

A new river bridge was being lowered by crane. I put my head inside a prefabricated workmen's hut. 'Is there a café in the town?'

'Welcome to the City of the Dead,' a young woman said cheerfully, 'that's what Ayash means. One of the Inca's virgins was on a journey and fell ill here, and died. There's no café. I'm Marlana. Sit down, the company doesn't know who's drinking its coffee.'

As Elaine tethered the donkey, a smart four-wheel-drive drew up. A tall, bespectacled man stood rooted to the spot when he saw us. He burst into smiles and strode across to us. 'Eliseo López Correa, I work at the Altamina mine. Are you having a coffee? Come in! The mine is quite new; it's one of the biggest in Peru, in fact, in all of South America. There's copper and zinc, molybdenum too, it's used in light filaments and high-strength steels.'

'Are you from Lima?' asked Elaine.

'I live in Lima, but I'm Argentine, and I work for the Canadian company BHP. It works Altamina in partnership with the Peruvian Government and a Japanese firm. Lima's a long drive, so I work twenty-one days on, seven days off. This really is the City of the Dead. Up until five or six years ago, before the mine came, the village was so primitive. They never saw any whites, and they stared at us like aliens. Some locals sold land to the mine company. Once they'd drunk the money, they started agitating to have the land back, saying it belongs to the community.

They can't understand that they took the money and the land is gone. They threaten our drivers now and again, but they're usually too drunk to hurt anyone. Our contract stipulates that we provide a certain number of jobs for locals, but they have had no education, and few had ever worked for wages. Even with simple jobs like sweeping up, it was difficult to get a day's work out of them. We have provided them with everything, mains water, a proper road, a trout farm and a bridge, but most of them resent us.'

'Has any money been spent on the school, so that they will be able to compete for proper jobs in the future?'

'We've given it a new roof, but there is no one from the community to teach them. If they ever existed, they left. Outsiders won't work here, it's too remote and primitive.'

He climbed into his shiny four-wheel-drive. 'Five more days and I go back to Lima, look me up if you're there.'

We found the trail in a narrow defile, climbing behind the houses and into a meadow by a small stream, where a hummingbird was bathing in a pool. We stopped for lunch. I joined the hummingbird in the stream. Elaine took a photograph of me bathing. I was skeletally thin. My stomach had shrunk so much there were deep shadows under my ribs. In the picture I am laughing. As we ate, two horsemen stopped to talk. The older introduced himself as Umberte. 'Ah! The Inca Road! You need La Union, good luck!'

The pretty side valley took us high above the main river to a moor, where we came to a fork in the trail, not shown on the maps. We checked the orientation of the paths on the GPS, scouted ahead, waited in vain for someone to ask and eventually concluded we had no way of knowing

which one was right. Elaine scanned each route through her binoculars. 'Odd that Umberte didn't mention it; he knew we wanted the Inca Road and La Union.'

'He can't put himself in the shoes of strangers and imagine what it's like not to know this land.'

The left-hand trail swept smoothly up one valley and had some edging stones in place. The right-hand one shot straight up a much steeper valley, and Elaine, after walking ahead, called back, 'There are definitely remains of built steps.' I agreed, we went right. The climb was hard. The tight valley trapped all of the sun and none of the wind. We sweated and gasped our way upward. Every hundred yards we had to stop and get our breathing under control. At the top was a hamlet sheltered among *queuña* trees. *Queuña* looks like a tall hawthorn, but has small fleurs-de-lis leaves and a distinctive fox-coloured bark that peels away in papery sheets. It loves the high land, and can survive right up to the snowline. A group of elderly people stopped hoeing a field to observe us. I leant on my stick waiting for enough breath to ask, 'Is this the road to La Union?'

'La Union? La Union!' they whispered among themselves. 'No!' said one of the men striding towards me. 'You are on totally the wrong road, at the bottom you should have gone left. That road goes to La Union; this one goes somewhere else entirely. You have made a mistake, the other road was your road, this one is not. You must go down to the bottom, that is the right road.' Although I didn't say a word, he continued as though someone were arguing with him. Sprawled on the grass, by his horse, was Umberte. 'La Union?' he said sagely, rolling a stalk of grass from one side of his mouth to

another. 'You are on totally the wrong road. You have to go back down. Why did you not stay on the Inca Highway?'

'But is it possible to cross this ridge and return to the other road?'

'Oh yes!' said the first man. He shouted after a young woman walking out of the village. 'The señorita is going that way.' The señorita marched at full speed up the hill, then stood and watched us struggling red-faced after her. We were over 14,000 feet, it was after four o'clock and we had planned to cross the next watershed and descend to warmer levels before nightfall. We were not going to do it. We followed the contour, wading through waist-high grass, and eventually met the Inca Highway coming up a smooth grassy valley floor: perfect walking. Had we kept to it, we would now have been over the watershed and pitching the tent. For us, these open grassy sections were easy walking; we could find a rhythm and double our speed. Dapple, on the other hand, was thoroughly confused about where to go unless led by the rope, in which case she would not go at more than two miles an hour unless one of us walked behind, tapping her every ten yards. Even then, every fifty or a hundred yards she would veer off sideways, or turn round and start back the other way, her step suddenly like a ballerina's. She knew it was wrong; each time she did it her expression changed, her ears picked up and her eyes bulged. I tried steering her along the row of stones marking the road's edge, to give her something to follow. I followed behind, holding the rope, and clicking my tongue in encouragement. Ten yards later she skipped over the edge stones, and started to canter away at right angles to our path. As a sideline,

when we passed buildings, she would run into the first courtyard, provoking the dogs to come out and attack us.

We neared the col as it drew dark. There was a long knoll on our left between us and the higher ground. Behind it, we would be out of sight of the trail. The sun had gone and the air was bitter. We tethered Dapple in a sheltered corner; it had been a long day for all of us. I took water from a bog pool, teeming with larvae and tadpoles. The scene behind us was lit by the last of the light. In the clearing air, snow-capped peaks shone pink for a few minutes; an unspeakable grandeur to reward us for being here. Andean lapwings piped on the hill above. We had to cook a proper meal to stoke up on food, so we piled on all our clothing, and set to work in the dark. At higher altitudes it was harder to balance the pressure and the fuel flow. The stove kept fading and going out. Making do with the cool yellow flames which it produced when not firing properly, we boiled mounds of fresh cabbage and lathered it with butter and salt. Then the stove expired.

'I can see how you lost weight,' said Elaine.

I put together my thoughts about the donkey. We were no longer in pain from carrying the packs; however, there seemed no way to tie the load on Dapple effectively because there was too much give in the cinch. When she descended uneven ground, she always turned the same shoulder forwards, and dropped down with a lurch, working the luggage loose over that shoulder. Next day, the animal would pull out its biggest surprise.

The morning took us, warm with coca leaf tea, across haunting limestone hills. Each exposed rock, its fissures bright with the delicate orange flowers of *huamapenka*,

seemed to bear the chisel marks of its own construction, but they were the solution runnels made by trickling rain, century by century. It was glorious walking over springy turf, the trail clearly visible over the hills ahead. A small stream fell in miniature waterfalls to pools of white boulders. We stripped off and washed from head to toe, taking turns, since there was nowhere to tie Dapple. Two naked white people chasing a donkey across a plain could change the myths of a generation. Dapple's contribution to the toiletries was to stand upstream and piss, sending me scuttling until the yellow flow had passed.

'Did you see how she did that?' I asked Elaine.

'Are there two ways to pee?'

'In a way, yes. *She* used a large grey penis: we have a castrated male. Perhaps that accounts for its great suspicion of humans.'

Elaine bent down, 'You're right.'

'Men know about these things.'

The walking had been fast and comfortable, and we were able to stop a little after four. The stove would not light. I took it apart, cleaned it and put it back together. It still didn't work. The best we managed was to half-cook some eggs for tomorrow's breakfast. In the morning, I couldn't see the point of wasting more time on the stove, so breakfast was slimy, half-cooked eggs and cold water. We began walking and in half an hour, our breath still condensing, we reached an isolated smallholding where a mother and two small children were milking sheep and cows in a paddock by their two-room hut. The beautiful, self-confident mother gave us enamel mugs of steaming cow's milk; it was like cappuccino. 'We have to work hard, we are too far from the town to sell milk, so we

make cheeses. My husband went to La Union to sell them.' She paused to chase a lamb that was nibbling at curds of cow's milk sitting on a muslin cloth.

'Have another cup!' It was as good as a second breakfast.

We came to a broad shallow stream, and were pulling at Dapple to no effect, when a couple in fine woollen ponchos rode up, erect as dressage riders, with stylish trilbies. He sat in a rough wooden saddle, but hers was splendid in black leather and silver. 'Let go of the rope and drive him across,' called the man. 'He will find his own way.'

We tipped hats, they rode away.

I did as he said. Dapple crossed without much fuss, and then, when he got to the other side, ran off sideways and had to be cornered and chased down, and the luggage re-secured.

'Next time, horses,' I said.

'What next time?' said Elaine.

The river went through a small canyon where ducks rode the rapids. The road became a narrow causeway before emerging onto a high bare plain. We suffered the usual fun of driving Dapple across a plain with no path, while dogs ran half a mile downhill from tiny huts to snarl and foam and snap at Dapple's heels. The dogs' owners stood watching like scarecrows. With relief, we reached another pretty canyon where ibises' surgical beaks delved the soft banks, and a heron frowned into the still pools. We came into a hamlet of half a dozen houses and a schoolhouse. When the teacher heard we had been unable to cook, he set us down on the grass, unloaded the donkey, then brought us half a bucket of hot potatoes

boiled in the skins, with chillies and a tin of tuna. As we ate, surrounded by all six children from the school, we found out this was taken from the school's own supplies. They would accept nothing in return, except us telling them about life in the city, and giving them biscuits. I took out my notebook and they gave me the local names for some flowers and birds I had sketched. He retied the bags for me, untying the woollen cinch from the loose ring. 'You don't need this knot!' He pulled the loose ring six feet in, and folded the spare length over itself three times, and laid it across the bags. He passed the rest under its belly and tied it off. It was so neat. He patted it, 'Nothing will shift that!'

'Thank you for your food and your help.'

'That's okay, we get lots of tourists here now.'

'Really?'

'Two Spanish last year, two Frenchmen the year before. They stayed in the schoolhouse, you're sure you don't want to?'

'We have to get on.' I got to my feet. We were filthy, mud splashed to our knees, we smelled of donkey and sweat. Without thinking, I said, 'I am looking forward to getting to La Union and cleaning up.' He looked himself up and down: he was dirtier. He slapped me on the back, laughing. 'You're fine, real country people!'

Poverty can make simple things very difficult, like keeping yourself clean. I began the trip thinking people were grubby in their persons and their clothes. I soon wondered how they stayed so clean. As the house is dark and has little furniture, you spend the day outdoors unless it is raining. The children play in dirt or mud. You handle animals much of the day and pick up the grease from their

wool, the sweat from your horse. Your handshake tells the other person what animals you own. In the morning and evening the temperature at altitude is close to zero, and you can only warm water on the fire, filling the house with smoke, and your clothes stink of whatever you are burning, which includes dried animal dung. Dirt is ground in, and cold water doesn't shift it unless you scrub long and hard, and even then you cannot get it out from under your nails. On warm days you can bathe in the river, but it is icy. I found I could keep little cleaner than the locals. Carrying just one change of clothing, I wore clothes until they were filthy, or until it rained and freshened them up. When I checked into hostels in the small towns, the first thing I did was hand-wash my clothes to get my hands properly clean.

The children watched us walk away across the green space where the road became the village square, and back to the trail. The last little boy to leave us looked like a Tibetan; his smock stitched together from dozens of different rags, his cheeks, cracked red marble. His eyes were unreadable.

The next village was larger: twenty houses. We entered the only shop, ducking low under the door, into total blackness. A tiny crone emerged out of the inky gloom behind the counter. She tapered from broad skirts to a conical hat. Behind her was a huge silver ghetto blaster. When she saw me looking at it she switched it on, very loud. Now I couldn't hear either. We lit our torches, and gleaned stray items of food and drink from her meagre stocks. A short distance below the village was a grassy ledge, between two abandoned houses reduced to the stumps of their walls, like the stubborn teeth of old ewes.

Elaine put Dapple inside one. I pitched the tent and sat just inside the door, drinking wine and watching the changes in the sky. It was our last night together in the tent; time thieves away at your lives.

'Well?' asked Elaine, still organising her pack. 'What's the apple wine like?'

'Nice afterburn.'

'You just don't want to share it, do you?'

The white cloud over the mountain opposite pumped itself up into a Romantic pillar. Catching the light from a sunset out of our view, it rapidly flushed red, then pink, before intensifying to a furnace of golden-orange. Time hesitated in the sudden crisis of the sun's flood. The cloud broke into grey fragments. We climbed into our sleeping bags. She kissed me and turned her back.

In the morning, two contorted *queuña* trees stood in a high hollow, awash in undulating mist. Loose horses cantered the rising trail in liquid motion; no riders to break the line of each rippling mane, muscular back and flowing tail. Up they flew, a chestnut, a dark grey and a deep slate stallion. Gravity could lay no hand on them. We were away by eight, past men standing like muffled statues in every porch. Our path climbed while the river fell into a narrow gorge. Schoolchildren coming the other way pointed at us and took higher paths to avoid meeting us, whispering cloudlets in the air. A stone got in my boot; I stopped to empty it while Elaine plodded on with Dapple to the next local crest. The slope was heavy red mud; I scraped lumps from the soles.

Elaine screaming.