



Peru

ON THE MORNING BEFORE SARAH'S ARRIVAL, ANNIE readied the guest room, fitting the bed with freshly laundered sheets. The last of the irises were blooming and she filled a Mason jar with their leggy stems and placed it on the old oak dresser to welcome Sarah home. In the meantime, I quietly pondered the logistics of a trip to Peru, poring over maps and calculating costs and timetables. When I discussed the proposed trip with Annie, however, I was surprised by her reaction, which could hardly have been described as positive. Because of my dream, I was quite convinced that we had to go; Annie, on the other hand, was still searching for any reason not to.

"Don't they have dictators down there?" she wondered out loud. "What about terrorists? Can't you get malaria and yellow fever in the Amazon? What if we got lost? Who would ever find us? How do we know Berger's map is accurate? Maybe it leads to nowhere! Where will we sleep in the jungle? Aren't there boa constrictors, poisonous snakes, piranhas, scorpions, tarantulas, stuff like that down there? Isn't there a lot of poverty? Don't they resent Americans? What if we get robbed, or kidnapped, or held hostage?"

Well aware of her reservations, I told her, rather offhandedly, that I was planning on going to the travel agency tomorrow to check ticket prices. She stood in front of the dresser, arranging and rearranging the purple irises, her back to me. "Do you want to come with me?" I offered.

"No," she answered abruptly. "I have things to do

tomorrow.” After the outburst at the dinner table, I decided it best to leave her alone with her thoughts.

Despite her misgivings, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the four of us were supposed to go. So I stopped by the travel agency and booked four tickets from Pittsburgh to Lima, Peru. Sarah hadn’t mentioned that she needed to get back to Chicago right away. Annie had two weeks to change her mind, I rationalized, and Sarah’s friend, Michael, would probably come along for the free ride. If nobody wanted to go with me, it was Aunt Lucy’s money wasted, not mine. She’s the one who got me into this anyway, I reasoned.

On the way home, I swung by the local bookstore and picked up a copy of the South American Handbook, a book the travel agent had highly recommended. It listed nearly every town in South America, and provided useful information about hotels, restaurants, bus and train stations, markets, rates, fares, customs, warnings, and just about anything else we could have wanted to know.

The Handbook described Lima, Peru’s capital and airport hub, as very dirty and smoggy, and issued lots of warnings about pickpockets, thieves, and guerrilla activity. Puerto Maldonado, a jungle town of 10,000 at the confluence of two rivers, the Madre de Dios and the Tambopata, was described as a gold mining and timbering center around which much of the jungle had been destroyed. However, it’s location at the base of the Andes allowed for an unusual microclimate harboring unique plant and animal life; several of the best jungle reserves in the world are still located there.

How we were to go from the gold-mining town down river into the jungle was a complete mystery to me. Not to mention how to get back. The thought that we would be attempting to do this in only two weeks was so overwhelming that it seemed best, although perhaps foolhardy, to just wait and cross those bridges when we came to them.

Sarah and her friend, Michael, arrived the next day. I immediately recognized him as the one I saw in my dream,

and I couldn't help but stare at him when we were introduced. It was disconcerting enough to see someone that I had met in a dream, but when I gawked at him, I realized that I was probably giving him the same look Lucy had given me in the funeral home two decades earlier. Maybe Lucy had met *me* in a dream before we met physically. Maybe *that's* why she looked at me the way she did. Maybe that's why she decided to choose *me* as her successor in this ego-eco thing. Because of my dream, I knew that Michael was supposed to go to Peru with me. Maybe Lucy knew I was supposed to take up her cause after she died because of a similar premonition.

Luckily, they had done as I had asked and brought their passports. Michael, like Sarah, was also a senior ecology major at the University of Minnesota. Of average height and build, with thick, brown dreadlocks, his loose fitting hemp clothing and sandals gave him the appearance of a vagabond. He had traveled in Mexico extensively, and had done a sustainable agriculture internship in El Salvador the year before, so his Spanish was quite good. He seemed like a nice enough guy, and I thought he would probably be an asset to the crew. He seemed the type who said what was on his mind. Sarah, on the other hand, was quiet and spent most of her time writing poetry. She was unusually sensitive and soft-spoken, but her quietness belied a razor sharp intelligence and an uncanny perceptiveness. The two of them made an interesting addition to our little Lucy escapade.

They both were fascinated to hear the details about aunt Lucy and the "inheritance" she left me. The uncanny coincidence that they were both ecology majors who had been summoned, in essence, to investigate Lucy's "ecocide" theory did not escape me. They were mesmerized by the entire story, especially by Lucy's initial letter, and by the yellowed, cryptic note from Eduardo. They stared at them as if they were viewing the Holy Grail. The hand-drawn map of Peru also fascinated them; they acted at times like they couldn't believe this was all actually hap-

pening and that they were about to become involved. At night, Annie and I could hear their whispers in the dark, passing through the thin walls of their room.

In the evenings prior to our departure, the four of us sat by candlelight on the patio drinking homemade wine and talking at length about ecological and environmental issues. Sarah and Michael both knew a lot more than I did; they both agreed that the global environment was in a sorry state of affairs. They admitted, in frustration, that they hadn't learned about the grave nature of the issue through their coursework. In fact, they said that the concepts of ecocide and global collapse were not being addressed at all in their college ecology curriculum. If not for their own personal interest, they pointed out, they would have never been exposed to such concepts. Their classes at the university focused primarily on the pure sciences — how to identify plants and animals, rattle off genus and species names, test water for pollutants, estimate the number of board feet in a stand of trees, and write paper after paper after paper. Never once were they taught how to incorporate basic ecological practices into their personal lives. So they were excited to be involved in real-life environmental sleuthing, especially with so many bizarre twists.

None of us knew what to expect from a trip to the Peruvian jungle, and Annie was still having second thoughts. She insisted that we make out a will as well as put into writing our wishes for Penny, should we die. We decided to leave Penny with her grandmother for the two weeks we'd be gone, so we wrote out a declaration that if we should not return, Grandma would have custody. I suppose it was this notarized document more than anything that forced us to face the seriousness of our proposed undertaking. I secretly wondered if the trip would just be a waste of five thousand dollars, and I silently decided I would be satisfied if we simply got there and back again in one piece.

We did all we could to prepare ourselves for the jour-

ney into the unknown. We packed compasses, purchased solar flashlights, filled canisters with waterproof matches, checked and rechecked our emergency first aid kits, counted our water purification tablets, sharpened Swiss Army knives, rationed the freeze dried food, and waltzed around the house in our net bug hats, which delighted Penny, and took her mind off the fact that she would not be accompanying us. None of us had the slightest notion what dangers this trip might bear, and we didn't want to put our ten year-old daughter in harm's way.



WITH PENNY SAFELY TUCKED AWAY IN HER GRANDMA'S house, the four of us headed south. While the others made futile attempts at getting some sleep on the long overnight flight to Peru, I paged through my Spanish-English dictionary and tried to memorize some helpful words and phrases. I also looked through the Handbook knowing that we would be spending the first night in Lima. The Handbook listed numerous hotels, some of which were described as "Gringo-friendly and English-speaking." I underlined and bookmarked the name of the hotel that looked most appealing.

After a stop in Mexico City, and another in Panama, we landed at the Lima airport as the first rays of light crept over the mountains. Sleep-deprived and stiff, we were grateful to be on solid ground and were longing for hot showers and some decent food. Instead, we were herded between ropes down a long corridor like cattle and forced to stand in a long line to wait for customs clearance. We hoped this ordeal would soon end, not realizing that once we passed beyond the sanctuary of the customs gates, we would be thrust into the airport lobby where a throng of thieves, pickpockets and con artists waited to prey on naive Gringos like us.

I stood in line with Annie, shifting my weight from foot to foot; Sarah and Michael stood close behind us. We

had filled out our visa forms, paid the fees, and now were waiting — for what, we didn't know. Behind a glass partition, a stern-faced customs officer spread all four of our passports in front of him on the countertop. He looked at me and, in an impatient and unfriendly tone, spoke a few words in Spanish through the hole in the glass. I stared at him blankly, not comprehending a word he was saying. He repeated himself even more loudly, almost shouting at me. I turned to Michael in desperation.

"He wants to know where we'll be staying," Michael explained.

"Tell him I don't know. I have no idea."

Michael exchanged a few words with the officer and then looked at me. "He said he can't let us into the country unless we have an address where we'll be staying."

"Damn! I didn't know that. Tell him OK. Stall him for a minute. I have an address."

While Michael pacified the customs guard, I rooted through my bag and pulled out the trusty Handbook. I opened it to the page I had marked, and handed it to the guard, pointing to the underlined hotel address. He hastily transcribed the information onto the customs forms, stamped our passports and dismissed us with a frown and a curt wave of his arm.

The waiting throng descended upon us like blood-thirsty mosquitoes. People were shouting and shoving, grabbing at our bags, offering to be our guides, pulling us every which way. We yanked our bags back and shoved our way through the swarm, trying our best to ignore them without being pickpocketed or robbed. At the front door of the airport, we all breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that we had successfully escaped the frenzy. But at the curb's edge, another horde, this time of shouting taxi drivers, jockeyed for position and bargained for the privilege of chauffeuring us to Lima.

"*Cuanto cuesta?* How much?" I asked.

"Ten dollars!" they clamored, all scrambling to be in front, some trying to take our bags to load in their idling

cabs.

“Five dollars!” I shouted back.

“No, no. Ten dollars!”

“*Cinco!* Five! *No mas!* No more!” I insisted.

My bargaining worked. All of the cab drivers turned their backs to us and walked away, disgusted. We were now free from the maddening mob, but had no ride into Lima. The four of us stood on the sidewalk outside the airport as taxi after taxi left with passengers. We dare not set our bags down. Here we were in Peru, finally, and apparently I was so cheap that even the cab drivers wouldn't have anything to do with us. Soon, only one battle-scarred cab remained at the curb's edge. Its owner, a skinny man with wavy black hair shook his arm out the driver's side window. “Six dollars!” he shouted.

“Six dollars, okay!” I replied. Sighing with relief, we threw our bags into the trunk of the cab and piled in. Sarah tried to roll her window down, but the crank turned freely and the window didn't move. My window was already down and I tried to roll it up a little. Mine didn't move either. What did we expect for six dollars? Windows that worked? The driver climbed into his seat, turned and asked, in Spanish, where we were headed. Once again, the Handbook saved the day. I handed it to him, he recognized the name of the hotel, and a half hour later we were at its front door.

The driver pulled up to the front of the hotel, blocking traffic on the narrow street, got out and wrestled our bags from the trunk. He carried them into the narrow, three-story stuccoed building. We were greeted by Nellie, a friendly, English speaking, middle-aged Peruvian lady. As she guided us down a dim hallway, she explained that the rates were four dollars per night, per room. I told her that we would only be staying one night, and would need transportation back to the airport early the following morning.

“Where are you heading?” she asked, in heavily accented English, twisting the key in the doorlock. She pushed open the door with her hip, and stepped aside to let us

enter.

I set my luggage down on the floor, and took out my wallet to pay her for the rooms. “A place called Puerto Maldonado,” I explained.

“Puerto Maldonado? Are you going to visit the rainforest? Do you need a guide? I have a friend who may be able to help you. But, you get settled first. I’ll see if she’s around.”

Sarah and Michael dragged their bags into their small room and collapsed on the narrow bed, after propping their door open with a clay pot they had scavenged from the breezeway. Annie stripped off her socks and hiking boots and stretched out on our double bed. In an instant, her eyes closed, and she was fast asleep. I busied myself, sorting through our luggage, and rearranging our gear. I found the map, safely tucked away in the side pocket of my pack, and smoothed it out on the floor to examine it more closely.

A knock on the door broke my concentration. A young woman in blue jeans and a white shirt stood in the doorway. As I stood with the map in hand, I pointed to Annie, asleep in the bed, and put a finger to my lips, stepping out into the hall.

“Do you speak English?” I asked the young woman.

“Si,” she replied. “My name is Rosa, I’m a friend of Nellie’s. She told me that you need a guide for Puerto Maldonado.”

I showed her the crude map and she immediately assured me that she could get us there the next day, for a “small fee.” We bargained back and forth until we finally arrived at a price. I agreed to pay her fifty percent down, gave her the money, and signed a handwritten contract with her. I’d pay the rest when we arrived at our destination. Rosa assured me that she would arrange for a guide to be waiting for us at the airport in Puerto Maldonado. She didn’t ask me for any additional information, and I didn’t offer her anything beyond Berger’s map.

I tried to rest after Rosa left, but my mind kept wan-

dering through the events that had led us here. Besides, I was too tired and too famished to think very clearly. Before long, Michael and Sarah appeared at the doorway, wiping their bleary eyes. “We’re starving,” Sarah said, patting her stomach. “Are you up for something to eat?” Annie easily roused at the suggestion of food, and we all stumbled down the hall together in search of Nellie. Surely she could suggest a suitable restaurant within walking distance. Nellie pulled a small map of Lima out of the drawer at the check-in desk and circled a spot on it.

“This restaurant is very nice, and not too far to walk. I think you will like it. The food is very good. Here is where you are now.” She circled the spot on the map where her hotel was located. “Keep the map with you and you won’t get lost.”

We stepped out into the crowded, dirty, dry streets of Lima and soon walked past a ten foot high pile of garbage, choking on its awful stench. In twenty minutes, we arrived at the main square, a haven, according to the Handbook, for thieves and pickpockets. It was now mid-afternoon, we had been up all night with almost no sleep, and had eaten very little since we left home almost 24 hours earlier.

We walked along the streets at a fast pace, ignoring the stares of the locals, searching unsuccessfully for the restaurant Nellie had recommended. Finally, when we were about to give up, Annie exclaimed, “Look, there it is!” She gestured toward a stuccoed building squeezed between similar structures on a crowded stretch of sidewalk. An elegantly carved wooden sign hung over its entranceway. A man in a starchy purple uniform stood on the stone stairs by the door, greeting patrons. He beckoned us to come in.

“Let’s go in,” Annie urged.

“Yes, I’m starving,” Sarah said.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding,” I insisted. “A meal there would probably cost a small fortune. I don’t think this was the place Nellie was talking about. Surely she could see we’re not rich.”

“Yep, this is it,” confirmed Michael.

“OK, OK, whatever,” I conceded.

A team of uniformed waiters, impeccably dressed in starched white shirts and fuchsia overcoats seated us at an ornately carved mahogany table covered with a crisp, white tablecloth. A crystal vase overflowing with fresh cut flowers graced the center of the table.

“We can’t afford this place,” I insisted to Annie. “Look at these prices. This is ridiculous. Twenty thousand Intis for a plate of seafood!”

“How much is that in dollars?” asked Sarah.

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know. This place is *way* beyond our means. Lucy may be paying our expenses, but there’s no need to squander her money.”

“Relax, dear, we’re here,” Annie cajoled. “Let’s just order something and enjoy ourselves for once. We can splurge this one time. We don’t need to order full course dinners.”

A waiter approached and asked for our drink order. He recommended a “pisco sour,” a popular local brandy drink, similar to a Mexican margarita.

“Oh hell, why not. Make that four,” I replied, holding up four fingers. “*Quatro, por favor.*”

The waiter returned with four large frosty glasses filled with the iced pisco sour. They were delicious. Being famished, we drained them before the waiter came back to take our orders. “*Quatro* more pisco sours,” I requested with a smile. I pointed to a menu item which we guessed was a seafood platter. “*Dos*,” I requested two of them, feeling financially brazen after such strong drink.

A new round of drinks and two huge platters of delicious shellfish were placed on the table. “Eat up,” I urged. “We’ll be broke after this.” After two drinks on an empty stomach, I was almost beginning to slur my words. The other three couldn’t finish their potent drinks, so I had to do it for them. Soon, I was feeling much better. Until the bill came.

The waiter approached gingerly, with a small silver tray in his hand. The bill was lying facedown on the tray.

He bowed forward, set the tray in front of me, and then turned curtly and quickly walked away. With a grimace, I flipped the bill over, praying that the fifty dollars worth of Intis in my wallet would cover it. I had exchanged some money during our stroll through the square, and still had the exchange slip in my pocket with the exchange rate printed on it. I pulled it out and began converting the restaurant bill into dollars.

“I don’t believe this,” I whispered to myself. “You guys won’t believe this!” I announced to the other three.

“Oh no. How much is it?” asked Annie, a worried look crossing her face.

“Those sea food platters were one dollar each! The cocktails were twenty-five cents! Unfrigginbelievable! The total bill comes to four dollars!”

“See, I *told* you,” Annie replied. “All that worry for nothing! Now you can afford to leave a tip.”

I left a hefty twenty cent tip and we all stumbled out the front door into the sunlight, three sheets to the wind, but jubilant. The heat hit us like a slap in the face as we stepped out of the cool restaurant into the blistering afternoon. We only had to stagger two blocks to a marketplace to find more food being served at an outdoor café. Here, they offered a huge plate of rice and chicken, with a large bowl of turkey vegetable soup, and a tall fruit drink, for forty cents. Suddenly, our four dollar restaurant bill looked like highway robbery. Although I wasn’t too sure about visiting a witch doctor in Peru, I was beginning to like it here, nonetheless. The prices, at least, were right.