

The Horseman

My timid personality and lack of self esteem had not prepared me for the two week riding bacchanal that my father had planned. The several times that my mother had asked me to ride her horses when I was a young boy, I had always retreated into a pit of lame excuses. I probably rationalized that if god had wanted us to ride horses, we would have been born with no bones in our tail ends.

I had just turned 9 years old and my father had asked me just one week before if I wanted to go with him on a very exciting adventure. The adventure was a two week camping/riding trip.

He had just sold the government of Colombia 36,000 hectares of land in a remote location. Part of the contractual agreement was that a full boundary survey of the area would be done prior to turning the property to the government. He had decided to do at least a preliminary recognition of the area, before committing the people and equipment to do the survey.

The land to be surveyed was controlled by a guerrilla group, that only two months before had decided to come to the negotiating table. When the agreement for a permanent cease fire was reached, one of the conditions was that the government would provide the ex-combatants with land so that they could be integrated into the economy. The government deduced that the most logical solutions would be to give the rebels the land that they had occupied for close to 20 years.

Armed with advanced information, my father had acquired an option to buy 110,000 hectares for \$1 (pesos) a hectare a full six months prior. He was one of a very close circle of friends that knew that there would be a *coup d'etat* and that one of the main items in the new government's agenda would be the obtainment of a victory or a peace agreement *ipso facto*. My father had sold 36,000 hectares of the optioned land to the government for \$36 pesos a hectare (rather symmetrical). Since he had only an option, he had only to put down 10% of the value and stood to make 3,600% profit on just a portion of the land. (All of it was rather obscene). He intended to keep the rest of the land for its mineral potential. In Colombia, the mineral rights are the property of the government, but since the property had been a royal land grant from the king of Spain to the current owners in the 16th century, the mineral rights remained with the surface owner. Various reports indicated that the property contained valuable mineral resources.

On a bright morning my father, two of his engineers and I started the trip in a Jeep 4 WD station wagon. After approximately 6 hours of eating dust we arrived at the city of Miraflores, approximately 200 miles East of the capital city of Santa Fé de Bogotá. Typical of my father, he had not made any plans to assure that I would be able to stay on the saddle during the two week joy ride. The day before the long trek started, as an

afterthought, he sent one of his engineers to purchase a horse of my liking and to teach me how to ride it.

The second place we visited in search of a proper mount, was a gipsy camp located just outside the city limits of Miraflores. One of the gipsies offered us a young mere, just slightly bigger than a pony. Assuming that falling a shorter distance I would feel less pain, I chose the small horse as my crotch torturer for the next two weeks.

After buying a Spanish saddle (cow boy saddle in the US), I spent a couple of hours riding around the town, mostly with the engineer walking ahead leading the horse. I can say with the veil of 40 + years that I became a little more comfortable about horses that day. I think this feeling was provoked by the realization that this small horse was at least 12 inches shorter than my mother's horses.

Let's Cut to the Chase....

Typical of my father, he woke up at 5:00 AM the next morning and proceeded to inform me, while lighting his first cigarette, that we had to get ready to go in 30 minutes. I looked out the window to see pitch darkness, and turned over wishing that I had not agreed to come in this trip. As usual, he insisted and soon I realized the futility of ignoring a person that believed every one should be up with the sun (preferably before).

After a Colombian country breakfast of coffee brewed with unrefined sugar, fresh bread, and a piece of salami, we walked over to where the horses had been stabled for the night. To my surprise, my fathers mount was not a horse but a mule. This mule was bigger than anyone I had ever seen and when I inquired about it, my dad explained that this type of mule was the offspring of a male horse and a female ass. He added that if you were to take a steep trail, a mule had much better footing, and is stronger in a long ride. He also told me that my choice of the small mere was wise as she could negotiate the steep, narrow trails with ease.

My father first checked the tightness of the saddle under-strap, or cinch, and the shoes for his mule and my horse. After making sure we had a good chance of staying in the saddles we mounted and started the trek. We were in the middle of the column that consisted of the engineers, two guides provided by the local Army garrison, four cow boys (arrieros) leading 8 mules with assorted surveying and camping equipment and supplies, and my father and me.

At this point I would have to stop to give you an image of what my father looked like in his new (to me) costume. As a base line, imagine that I had always seen this man in business clothes, and at this stage in his life as a rather dandy dresser. Now he looked like a Mexican bandit played by Anthony Queen. He had a two day growth of beard was wearing a pair of beige pants, over a pair of short boots, a light color shirt and an open brown mid length jacket. He had a 38 caliber Smith & Wesson revolver in

a leather holster at his waist, and to top it all off, a wide rim cream colored hat. He looked more like a bandido than a business man. He had been raised in a coffee plantation in central Colombia, and according to his own folklore, he had broken horses as a teen. I have to say that he looked very comfortable on the saddle of the big mule.

Soon we had left the paved streets of the town behind, and were heading down a narrow trail with deep ruts that made walking difficult for our mounts. My little horse was having probably more trouble than the other larger animals, and was soon left behind, as I admired the rather picturesque winding trail with its fenced and treed edges.

After a particularly deep series of ruts that made me zig-zag from side to side of the trail, I noticed that I was alone. Here I am, a timid, underdeveloped child of nine, alone in a completely unknown area. I had not been alone for more than 15 minutes at the time since I remembered, the new freedom was less than exhilarating. I debated whether I should go back to town, about one hour away, or continue and try to catch up. The fear of suffering my father's disappointment forced me to continue.

Not trusting the loyalty of my new horse, I decided to be assertive and force the pace. Soon we were doing a decent gallop, as the terrain had taken a turn for the better. We appeared to have reached a plateau and I thought I could see a cloud of dust a distance ahead. Not having a point of reference, I couldn't tell if it was half a mile or 2 miles ahead. It was also possible that the cloud of dust was not my father's party. As I approached peasants busily trying to irk a living out of the poor land, I would yell at them whether they had seen a man in a tall mule wearing a cream colored hat. Invariably the answer would be, that he had gone by some time before, but nothing specific as to the length of time. With my heart in my mouth I kept going and asking, until at about 1:00 PM I found my dad having some light liquid refreshment in the small all purpose shop by the trail. Of course, I knew better than to mention or ask why he had let me behind. Probably some kind of initiation in the horsemen club....

What reptiles do

The first time it happened it was the first day at around 2:00 PM. The sun was starting to go below the highest point in the sky, when we climbed to just another plateau. My horse's ears rose up, some of the hair in her back rose straight up and she stopped. I turned to my father and asked him of the reason for this unexpected reaction and he pointed to the fairly short grass ahead that appeared to be alive with snake-like movement. Snakes of all descriptions and sizes appeared to be sunning themselves on the semi-bald piece of land. Later many times I wondered whether that was what I really saw, and what my dad told me.

When one lives in the tropics, there is a very magical reality on one's perception of nature. While it would be logical to know what kind of creatures populate the low

lands near ones place of habitation, the opposite is usually the norm. We are raised on stories of animals half tarantula and half poisonous snake, that live below the floors of any house one chooses to spend the night, and other similar improbable monsters. The locals, either because they believe the same nonsense or because they like to see city folk make fools of themselves, usually corroborate even the most absurd tales. Imagine my panic when confronted with a large piece of land, right in my path, covered with snakes.

As I tried to dismount, my father rode next to me and stopped me in no uncertain way. He very tensely told me that the horse and I were a lot larger and very intimidating to the snakes, and that I could not get off the horse. He instructed me to stand tall on the saddle to give the horse the idea that I had a handle on the situation, and gently guide the horse through the snake covered plot. To my surprise, the horse believed my bluff and as it started to walk slowly, the reptiles moved out of the way. After all, even a small horse weighs several hundred pounds, which can do severe damage to the bravest slitherer. This was one of the first points that my father made with me in this trip. It was amazing to see this other side of my father, later in life I kept learning amazing things about this complex man, many of them not very comfortable.

The rest of the day slipped by with very little additional excitement. At about 5:30 PM we arrived at the Army post that was our target for that day. The colonel that ran the post had been notified in advance of our arrival and he had the VIP accommodations ready for us. We were taken to the headquarters building, the only real building in the area, and given a chance to freshen up before a meal of spam, rice and fresh fried plantain was put in front of us and quickly consumed.

More reptiles...

After a filling dinner and a longer adult smoking and drinking couple of hours, we were left to go to bed. We were all very tired and we were glad to see the very welcoming canopied beds. These beds were set in adjacent rooms, 2 for my father and me in one room and the three engineers in the other room. The helpers and soldiers were of course asked to sleep in tents or in the troop shelters. Light in the rooms was provided by gasoline lamps. The light was mostly shaded away inside the mosquito nets hanging from the bed canopies, these semi-darkness and the full day were enough to put me to sleep in a question of minutes.

At first I could not locate the source of the sound that woke me a couple of hours later. The full moon was coming through one of the windows behind my bed and as I laid in my bed, I could see inside the canopied bed clearly. To my panic, the left post of the bed was waving. Some portions of it were fatter than others and the swollen part was moving up.

Dad...., dad...., DAD!! I could not believe the sound coming out of my mouth was

my own voice. In a question of seconds my old man was standing near my bed looking at my terrified face. He followed my terrified gaze and with the help of a flash light, he found the reptile. He was curled up around the post. He was large, his head was the size of a toy poodle's, and he was mostly black. He was probably close to 2 1/2 meters in length, and terrifying to me.

My dad gingerly poked the snake with his bone handle horse whip. It reluctantly moved away down the post and on to the floor of the room and out of sight. I was reminded of this reluctance later in life when a cat that honored us with his companion would take this approach when poked by my foot to move away from my bed. The snake was trying to tell us with its actions that it was the permanent resident and us only interlopers.

After petting my head lightly, he explained to me that it was common for rural people to keep non-poisonous snakes to control rodents and other pests inside buildings. This was not a good explanation to a 9 year old. I must have stayed awake for a good portion of an hour seeing the snake in every shadow.

The Life of a Trooper

The next morning we waked up late. The bugles that I expected never happened, probably because in this outpost that part of military procedure had been discarded in favor of a more camouflaged life. A quick look outside revealed most soldiers engaged in different types of drills and cleaning up activities. There were people washing clothes, dishes, horses and themselves. Those drilling were marching and executing all types of unit commands, this part of my perspective could be taking place in any military post in the world, if one cover one's ears.

In a segregated part of the field there were some rather strange goings on. Rather comical figures appear to be engaged in a futile exercise. Heavy canvas bags that they were carrying were full of fist sized rocks. The soldiers would carry the bags to one end of the field and would empty them, as well as all of their pockets that were full of smaller size rocks, they would move laterally to the place where another soldier had unloaded rocks and would proceed to fill their bags and pockets. After that, they would proceed to the other end of the field where the procedure would be repeated.

When my father inquired about the rock detail he received a grown up answer - *Esos son los dañados* - they are the perverts. Which my dad promptly pass on to his group by telling them "*Esos son los maricas*". Later experience led me to learn that the sin for what the troopers were being punished was homosexuality. The long periods of time that they had to be in this outpost, without feminine companionship created a "... love the one you are with." attitude. The message by the military is that those that couldn't wait for the periodic visit by the prostitutes, deserved to be punished.

Every couple of months the horny soldiers would be treated to one night with the girls. The dates were gathered by the military from the red-light districts in cities from the Western part of the country. Without any notice, a couple of military trucks would be sent through the sin cities and every pro would be grabbed, transported to a military airport, put in a military transport and asked to do her bit for the defense of the country. Each prostitute would serve up to 20 soldiers during the night, and would be compensated fairly for this. After a good meal, they would be returned to their places of regular toil, just in time to go to mass and home for a well earned rest. These visiting girls were generally known as *Las Juanas* (the Joans). Later I learned that this practice was not exclusive of Colombia. In several other countries the same practice was followed, so much for military cooperation.

Obviously, all this events and subsequent analysis were only registered in my mind in an orderly and logical manner years later, when I was able to digest it all.