

Leaving Lares

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5.a.m. In silence my sister and I shiver into layers of polypro and fleece then carry our packs down the red-carpeted steps of the Posada de Los Corregidores. Lorenzo, our guide, waits in a taxi. We glide down the dawn streets of Cuzco, Peru, past the dark *Catedral*, past a Quechua woman setting up her blankets and sweaters on the sidewalk, past narrow *calles* bounded by massive Inca walls.

The bus to Calca is crowded. Windows slide open as we squeal around corners. The passengers sit silent, the men in their ponchos and chu'llu toques, the women draped in striped blankets. My sister and I huddle together in the cold, in this unheated bus. We pore over John Hemming's *The Conquest of the Incas*. When one of us wants the page to be turned, she nods and the other paws the book with mittened hands. We read five hundred years into the past, about the last stand of Manco II, King of the Inca. He fought and almost beat the Spanish, was captured and escaped to Ollantaytambo in the Sacred Valley which we are hurtling toward though it is not our destination.

At Calca, Lorenzo finds us a ride in a pick-up truck going to Lares. The narrow, gravel road switchbacks as it climbs, each turn revealing more snow-covered peaks and sliding us from our perches on bags of potatoes on to sacks of squirming guinea pigs.

On the main street of Lares, beneath looming mountains and an overcast sky, children have gathered to perform a dance. We weren't expecting a welcoming committee, I joke. Lorenzo laughs and tells us the dance is for education officials who are on a school inspection

tour. We join the ring of onlookers. Beside me, a teenage girl tenderly braids a little one's hair. The little one is still as the older girl combs and winds. Sisters, I wonder?

We watch the dancing and then we leave Lares. Lorenzo walks us along a bumpy road that becomes a small dirt track through the forest. Leslie rockets ahead; Lorenzo and I follow.

"She is very strong," Lorenzo says in Spanish.

"Yes," I say. "She pushes her husband, Randy, in his wheelchair."

"Was he in an accident?"

"No. He has a disease. A degenerative neurological condition."

Lorenzo nods. Do I notice a tear in his eyes?

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We hired Lorenzo for his kindness. He'd been our guide the previous week on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, and he'd waited for each person in our group of twelve, where Leslie and I were known as "the sisters." He'd gone back and forth along the trail, encouraging Les, whose ankle, weakened from an old basketball injury, had collapsed on the steep Inca steps down to Huiñay Hayna; leading an acrophobic trekker down a gully; and coming back to check on me, the oldest in our group, "Señorita Isobel," of the bad knees.

Lorenzo was born in Huayllabamba, where we spent our first night en route to Machu Picchu. He grew up speaking Quechua. At eighteen, he left his village for Cuzco, where he worked as a servant and learned Spanish. He became a trekking porter, a cook, then a guide. He earns about twenty dollars for four days work guiding gringos to Machu Picchu, making sure we don't sit on the Inca walls, or stray down the wrong valley, that we are kept fed and watered and healthy and warm. He lives with his ninety-five-year-old father and supports a large extended family.

"Señorita Isobel, Me puedo preguntarte algo?" he'd asked me as I dragged myself up Dead Woman's pass, the highest point of the Inca Trail.

"Si, como no?" I'd answered in Spanish. Ask me anything.

"Where is your husband?"

"Good question."

"He ran away?"

"No, no. I'm single."

"You live with your parents?"

"No."

"You live with Leslie?"

"No."

"You live alone?"

"Yes."

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I watch my sister's turquoise jacket and purple pack disappear around a green eucalyptus bend and think about her suggestion that we each rent our own tent.

The day before Les arrived in Cuzco, I moved out of my one-star hotel and found us a big room in a comfy place on the Plaza de Armas. I was eager to show her what I'd seen, tell her what I knew. I was looking forward to being with her after four months of traveling through South and Central America on my own.

But she arrived exhausted. She'd been working fourteen-hour days, trying to cope with the demands of a stressful job and her husband's disease. She'd flown in from sea level, and the altitude was making her sick.

I convinced her that one tent was better — less weight and less expense. I didn't say her idea made me sad.

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Several kilometers beyond Lares, we come to an Inca hot springs. Stone columns surround the square pool. Water flows down into it from spigots in the columns and steam rises from the muddy water. A rickety, wooden change house sits off to the side. It has two stalls, half doors and a concrete floor, just like the change house behind the house where we grew up in Kamloops: me, the oldest of four girls, Les, the baby, seven years younger. Let me rephrase that: where *I* grew up. When I was nineteen and Leslie was twelve, my family moved to the States. Les grew the rest of the way up in Alabama; I stayed behind to finish university.

In Kamloops, I called her "baby," and "brat." She found cigarettes in my bottom drawer, listened to my phone conversations about boyfriends and drinking parties, threatened to tell mom. She had nightmares. Often she'd appear at my door in the middle of the night, wanting to sleep with me. "No stealing the covers," I'd tell her. But the kid was always burning hot, and I ended up pushing all of the blankets onto her.

Leslie jumps into the hot pool, yelling, "Come in, it's beautiful."

I ease gooseflesh into steaming water.

"Lorenzo, te puedes tomar una foto?" I ask.

Les and I put our arms around each other. Water streams down the stone irrigation channels at our backs.

"Cheese," Lorenzo says.

"Queso!" we yell.

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We follow a dirt path upwards, grey sky and green hills above us. A boy herding sheep offers a shy, "Buenas tardes." At Tamboallaua, we talk to some men who are roasting the potatoes they have been harvesting. The men offer us the small nuggets and chicha, corn liquor. I take the chicha but Leslie declines. Why? She takes the grassy coca tea Lorenzo offers for altitude sickness. Maybe she is worried the chicha will make her sick and she can't afford to get sick. She has to be strong for Ran.

Passing cows and sheep, I climb alone into a cold fog. See my first llama. I take out my camera and creep closer, but when I am about ten feet away, he bolts, only to stop again a few feet ahead, looking back at me with enormous, lashed eyes. I follow him up to the village of Concani. Near the stone schoolhouse there, the teacher waylays Lorenzo, asking that we camp in the schoolyard, telling him it will be safer and the money we pay will help the school. Lorenzo refuses, telling us later the money will only get as far as the teacher's pocket. We will stay at the home of Santiago, our porter.

Santiago's home is one narrow room built of stone. At one end is a fireplace where several children, from toddlers to adolescents, sit on a stone bench. Santiago's wife crouches over the fireplace, preparing dinner. Les and I sit at the other end on benches covered with llama skins, shivering despite our multiple layers, and drinking coca tea. Smoke from the fire has blackened the walls. Guinea pigs run past our feet. Les and I exchange glances. "*Cuy*," says Lorenzo. I look at the furry brown and white animals skittering back and forth across the stones. "Very good, muy sabroso," he says, when a little boy shyly offers us their legs on a platter. I think to tell Lorenzo that in Canada we keep them as pets, but don't. He may already know this. He probably thinks it's crazy.

Santiago, Lorenzo tells us is "muy fuerte." Very strong. At forty-six, Santiago has eight children, the youngest just walking, the oldest married. The smaller children huddle together, sending us shy glances.

"His wife gets up at two o'clock en la madrugada," Lorenzo says. She prepares Santiago's breakfast so he can be out tending his animals — sheep and llamas — by four.

According to my Spanish-English dictionary, "a quien madruga, Dios le ayuda," means "the early bird captures the worm," but the literal translation from the Spanish is, "God helps those who rise early." I would like to believe this is true, but then I think of the small children, their thin clothes and rubber sandals, their black or missing teeth. I think, of my brother-in-law whose legs shake when he tries to stand, whose spasticity robs him of sleep.

The next day Les and I hike ahead while Lorenzo stays behind to pack up. Santiago's son leads the way. I follow Les who follows the boy up a wandering path, past waterfalls and blue lakes dotted across a rocky meadow. We trudge up to a cold, windy pass 4200 metres above sea level, behind this twelve-year-old boy who has the strength of a man, then we head down and up another small pass.

"How's your ankle?" I ask Les, when I catch up.

"Fine," she says though I can see that she is limping.

I try to keep her in sight as we follow Santiago's son down the pass. Then Lorenzo is with us and the boy is gone.

Passing a pueblo with three stone houses, Lorenzo says he wishes that the parents wouldn't have so many children, that all the children could go to school. He speaks in Spanish, and I translate for Les.

"You don't need to," she says. "I can understand a lot. I'll ask you when I don't."

But she won't. In our family, we don't ask for help.

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When I was fifteen and Les was eight, I almost killed her. We were skiing at Tod Mountain and I took her down an advanced mogul run. I was annoyed to be skiing with my little sister instead of my friends, so I zoomed ahead, not stopping until the bottom. She came barreling down toward the lift line, knocked over some skiers, disappeared over a ledge and crashed into a tree.

"Why were you going so fast?" I asked her later, after she'd been evacuated down the mountain, examined and found to be mildly concussed but otherwise unbroken. After I'd stopped shaking.

"I was trying to catch up," she said.

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That evening on the trek, Les and I set up our silver tent in a circular stone compound filled with hay. After dinner, we put on all our clothes against the cold, climb into our sleeping bags, and take turns reading aloud from *The Conquest of the Incas*. Reading is something we have in common. We will read by flashlight, by candle light, by firelight, by moonlight. We will read when there is barely any light at all.

"Night, sweetie," she says at the end of the chapter.

Her black toque peaks out of the top of her sleeping bag before sliding inside. I scoot my sleeping-bagged body towards hers. I can feel the heat coming from her; she's still as hot as the seven-year-old who crawled into my bed after a bad dream.

I wake in the madrugada to pee, pull on frozen boots and walk through mist past a stone enclosure where frosted sheep huddle together. A llama looms out of the dark, sniffs and moves on. Light diffuses, a peak appears — the sacred snow mountain of Pitusiray.

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We begin our final climb up a faint path on the side of a grey scree slope. The rocky trail winds above two lakes the colour of green olives. One of the lakes swallowed a boy who came too close with his llamas, Lorenzo says. I walk slowly, drawing in great gulps of thinning air, resting frequently. Les is ahead, chewing coca leaves and moving quickly in spite of her altitude sickness. Maybe the leaves are helping. Lorenzo tells me all the things he has learned that gringas like to know: the distance traveled, the distance left to go.

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I still don't understand what happened at the top of that final pass where we looked upon the sacred snow mountain of Pitusiray. I remember we were jubilant, thrilled at having climbed to the highest pass on the trek, awed by the panorama of snow drenched peaks. I remember that Lorenzo knelt before the distant, cone-shaped mountain, offered green coca leaves and a prayer to the Apus. That Leslie sat on a rock away from us and cried. For Randy, who would only be able to see this place in photos? For the wild beauty of this sacred place? For this journey that is ending? For the distance that is sometimes between us?

Lorenzo gave her some leaves, told her to pray to the Apus for help. I watched her stare into the mountain's icy face, searching for solace, for some kind of hope.

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The trail winds down, down, knee-jarringly down. The temperature warms with every hundred-foot loss of elevation, and soon we're shedding fleece and toques and Gore-tex®. The waters from Pitusiray follow us downhill in Inca irrigation canals. We come to the lush greenery of the Eucalyptus forest, to the clear Cancha Cancha river, then follow the white rapids of the swift-flowing river to Huarán and the highway. Lorenzo flags down a bus.

Inside, Les and I huddle together to avoid the swaying of a drunken man who stands in the aisle, losing his balance, falling onto my shoulders and threatening to land in our laps. I sigh, shrug him off. He falls forwards, backwards and I notice that Les and I are the only ones annoyed. The women with baskets of potatoes, the men in their bright orange and red ponchos, guide him back to his feet, murmur words of encouragement. Call him, "Papá."

There are stories here to be learned. About a way of caring for each other that we have lost. On the Inca Trail, Lorenzo told us a rambling tale about two sisters he was guiding. The younger disappeared, the older frantically searched for her. Found her in a tent with another trekker.

Shivering in a stone hut at 3000 meters, we waited politely while Lorenzo's story circled around and around, his English, or the way a story is told in Quechua affecting the retelling. We wanted to leave for the warmth of our down sleeping bags and our book. But we didn't want to be rude.

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Back in Cuzco, we invite Lorenzo to a tourist restaurant for dinner. There are candles, white linen tablecloths, an Inca boy with a flute playing a mournful *quena*. Lorenzo seems nervous. He casts furtive glances at the other diners, and eats quickly. We urge him to order dessert. He does, but when the chocolate cake arrives, he carefully wraps it in a napkin to take home to his family.

Outside the restaurant, it is dusk, the sky a mottled pink. Lorenzo hugs us, then walks away, turns a corner, is gone. Silently, we walk past children peddling postcards of Machu Picchu; women selling treks; tourists fingering Alpaca sweaters, holding up fingers and shouting, " five dollars, four?" at silent women who sit on the cold sidewalk knitting more. We return to the hotel of the conquistadors, climb the red-carpeted stairs, and get ready for bed. We lay in our

separate beds piled high with wool blankets, writing in our diaries. Then I take *The Conquest* from the night stand and in the fading light, read my little sister to sleep.