel to the river through town and on down the road after the buildings end and the street turns into a rutted dirt. Not only is there no sign of the *Galeon*, but there aren't any people, either.

"If the boat is down here, we'd be seeing people," I say, stopping in the middle of the empty road. "We can't be the only ones interested in this boat."

"But where is the boat, then?" Laurence asks. "Is it skipping this stop because the water is so low?"

We walk back to town, already formulating alternative plans, all of which require more soles.

In town we notice people going down a side street toward the water. We follow and, sure enough, there are people hanging around all along the street about a quarter mile down the river from the fancy public dock. After another ten or 15 minutes, the *Galeon* comes back into view, this time from down river. From the rough gangplank to the faded "*SE VENDE*" (for sale) dominating the side of the boat, the *Galeon* is even less inviting close up than it has looked from a distance.

## Chapter 9 The Chicken Shit Boat

“*Venga*,” people say as Laurence and I hesitate in the front of the passenger compartment of the long-awaited *Galeon*. Come in.

Some sit or kneel on the benches to look out over the water, but most are lounging in colorful cotton hammocks.

The ceiling is only about eight feet high and, illuminated only by the fading sunlight, the whole place feels claustrophobic. Rough boards serve as simple benches around the sides of a large open area. Two rows of support beams hold the roof up and hammocks hang from hooks attached to the crossbeams. The boat isn't wide enough, and the beams not far enough apart, to hang a hammock from the two beams. Instead, people tie one end of their hammocks to the outside frame of the boat, so the hammock ropes cross what should be an aisle about chest high. Where nobody is sitting on the bench I scoot along it under the ropes, but navigating becomes trickier where the benches are populated.

“Not a lot of room for more hammocks,” I say.

“No,” Laurence agrees, “it doesn't look good.”

“*Si, hay espacio*,” an old man says, having understood either our English or else our expressions. He looks 60-ish, but has the kind of lived-in face that makes it hard to tell age.

“*Somos cinco personas*,” I say. We are five people.

“*Hay espacio*,” he repeats. There's room. He says something to a woman, who rolls out of her hammock, smiling, and moves it over a few inches. She nudges the man

next to her and he moves a few inches, making room for her to move a little more. As everyone shuffled, a space about two feet wide opened up.

“*Hay mucho espacio,*” the old guy repeated. It doesn’t look like *mucho* to me but at least the people are being nice. I read complaints in blogs and forums online about hammocks stacked three or four high, so I figure we’ll have to make do.

The stink of too many people and animals in a closed space is disturbing and I wonder what is in the cargo hold. I assure myself that it will fade when the boat is in motion. The breeze will blow the unpleasant smells away, right?

Neither Laurence nor I notice that the chickens live on the passenger deck, not down below with the cargo.

“We have to go talk to our other people,” Laurence says in Spanish. “We’ll return.”

“*No te preocupe,*” the old guy says. Don’t worry.

We report to the others at the house.

“We don’t know when there will be another boat,” Dave says. “I think we have to go.”

“It’s this or the fast boat, and we can’t afford that,” I say. This boat cost about 20 Peruvian soles, or about \$6 each, as opposed to four times that for the fast boat.

Laurence makes a token argument in favor of the fast boat, but the fact is that we don’t have enough Peruvian soles to pay for the fast boat and they don’t take dollars. It’s the *Galeon* for us.



It is getting dark by the time we haul our bags to the boat. Men chuck arms of plantains and sacks of mangoes into the lower cargo deck. The second deck is for passengers, and there is no roof access.

Dave managed to board, carefully setting each crutch on the wobbling six inch plank and gradually putting his weight on it to be sure it is centered, so the plank wouldn't turn over. Then he inches his good foot and the second crutch forward to catch up. This painstaking process eventually gets him on deck without mishap.

I'm not so lucky. Carrying my pack on my back and a day pack on my front, I can't see the plank. And just to keep me off balance, I'm carrying a grocery bag of water and bread in my right hand. I try to feel with my right foot for a solid place on the plank, and then carefully move my left foot forward. On about my third step the plank twists to the left, dumping me into the mud in an inglorious heap. Between the two packs, the mud, and the bag, I can't get back up. I look around for help but everyone is on deck either clearing room for Dave to get into the passenger compartment or just watching the strange procession. I finally dump my backpack in the mud, shift the daypack to my back so I can see and pull myself up with a hand on the plank. With the lightened load I get on board easily enough.

About eight feet from the pointed front of the boat is the captain's cabin, a three-sided wooden enclosure with glass in the front and openings on the sides that might once have held glass. A hint of green suggested that it is painted, but it is hard to tell. I drop the daypack and bag by the captain's cabin and, praying that nobody runs off with them or accidentally kicks them overboard, go back for my pack. It isn't the first time I've scraped gobs of mud off myself.

In the cabin, we glumly contemplate our options. Near the front of the boat is the area the old man “cleared” for us—about two feet wide and next to a pole. Dave and Jon go for that on the theory that the pole will give Dave something to hold onto while he gets in and out of his hammock.

Laurence and I venture further in, ducking under hammock ropes in search of another clear space. About two thirds of the way back there is just a hint of extra space between two hammocks. These people, however, are not so accommodating. After Laurence asks nicely the second time, the man on her side gets out of his hammock to slide the ropes slightly, grumbling the whole time. My neighbor on my left is a very large woman who is lolling crossway, taking up enough space for three people, or two people her size. That is, her head hung over one side of the hammock and her feet over the other, taking up about five feet of space where I have 20 inches.

“I have a bad knee,” she explains with a sour expression. Well, so do I, but I don’t lounge sideways in my hammock.

“Nothing like friendly neighbors,” I say to Laurence as we loop our ropes around the bars on either side of the boat. Tying my hammock in the obviously too small space, I smile sweetly at the woman. She ignores me.

“Maybe they will become friendlier when they get to know us. If not—” Laurence shrugs. Because, really, what are we going to do?

Oswaldo watches all of us with a look of distaste and doesn’t bother with a hammock. He’ll try to sleep on a bench. Once we have our hammocks in their spots, however inadequate, we go off in search of our last dinner in Santa Clothilde.

We locate a street stand with chicken and rice—had we known what is in store on the *Galeon* we might have been more discriminating—then go to the house and say our goodbyes. I didn't get to see the family *chagra*, and poor Felipe will no doubt be heartbroken, but that is the nature of what we are doing. We are controlled by the opportunities that come our way. Just as Jose offered us the chance to stay with his family, we now have the chance to get to our next stop. And there is no knowing when another boat might appear.

By the time we get back to the boat, someone has squeezed yet another hammock between Dave and the pole. Laurence's and my hammocks have gotten even cozier in our absence, as people have squeezed in on her side and the lady next to me pushed my hammock over to give herself even more room, but we don't have any interlopers. I crawl into my very narrow hammock, held in place by the large lady to my left and Laurence on the right.

We're in for a long night.

Laurence has her head pointed toward the river and mine is toward shore, giving myself a little elbow room by her feet. However, the large woman is determined to sleep crossways. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she put her feet toward me but, no, she has to shove her head in my side. She drops right off into a deep snore, 250 pounds of unbudging, immovable object. I finally manage to wiggle up in my hammock a bit so her head is butting my belly instead of my boobs, which is a little less disturbing. I feel Laurence on my other side shifting restlessly. I suspect that my zeal to avoid a more intimate acquaintance with my neighbor has pushed me even more into Laurence's tiny

space but, having found a bearable position, I'm not volunteering to move. I drift off for what seemed like just a few minutes before the roosters start their business.

We have a fine selection of fowl on the boat, which people tie by the legs to the wall under the benches. Of course, we are still anchored at Santa Clothilde, which has its own residents defending their crowing territory. It starts with a big guy near my head.

"Coo-ca-roo!" he howls. When nobody replies, he repeated it more emphatically, "Coo-ca-roo-oo-oo!"

That gets a guy on shore responding in a deeper tone, "Coo-coo-ca-roo!"

The two go at it for a while, always louder and with variations on the 'Coo-ca's and 'roo's. Then someone up near Dave joins in. I think this is a young one, because he doesn't quite have it together. "Coo-coooo!" he says in a high squeaky voice that breaks off like a teenaged boy's. I'm a little embarrassed for the poor guy.

Sure enough, both of the first two have to respond, competing for volume and emphasis is a squawk of Coo-coo-ra-doo. This inspires some other inexperienced fellow on shore to help out. He has a deep, well developed crow, but hasn't quite figured out the whole expressions, "Coo-ra-coo-coo!" he says, trailing off uncertainly, like he has forgotten the ending.

I feel Laurence shifting on my right and am pretty sure she is awake.

"Rooster crowing 101," I murmur.

"It isn't amusing," she says.

I'm starting to find the whole situation pretty funny. Who needs American Idol when you can get Napo Rooster Idol, live and unedited? I can hear Randy Jackson

saying, “Keep it real, Dawg.” No, we don’t want to introduce dogs into this show. That would require a whole ‘nuther level of grading criteria.

The rooster chorus continues for the rest of the night with different ones joining in and dropping out, presumably between naps, since roosters must need some sleep even if we don’t get any. As it starts getting light, both Laurence and the fat lady cede their territory, and I finally get to sleep.

When I wake up to talk of breakfast, the boat is in motion and there is no sign of Santa Clothilde or any other humanity along the river. We are again isolated in our floating world, albeit a bigger, noisier and less sanitary one than the *Fiona* provided.

Meals are included in our six dollar fare. A tiny kitchen with two camp stoves sits at the back of the boat. A garbage can of river water, refilled a few times a day via a canoe tied to the boat, supplies the tiny sink, which drains back into the river. Two tired young women work almost around the clock preparing three meals a day.

Breakfast doesn’t include coffee. This is very sad, although unsurprising, news. There is no hot water and, from what I see of the kitchen, no reasonable way for the poor overworked girls to produce it. My only caffeine source appears to be the Diet Coke that I hoarded in my daypack.

Breakfast does include rolls and a hot beverage made from boiled oats. For once I don’t mind not being able to eat oats, since the stuff looked like puke and doesn’t smell much better. I give it to Oswaldo, have a roll and called it good enough.

I can’t put off the bathroom any longer, so I gather my toothbrush, toothpaste, and a bottle of water. Getting to the “bathroom” naturally requires tromping through the galley. On the other side of a plank wall is a toilet seat over a hole in the floor and a

plastic garbage can of river water for “flushing” stuff into the river. There is enough room to turn around so people can “shower” in there. Sometimes there is a plastic container for scooping out water, sometimes not, which leaves the choice of not washing or dipping your dirty hands directly into the water. Of course, some people just use the kitchen garbage can of water on the way out. It’s best not to think about it too much.

There is no shelf or nook or hook for my toothbrush and toothpaste or good place to spit, so I give up on that and just stuff everything into my pockets, use the toilet, and surrender the space to the next unsuspecting victim. I brush my teeth with my bottled water on the main deck and spit over the edge, trying to keep downwind so my spit won’t fly back into somebody’s face.

I rode in a chickenshit truck once. Some friends and I were hitchhiking in the cloud forest of western Ecuador and a truck stopped for us.

“I don’t know if you want to ride back there,” the driver said, “but you can if you want.”

The local kids with us were saying “no!” but we said, “It will be fine. It’s only a few miles.” It was only after we climbed up onto the back of the truck that we saw what the kids already knew—empty chicken crates were neatly stacked about 5 high in the truck bed. We still didn’t fully understand what we had gotten ourselves into until we hauled ourselves over the edge of the truck and got a good whiff, but by then it was too late. We were committed.

No other poop in the world smells as bad as that produced by chickens. I dare anybody to prove otherwise. The stench makes your stomach churn. It smells like rat

corpses rotting in a sewer, or what I imagine a rotting rat corpse in a sewer would smell like, having never encountered one. Our ride in the chicken-shit truck, as we fondly referred to it later, was only a few minutes, so we soon recovered and took consolation in the fact that it would make a good story.

We were committed to the Galeon for three days and three nights—a little harder to take. Our chickens are tied to the edge of the boat but they have room to wander into the “aisles.” The benches are only about 18 inches deep so I guess it would be inhumane to keep them tied so tightly that they couldn’t reach the aisles. However, reaching the aisles means they poop in the aisles. People walk in it, spreading it everywhere—in the kitchen and bathroom, between hammocks, and probably even in their hammocks if they don’t take their sandals off very carefully before climbing in.

The breeze come through the open sides of the boat, cutting the smell significantly, as I had hoped, but the stench is too deeply engrained. It pervades every inch of the boat. I would add nose plugs to the list of necessities for the next boat except that I don’t like to think about what I might inhale if I breathe through my mouth.

I guess Orellana and his crew would have been happy to have this problem, although it wouldn’t have lasted long. That is, the chickens wouldn’t have lived that long.

When lunchtime rolls around, I am hungry and hopeful.

The white seed sack Dave and Laurence procured in Nuevo Rocafuerte still holds a few emergency provisions. We have bread, two mangoes, and a jar with about half an inch of instant coffee left in it. We were warned that we would need our bowls and spoons, so they are in the white food sack, as well. My private stash includes the snack

sized Ziploc bag of powdered milk that Geran gave me, a liter of water, a 20 ounce bottle of Diet Coke and a packet of four cookies from Santa Clothilde. That is about it.

The girls produce rice, boiled yucca, boiled plantains, and hunks of chicken in a murky sauce. Under the circumstances they haven't done too badly but, all dumped together in my bowl, it's barely edible. I eat some rice and a couple pieces of yucca, then offered the rest to the guys. They eye it like it might bite, but Oswaldo takes it. He can't stand to waste food.

My Diet Coke isn't going to last three days, so I'm facing an imminent caffeine crisis. I decide to try out my caffeine back-up plan. I've never had to implement this plan before but I'm hopeful that I'll get a palatable concoction. I fill a half liter bottle about two-thirds full of filtered water and carefully pour in about a tablespoon of instant coffee and an equal amount of powdered milk. Screwing the lid on tight, I shake. It takes a fair bit of shaking—maybe about a minute—but time is something I have. It isn't too bad. In fact, I'm pleasantly surprised. I reluctantly offer it to the others and am grateful that they don't want to give it a go. I'm going to need the caffeine.

By dinner time I've learned my lesson. I ask if anyone wants my food before getting any. When there are no takers, I break open the food sack and hand out the rolls Laurence and I stocked up on in Santa Clothilde.

The highlight of the first day is that the fat lady gets off in the middle of nowhere, so I move my hammock into her space as far as I dare. I don't want to move over too far or somebody will squeeze in between Laurence and me. It is an art that we have no experience in. Each time the boat stops, we jump into our hammocks and take up as much space as we can to discourage new settlers, but to no avail. An old man immediately



hangs his hammock where the lady's had been. Still, I'm hopeful because he is a normal sized person and might sleep lengthwise in his hammock.

My relief is short-lived. At nightfall I discover that the old man comes with a friend and a ten-year-old boy. The friend sets up on the other side of the old guy, pushing him toward me, and they put the kid's hammock right above mine. Every time the kid throws his feet over the edge, which he seems to find necessary, he kicks me in the head. I shuffle down until I'm intruding into Laurence's hip-space instead of her foot-space and I don't dare move down any more.

Then my neighbor's true nature is revealed. No matter where I lay, his hand "accidentally" falls onto my breasts. I would turn my back to him except that there isn't room to shift that much and, frankly, turning onto your side in a hammock isn't all that easy to begin with. I figure, better a foot in my eye than a hand on my boob, so I grab the sides of the hammock and wriggle back up. But the hand, undaunted, finds its way right back to my boobs. I pick it up and drop it back in his hammock but that doesn't last long. After a few rounds of this I just cross my hands over my chest, like I'm lying in a coffin. One time, when the hand wanders my way, I get ahold of one finger with my right hand to hold it still and another with my left hand to twist up. The hand jerks away until I fall to sleep, but three more times that night that hand wakes me up, trying to wriggle its way between my crossed arms.

Fortunately, the rooster-crowing contest keeps me entertained through the long, long night.

Our following days on the *Galeon* are much like the first. We all get rolls every morning, Osvaldo eats something nearly every mealtime and Dave usually gets a meal

each day. I learn to ask for only rice and yucca, and the helpful girls make up in volume what I miss in plantain and meat, providing enough rice for the whole group.

There isn't a lot to do on the boat. I have my Kindle until the battery dies and there is no way to recharge it. We each have one or two books, which we pass around. Jon takes refuge in his hammock and I don't see anything more than his hair for two days. We make conversation with our traveling companions, most of whom are heading to Iquitos or Mazan, the only other town on our route.

In the afternoon I hang around with Oswaldo and Dave near the front of the boat where they have struck up friendships of sorts with some local people.

"Did you see that guy I is talking with earlier?" Dave asks. The fellow, with beautiful wavy black hair in his eyes and a big grin that reveals blackened teeth, looks pretty sketchy to me.

"He's interesting," Dave goes on. "He's done lots of stuff but most of it seems to involve smuggling drugs, one way or another. He's had some scary adventures, too. I think he's even telling the truth. Well, I guess I don't believe all of it, but he says that you can't take any kind of illegal drugs on the boats into Brazil. Apparently the Brazilian military is on the river all the time and it's too dangerous, even for him. But in Peru it's easy."

We haven't seen any kind of authorities since we left Pantoja and, even there, nobody actually looked at the boat. We could have been loaded down with bag of cocaine, for all they knew.

"Is he smuggling right now?" I ask. "'Cuz, if he is, he's very brave to be talking about it."

“I don’t dare ask.” Dave laughs. “I’d rather not know.”

The new perspective from Dave’s territory toward the front of the boat reveals a disturbing number of dead turtles under the benches and hammocks. The poor things sit shell down, their legs in the air, no longer waving as they did when we first got on the boat, having finally died what must have been an agonizing death.

I wonder whether any of them are protected species in Peru, as some species are in Ecuador. Not that legal protection stops Ecuadorians from killing and eating them. Both the turtles and the eggs are traditional food for the Kichwa and most of them don’t see any reason to change their ways. If they notice that the supplies are diminishing they either blame the oil companies or put it down to fate. When Sachamama wants there to be more turtles, she will send them. And if she decides to send a turtle my way, then she means for me to have it, so I should take it.

If you see an outside force as controlling events, then there is no need to worry about your own behavior. Eating turtle eggs today does not mean fewer turtles next year. There is no cause and effect. As Einstein said, “the only reason for time is so that everything doesn’t happen at once.”

That is a gross over-simplification, of course, and most Kichwa have wandered from the traditional beliefs, but the basic attitude remains. Planning for the future is presumptuous; it suggests that you think you control the world. It is better to just live your life from day to day and take what appears.

We look around the boat and count turtles—I count five but Laurence sees at least eight. We see the food supplies diminishing. The locals see turtle soup.

I have claimed Oswaldo's spot on the bench, where I can watch the shore. We are sitting higher on the water than in the *Fiona*, of course, so it's easier to see the treetops and harder to spot herons. But other than that, it looks about the same. Layers of green. Tall and short, darker, lighter, paler, and deeper greens of trees, bushes, ferns, and vines. From here, higher up and farther from shore, they don't have the power to mesmerize that they had in Don Orlando's canoe, where we could hear and smell the forest. It's more like watching it on TV. See the pretty trees go by. Aren't they pretty? Next image.

Even as I know I should be taking advantage of the chance to meet people, I miss the peace of the *Fiona*. I pull out my paperback copy of Carvajal's journal and, carefully holding the pages that are falling out, read what he has to say about this part of the river. There isn't much.

After leaving Imara they spent a night in an abandoned community where, Carvajal reports, they "did not fail to find great swarms of mosquitoes." Then, in what must have been a terrifying two days, two canoes with seventeen men got separated from the *San Pedro*. The men on the larger boat weaved in and out between islands hoping to find their companions before finally giving them up for lost. Then they stumbled across the lost canoes. As Carvajal put it, "Our Lord is pleased that we should come together, so that there is no little rejoicing among us all, and in this way we are so overcome with happiness that it seemed to us that all the suffering endured has passed out of our memories." There are those short memories again.

When you think about the speed of the water, the relative sizes of the boats, and the maze of islands the water creates, it is amazing that they found each other. Still, I sort of doubt that they forgot all their suffering.

Dave is contemplating the long line of hammock ropes between us and the back of the boat. We bring his meals to him but there is nothing we can do about the toilet.

“I’m going to have to do it,” he says, looking at the treacherous path. I look with a new perspective. The ropes hang at about three to four feet off the floor. While I just duck under them, Dave can’t.

“Do you want me to hold ropes up for you?”

“It’s useless,” he says. “I can’t get under them with the crutches. I tried hopping but there are too many things in the way and I’m afraid I’ll re-injure my foot. I can’t wait to get off these crutches!”

“So what are you going to do?” I ask, realizing for the first time what he has been dealing with for two days. Backpacks, boxes, children and chickens line what should be an aisle. Chicken poop covers every open bit of floor. What’s a little groping compared to that?

“I have to crawl,” Dave says, glumly pondering the filthy floor.

“No way!” I say. “You must be able to—” I stop. He is right that getting the stiff crutches under the hammock ropes will be nearly impossible. If we had thought of this we could have put his hammock nearer to the back of the boat, but now it is too late.

“Pee over the edge?” I suggest.

“That’s fine for pee,” he says, “But this food is not agreeing with me. I’m afraid I really have to get to the toilet. Soon.”

Blaming the food might be unfair. Crawling through this for two days would make anyone sick. I've been in my hammock wallowing in the miserable smell and my lecherous neighbor, but at least I haven't been crawling through chicken shit.

I stand to let Dave by. He hands his crutches to Oswaldo in a routine they have obviously practiced many times. He drops to sit on the floor with his legs pointed toward the back of the boat.

“Crawling doesn't work,” Dave explains. “I keep hitting things with my foot and I'm just injuring it more. This seems to be the best technique. “

Pulling his sleeves over his hands, Dave scoots under the ropes and through the obstacles on his butt. Oswaldo follows to deliver the crutches at the other end of the journey.

I can't watch.

The Napo does an odd thing before meeting the Amazon. At Mazan, it hangs a sudden left, running east almost parallel to the Amazon for a few miles before slowly inching southward to join the Amazon River at a steep angle, similar to how the Aguarico did. By cutting across land and catching a boat to Iquitos on the other side, Mazan is only three hours from Iquitos, cutting a day off the trip. However, we stay on the boat to follow Orellana's route. It's also cheaper, an important consideration, given our sol situation.

On Saturday afternoon, our whole contingent is on the most prized spot on the boat—the prow. In the clean, cool breeze, the noise and smell from the boat fades into a mellow backdrop. The rain has stopped and the clouds that came and went are light

feathery puffs high up in the sky, not the gloomy ominous grey shadows we have become accustomed to.

Here, I can imagine being Father Carvajal, along for the ride on an adventure into the unknown. They are in friendly country, Aparia the Lesser having sent word ahead for the communities down the river to welcome the strangers. The natives they saw regularly gave them food and directed them to shelter at night. As they approached the Amazon, it looked to them like there are three rivers coming together. The rivers constantly change and whatever Orellana saw does not exist today. Even in the course of a year, the channels change with rainfall. Over the years, the water dredges new shortcuts, diverting from old routes, which become side channels or just dry up and revert to jungle.

They saw something that looked like three rivers coming together, and they didn't know which way would lead them to the main river. The locals told them to go to the left, and then led them to make sure they wouldn't get lost. Not much farther down the river, they promised, Orellana would find Aparia the Greater, the leader of the entire tribe. He was waiting for the explorers, the Indians promised as they guided Orellana's procession toward the river then known—hypothetically, since nobody had ever made it to the river—the Marañon.

We are finally approaching the Amazon, which is still called the Marañon at this point on the river. The boat pilot says we will get there around 5:00 PM. We are hoping for a nice sunset.

“I heard that you can see the statue of Francisco de Orellana from the river,” Dave says.

“It doesn’t look like it on the map.” I pull out the expedition map and we study the lines representing the rivers. It looks like the community of Francisco de Orellana, where the statue is located, is on tiny river that cuts to the south in a shortcut to the Amazon. Unless the area is really flat and has no trees, I don’t see how the statue could be visible.

Dave agrees, and asks the pilot to point out the community.

Laurence distributes slices of the precious mangos we have all been thinking about during two days of gruel. I don’t usually like mangos, but this is better than chocolate ice cream. It is fresh. It is healthy. It is wet. It is a refuge in a sea of filth. We pose for pictures holding big pieces of mango in our teeth to make fake smiles, as the breeze in our faces erases all traces of the boat. Our cameras are out and we’re playing tourist enough to make up for the miserable days spent hunkered down in survival mode. This world is colored with the thousand greens of the forest against a baby blue sky with immaculate clouds drifting silently southward.

Oswaldo sits at the edge of the steps leaning against the rail, contemplating who knows what. This part of the journey means more to him than to any of us—it is his lifelong dream to see the Amazon River. As the crow flies, he probably lives less than 50 miles from here. Jon and I have come 3,000 miles from the states, and Dave and Laurence twice that from Europe. We have all seen something of the world. For Oswaldo, the bus trip to Coca is a major expedition. This is a greater journey for him than for any of us.

About half an hour before we reach the Amazon, the pilot says, “That is the way to Comunidad Francisco de Orellana,” pointing to a small river cutting inland to our



right. If I had not seen a paddle canoe disappear into the waterway, I still wouldn't have spotted it. There is no sign of a statue.

The sun has almost set when the Amazon River finally stretches in front of us. We can just make out lights on what might be the opposite shore, which looks to be at least a mile away. I've heard that the Amazon can be as much as five miles wide in places, but, as we know so well, the water is low right now.

Friar Carvajal's reaction to the confluence is about like ours. He says, "[The Amazon river] did away with and completely mastered the other River, and it seemed as if it swallowed it up within itself, because it came on with such fury and is so great an onrush that it is something of much awe and amazement to see such a jam of trees and dead timber as it brought along with it, such that it is enough to fill one of the greatest fear just to look at it, let alone go through it."

For once I wish I had his florid language and penchant for drama.

Carvajal called it Saint Eulalie's confluence because they got to this confluence on Saint Eulalie's Day, more or less. The name is appropriate. Saint Eulalie is the first Christian martyr in Spain, and her martyrdom at the age of 14 sparked the spread of Christianity throughout Spain in 303 A.D. Twelve centuries later, after his famous first journey, Christopher Columbus met with clergy in a cathedral named for Saint Eulalie to plan the expansion of Christianity to the New World. Then Orellana followed through on that plan, albeit inadvertently, pressing deeper than ever into the center of the New World.

I like the idea of this confluence having its own name, even if nobody uses it anymore. A place this magnificent deserves a remarkable name.

Carvajal pegged it when he says “[I]t is so wide from bank to bank from here on that it seemed as though we are navigating launched out upon a vast sea.”

The sun setting to our right casts a soft orange glow over the scene as we try silently to grasp the hugeness of it. I imagine taking the *Fiona*, our little piqui-pique boat, onto that river and, for the first time, am happy to be on our chicken shit boat.

The greens of the shores to the left fade as they get farther away. On the right, the land comes to a sharp point. I wonder if it has a name. Cape Conquistador, Orellana Peninsula, Traitor’s Promontory? No. Maybe something related to Saint Eulalie--I’m sure she suffered some colorful torture I could use. That is where they should put Orellana’s statue—right on that point where everyone going up or down the river would see it. Until it gets flooded over, I guess, but that might also be appropriate.

Most famous sights look like their pictures. I’ve have been to a lot of them. The Taj Majal, Machu Picchu, Mount Rushmore, the Eiffel Tower, the Coliseum in Rome. If you have seen the Discovery Channel version, you don’t need to go there. Until this moment I have seen only two sights that are too vast for film. Two places in the world that, if you don’t go there and see it with your own eyes, you can’t grasp the immensity of it.

The Grand Canyon and the Great Wall of China. Those are the only two scenes bigger than film, bigger than life, bigger than imagination.

Now there are three.

## Chapter 10 The River Sea

The Amazon dwarfs all other rivers. A Brazilian team recently measured of the Amazon and Nile rivers using updated techniques and found that the Amazon is about 100 miles longer than the Nile, although most scientists do not accept the new measurement and still consider the Nile to be slightly longer.

In every other way, however, the Amazon River's claim of being the biggest river on the planet is unchallenged. About 20 percent of the Earth's fresh water enters the ocean via the Amazon River, more than the next seven rivers combined. In places, it is 100 yards deep. It can be up to 25 miles wide and is more than 200 miles wide at the mouth.

It has an island the size of Switzerland.

The Amazon is sometimes called the Rivers Amazon rather than the Amazon River in the singular. That is because, from one point of view, it is actually three rivers. In Peru it is the Marañón, then it becomes the Solimões near Iquitos and, finally, from the Rio Negro to the mouth of the river, it is called the Amazon.

It is also named in the plural because it is the catchment for thousands of miles of rivers—a network that rivals the human body in complexity and covers an area approaching the size of the continental United States. The river rises more than 30 feet over this entire area during the wet season, creating what is referred to as the “river sea” or “flooded forests”—*varzeas*, in Portuguese.

And it is full of dangerous creatures, like caiman—Amazonian crocodiles—and anacondas. If I go overboard on the Amazon my only hope is that a fearless local person will haul me out before a caiman devours me or an anaconda crushes me. One in ten

known species in the world lives in the Amazon Rainforest. I wonder what that ratio would look like if all of the species in the Amazon were catalogued.

The *Galeon* seems to shrink as it inches into the vast river sea; Saint Eulalie's confluence looked much safer from the outside. We frantically take pictures as we edge into the Amazon, but we soon realize that we will not navigate this confluence quickly. Twenty minutes, half an hour, forty five minutes pass. The sunset is gone and it is dark before the *Galeon* turns along the shore to fight the current of the big river.

I eventually realize that the lights we saw in the distance when we entered the confluence, which I thought was the opposite shoreline a mile away, turns out to be neither shore nor a mere mile away. It is only after we reach the channel that I make out the outline of a huge oil tanker anchored in the river. It doesn't seem to have gotten any closer, and I realize that I have no concept of distance here. I have nothing to measure it by. The water simply disappears into the darkness of the night.

I feel a sudden swell of sympathy for Orellana and his men, with no idea how far they had travelled. Even now, armed with satellites imagery and topographic maps, all the technology created by 500 years of scientific progress, I was unprepared for this sight. The river remains unfathomable, indifferent our existence.

I understand why Don Reynaldo wouldn't take the little *Fiona* onto the Amazon. It would be like throwing a rabbit to a pack of wolves. Chances of survival would be similar to Orellana's chances of safely reaching a Spanish port.

Yet, that is what Orellana did. He built another, bigger boat, which he could not have survived without. After he entered the Amazon River, his story is one of battles.

Day after day of crossbows and musket balls holding off spears and arrows that pierced the little armada like porcupine quills. After five months of steady conflict, Orellana, again defying the odds, had lost only three men—one in hand-to-hand combat and the others to minor injuries inflicted by poisoned arrows.

Before entering the Ocean, he stopped to retrofit the boats with new keels and sails for sea travel. Then they ventured onto the “North Sea,” hugging the shoreline in hopes of finding a “Christian” settlement.

On September 13, 1542, 19 months after leaving home and more than eight months after separating from Pizarro’s expedition, the men arrived on the tiny island of Cubagua, just five miles long and two miles wide, off the coast of what is now Venezuela. Today the approach to Cubagua that Orellana took is a popular scuba diving ground because of the numerous shipwrecks littering the ocean floor after being pulled there by currents and overcome by the powerful forces of wind and water. Orellana and his remaining crew survived where professionally built, fully equipped ships could not.

The ragged, skeletal, but happy group disembarked to the shock of the fifty or so island residents who had, like the rest of the world, assumed they were dead.

Orellana’s victory was short-lived. He tried to find the Amazon again, this time from the mouth, going up the river. The entire expedition was a disaster, from his lack of funds to outfit sound ships to his decision to take his new 14-year-old wife, Ana de Ayala. Half of his boats sank before reaching the Americas, while the remainder got separated or shipwrecked in the maze of islands at the entrance to the river. Many of his men died from a fever. While he was out looking for food with his men, Ana later said, 17 of them were shot with poisoned arrows.

Like the events surrounding his separation from Gonzalo Pizarro and his subsequent journey, salacious tales of Orellana's death abound. Some say he drowned. Others say that hostile natives speared him to death or riddled him with arrows. Yet another story has him succumb to the fever that had killed so many of his men.

It doesn't matter what killed his body. He died in late November of 1546, lost in the mouth of the Amazon River. Ana de Ayala, one of the few survivors, reported that Captain-General Francisco de Orellana, Governor of "New Andalusia," died "from grief."

I don't have answers for the growing pains of this region. Even in a perfect world—where all indigenous people were happy with their way of life and nobody wanted to exploit oil, gold, or rubber—the traditional way of life would not be sustainable. The agricultural techniques that apparently sustained large populations in the region 500 years ago were irrevocably lost when smallpox wiped out an estimated 95 percent of the indigenous population, leaving native communities largely dependent on fishing and hunting, supplemented by small family gardens. The result is widespread overfishing and overhunting. Sachamama isn't keeping up.

Everything in me objects to the Ecuadorian government's efforts to invade Sani Isla's land against the wishes of the families who have lived there for generations. I can't say that the parents of Pañacocha are wrong to want doctors, dentists and educations for their kids.

The reality is that the outside world has arrived. People like me travel, some might say intrude on, even the remotest parts of the jungle, and nothing can stop local

residents from seeking the benefits of technical and medical progress. If we are honest, we have to admit that to try is outrageously paternalistic.

As fascinating as we find the quaint simplicity of life on the Lower Napo River, can we expect America and the other families up and down the river to be content forever without rice and cooking oil, not to mention doctors and high schools? We often ask what the cost is of development, but what is the cost of isolation, and who pays the price?

My pictures and video of Saint Eulalie's Confluence are a waste of time. I give up and sit on the steps in front of the *Galeon* captain's cabin, letting the breeze flow over me. I don't know how many more excursions like this I will be able to take. Despite Einstein's assurance that time is an illusion, it is moving relentlessly in one direction for me. I may have more than the three years my mother had at this age, or not, but I don't think physics is going to save me.

As I let the hugeness of the Amazon River overtake me, I stop trying to imagine solutions. I stop trying to guess at sizes and distances. None of that matters.

In that moment, a warm breeze brushes my face and lifts my hair from my neck, taking with it the heat of the day. A juicy slice of mango soothes my throat. The discomforts of the *Galeon* slip away and, in Friar Carvajal's words, "it seemed to us that all the suffering endured had passed out of our memories."

## Works Cited

- "Authorities on Francisco Pizarro." *Heritage History*. n.p., n.d. Web. 09 July 2014.
- Bass, Margot S., Matt Finer, Clinton N. Jenkins, Holger Kreft, Diego F. Cisneros-Heredia, and Shawn F. McCracken. "Global Conservation Significance of Ecuador's Yasuní National Park." *Plos One*: n.p., 19 Jan. 2010. Web. 09 July 2014.
- "Board of Longitude Project." *Board of Longitude*. Royal Museums Greenwich, 8 July 2014. Web. 09 July 2014.
- Cabodevilla, Miguel Angel, Milagros Aguirre, and Massimo De Marchi. *Una Tragedia Ocultada*. Quito: Fundación Alejandro Labaka, 2013. Print.
- Carvajal, Gaspar de. Discovery of the Orellana River: Account Written by Friar Gaspar de Carvajal. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. José Toribio Medina. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. 167-235. Print.
- Carvajal, Gaspar de. Version of Carvajal's Account in Oviedo's "Historia." *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. José Toribio Medina. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. 405-448. Print.
- "Chevron Corp." *Amnesty International USA*. Amnesty International, n.d. Web. 09 July 2014.
- "Chevron in Ecuador." : *Chevron Became Terrified of Its Own Witnesses During Retaliatory RICO Trial*. n.p., 30 Dec. 2013. Web. 09 July 2014.
- "Chevron's Ecuador Cancer Problem: 10,000 People at Risk of Contracting Disease in Coming Decades, Says Expert." *ChevronToxico*. Amazon Defense Coalition, 14 Oct. 2010. Web. 09 July 2014.



"Health Impacts." *ChevronToxico*. n.p., n.d. Web. 09 July 2014.

Christina Cuenca Vicente, Diana. "People from the Amazon Welcome a New Millennium Community." *ElCiudadano.gob.ec*. El Ciudadano, 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 08 July 2014.

David, Jane. "What Research Says About. . . School Meals and Learning." *Health and Learning* 67.4 (2009/2010): 88-89. Print.

"David v. Goliath: An Update on the \$19 Billion Judgment in Ecuador Against Chevron." *ChevronToxico*. n.p., Spring 2013. Web. 08 July 2014.

Dykstra, Peter. "Society of Environmental Journalists: SEJournal Excerpts." *Society of Environmental Journalists: SEJournal Excerpts*. Society of Environmental Journalists, Summer 2008. Web. 09 July 2014.

"Ecuador." *City Population: Provinces, Major Cities & Towns*. N.p., n.d. Web. 09 July 2014.

"Ecuador Indian Community Resists Temptations of Oil." *Latin American Herald Tribune*. Latin American Herald Tribune, 7 Feb. 2013. Web. 08 July 2014.

Gil, Imma. "¿Por Qué Hay Un Derrame Petrolero Por Semana En Ecuador?" *BBC News*. BBC, 13 June 2013. Web. 08 July 2014.

Giorbran, Gevin. "Albert Einstein and the Fabric of Time." *Everything Forever*. n.p., 10 Apr. 2007. Web. 12 May 2014.

Gordon, Daniel. "Ecuador Seeks Oil 'compensation'" *BBC News*. BBC, 21 Sept. 2007. Web. 08 July 2014.

"Hay Temor En La Ruta Al Parque Nacional Yasuní." *El Unniverso.com*. El Universo, 16 June 2013. Web. 5 July 2014.

Horne, Bethany. "'After All the People We Killed, We Felt Dizzy'" *Newsweek*, 2 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 May 2014.

- Hurtig, A.-K. "Geographical Differences in Cancer Incidence in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador in Relation to Residence near Oil Fields." *International Journal of Epidemiology* 31.5 (2002): 1021-027. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Juhasz, Antonia. "Opinion: Why Oil Drilling in Ecuador Is 'ticking Time Bomb' for Planet." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 01 Mar. 2014. Web. 09 July 2014.
- K., S. "Death in the Amazon." *Economist* 8 Nov. 2013: n. p.. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Kane, Joe. *Savages*. New York: Vintage, 1996. Print.
- Kane, Joe. *Savages*. New York: Vintage, 1996. Print.
- Keefer, Frank R. "Causes Of Army Rejections: What Health Officers Can Do To Remedy Conditions." *American Journal of Public Health* 10.3 (1920): 236-39. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Keltie, J. Scott, and O. J. R. Howorth. *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*. 11th ed. Vol. 46. London: Watts, 1914. 66. Print.
- King, Ed. "Chevron v Ecuador: The Big Oil Battle Where Everyone's a Loser." *RTCC Chevron v Ecuador the Big Oil Battle Where Everyones a Loser Comments*. Responding to Climate Change, 12 Dec. 2013. Web. 08 July 2014.
- Kruckewitt, Joan. "Oil And Cancer In Ecuador / Ecuadoran Villagers Believe High Rates of Disease Are Tied to Petroleum Pollution, a Contention That Chevron Disputes." *SFGate*. San Francisco Chronicle, 11 Dec. 2005. Web. 09 July 2014.
- Kunze, Albert F. "The Amazon--Has It Been Fully Discovered?" *Scientific Monthly* 58.1 (1944): n.p. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Levin, Madeleine. "Breakfast for Learning." Food Research Action Center, Spring 2014. Web. 9 May 2014.

- Levy, Buddy. *River of Darkness: Francisco Orellana's Legendary Voyage of Death and Discovery down the Amazon*. New York: Bantam, 2011. Print.
- Lindy, Lily. "Ecuador's Development Dilemma: Will Oil Win Out?" *The Christian Science Monitor*. The Christian Science Monitor, 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 08 July 2014.
- McKensie, Celeste. "Rumble in the Jungle." *Canadian Business*; 2/28/2005 P57-63 78.5 (2005): 57-63. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Medina, José Toribio. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. Print.
- Moffat, Steven. "Blink." *Doctor Who: The Complete Third Series*. Dir. Hettie MacDonald. BBC Home Entertainment. 9 June 2007. Television.
- Musser, George. "The Quantum Mechanics of Fate: How Time Travel Might Explain Some of Science's Biggest Puzzles." *Nautilus*. n.p., 30 Jan. 2014. Web. 12 May 2014.
- Ohio State University Extension, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, Oh 43210. "*Shale Oil and Gas Development*" *Fact Sheet Series Seismic Testing and Oil & Gas Production* n.d.. *Ohio State University*. Ohio State University. Web. 9 July 2014.
- Ortiguera, Toribio de. Introduction and Chapter XV, dealing with Orellana's descent of the Amazon from Toribio de Ortiguera's Jornada del Rio Marañon. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. José Toribio Medina. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. 310-319. Print.
- Osborn, Liz. "Total Number of Species Estimated in the World." *Current Results*. Current Results, n.d. Web. 09 July 2014.

- "Number of Species Identified on Earth." *Number of Species on Earth*. Current Results, n.d. Web. 08 July 2014.
- Oviedo y Valdés, Gonzalo Fernández de. Selections from Historia de Las Indias. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. José Toribio Medina. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. 390-404. Print.
- Pizarro, Gonzalo. Letter of Gonzalo Pizarro to the King relating to the expedition to the Land of Cinnamon. Tomebamba, September 3, 1542. *The Discovery of the Amazon According to the Account of Friar Gaspar de Carvajal and Other Documents*. José Toribio Medina. Ed. H. C. Heaton. Trans. Bertram T. Lee. New York: American Geographical Society, 1934. 245-251. Print.
- Priwer, Shana, and Cynthia Phillips. *Essential Einstein: Everything You Need to Know about the World's Most Acclaimed Genius*. Avon, MA: Adams Media, 2006. Print.
- Purdy, Britnae. "Kichwa Community's Fight to the Death on Hold, for Now." *First Peoples Worldwide*. N.p., 18 Jan. 2013. Web. 12 May 2014.
- Republic of Ecuador, National Assembly Legislative and Oversight Committee. *Republic of Ecuador Constitution of 2008*. Cong. Doc. n.p.: Georgetown U, n.d. *Political Database of the Americas*. Web. 31 Jan. 2014.
- "San Rafael, Cascada De Napo, Ecuador." *World Waterfall Database*. n.p., 21 May 2011. Web. 09 July 2014.
- "Sani Isla Case. Ecuador's Position." *Embassy of Ecuador*. N.p., n.d. Web. 08 July 2014.
- "Sani Isla Case—Ecuador's Position." *Republic of Ecuador, Ministry of Exterior Relations, Commerce and Integration*. Ecuadorian Embassy in Canada, n.d. Web. 14 May 2014.

- Scott S. Robinson. "Fulfilling the Mission: North American Evangelism in Ecuador." *Is God an American?: An Anthropological Perspective on the Missionary Work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics*. By Søren Hvalkof and Peter Aaby. Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 1981. 41-49. Print.
- Sebastian, M. San. "Exposures and Cancer Incidence near Oil Fields in the Amazon Basin of Ecuador." *Occupational and Environmental Medicine* 58.8 (2001): 517-22. Web.
- "SIL Responds to Errors in Confessions of an Economic Hit Man." *SIL*. Summer Institute of Linguistics, Nov. 2005. Web. 09 July 2014.
- Sobel, Dava. *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time*. New York: Walker, 2007. Print.
- Tidwell, Mike. *Amazon Stranger*. Guilford, CT: Lyons, 1996. Print.
- Twain, Mark. *Life on the Mississippi*. Charleston, S.C. :: S.n., 2012. Print.
- United States. Cong. House. Committee on Agriculture. *Hearing on H.R. 2673, H.R. 3143 (H.R. 3370 Reported). Bills Relating to the School Lunch Program. Testimony of Major General Lewis B. Hershey*. 49 Cong., 1st sess. H. Rept. N.p.: Government Printing Office, 1945. Print.
- Vega, Henry. *Coffee Production in Ecuador Exports Imports 2013*. Rep.n.p.: United States Department of Agriculture, May 30, 2013. Print.
- Verne, Jules. *The Exploration of the World: The Great Explorers of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1881. 275. Print.
- Watts, Jonathan. "Ecuadorean Tribe Will 'die Fighting' to Defend Rainforest." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 14 Jan. 2013. Web. 08 July 2014.

Zarate, Agustin De. *The Discovery and Conquest of Peru*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. Baltimore:  
Penguin, 1968. Print.