

Regalo

Lake Quilotoa: a 'must see' for any intrepid visitor to Ecuador's high Andes, an incomparable landscape of emerald waters in a collapsed caldera; beneath, if you are lucky enough to arrive on a cloudless day, a cornflower-blue sky.

We are lucky enough. My daughter, Mindy, and I approach our 12,000 foot destination at lake's rim in a third generation, discarded school bus. We fight off nausea from the sight of twenty live hens bought at the market in Latacunga, tied by their feet, still clucking, and dropped, fluttering from the roof of the bus at the last stop. We breathe in diesel fumes that fill the interior with every acceleration as the bus laces its way around blind curves on the one lane dirt road. The hillside drops 5,500 feet to the valley floor as we approach yet another turn. The driver honks to warn oncoming buses, bicycles, sheep, and shepherds, stopping several times to allow a wooly sea to part.

When the doors open, our heads clear with the dazzling and dizzying vistas below Cotopaxi, one of Ecuador's highest volcanoes. It's cold, despite the cloudless sky of May at the equator. No surprise. We're far from the soggy air of the Amazon and only steps from the oxygen-starved heavens of the Andean Sierra.

As we zip jackets, pull down our fleece hats, and search for gloves in our North Face packs, a few forward scouts from the row of black and brown felt hats at the caldera's edge draw near. At first, their voices are too low to hear, but finally, one guide steps out and offers without pressure, or even expectation, "*¿Guía? ¿Guía a Chugchilán?*"

We've been warned. "You don't need a guide," our innkeeper at Mama Hilda's in Chugchilán assured us. "Just follow the rim around to the third low sandy spot from the viewpoint. Scan the horizon first to get the right one before heading off, and then turn down the

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hill. The guides often remove the arrows that we place near the lake to encourage more business for themselves, but as soon as you drop over the edge, you'll see our blue, 'Mama Hilda' signs."

I avoid the guide's imploring eyes and sense he would rather avoid mine. "*No gracias*," I say firmly, wagging my finger like I've been taught for the marketplace in Mexico. He does not persist and pulls back into the line of men with their poppy-colored ponchos and dark trousers.

I look beyond the tops of their hats. I want to peer down on the jade waters of Lake Quilotoa to see how they compare to the sapphire of our own Crater Lake back home in Oregon. But first we have to pass through a gauntlet of permanent stares and stalls, each one the same with a rainbow of woven *rebozo* wraps, embroidered belts, and key chains—the same as those picked up on earlier trips to Oaxaca or Antigua or even Tijuana. They must share the profits at the end of the day, I think to myself, the first ones with little hope of making a sale, but the last, almost assured as guilt tightens its grip.

I weigh my own. Scanning the hillside, I find a way around the single row of *negociantes* who are quietly spinning and weaving behind table runners or leaning forward on worn elbows. I signal for Mindy, finishing her last two weeks of a semester abroad, and our new French friend, Annette, to follow.

At the crater's edge, we are allowed a few moments to inhale what little oxygen there is in the air and to exclaim over the jewel *laguna* below. Suddenly, a young girl pops out from behind a frozen lava outcropping. She wears the knee-length, velvet skirt of most Quichuan women and girls. It's overlaid by an orange-red poncho and capped with one of the signature woolen fedoras—postcard perfect.

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“*¿Regalo? ¿Regalo? ¿Foto? ¿Foto? por favor.*” Her hand reaches out from under the poncho and leaves little doubt as to the meaning of her appeal, despite her sparse Spanish. “Gift? Gift? Photo? Photo, please?”

We have read in the guidebook, “Do not take photos. To take a photo is to take a soul,” so her request surprises me. I look down. I see the wealth on my feet. I feel the weight of the wealth on my back.

“*¿Regalo, regalo, foto?, por favor.*”

“*No gracias, no gracias.*”

We turn down a trail just below the rim, but she pursues us from above. When we scramble over the cinders again to check our route, she is there. I sense she is being followed, shadowed, pushed along by someone only steps away.

As it becomes clear that we are about to escape down the mountain, her requests turn bold, aggressive, desperate. The marketplace appeal disappears.

“*Tengo hambre. ¡Regalo, regalo!*” “I’m hungry. A gift, a gift!” she says.

I am shocked—shocked by her brashness, shocked by her pursuit, by her persistence—overwhelmed by her poverty, the poverty of lichenless boulders, of stunted pinions leaning into the brutal wind.

My pace quickens. I practically trip over my fear of empty pockets and eyes, the shameless selling of oneself, of one’s child, of one’s soul. I am afraid of being played, of being asked for more than I can give, more than I will give, more than I can feel.

We slip down the side of the mountain on the cushioned grasses of the Andean *páramo* as quickly as we can go. The pleading voices and hawking choruses fade behind us, “*Señora,*

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señora...una blusa, una manta, un recuerdo, ¿no quiere nada?” “Ma’am, ma’am...a blouse, a blanket, *un recuerdo*...don’t you want anything?”

Un recuerdo?

No, thank you. I have a *recuerdo*...a souvenir...a remembrance.

Soon we are gasping from the breath-seizing splendor along the six-hour trek from crater rim to remote village, descending through the Toachi canyon and up again. The trails are confusing as we come to one fork after another, no signs in sight. More than once, a guide, accompanying a more humble *gringa* behind us, whistles loudly to draw us back to the correct route, though he has nothing in his pockets to require such kindness. My confidence recedes as I am forced to confess my ignorance to my fellow hikers.

The terraced highlands alternate cultivated potatoes and grains with open fields of *páramo* grass. Here and there, creamy flocks chew away at the hardy blades.

Suddenly, like a flash of the real entering a dream, I catch sight of a shoeless and buttonless child racing across the stone-studded hillside directly towards us. At first we cannot make out her words, but as she draws near, they are familiar,

“¿Regalo? ¿Regalo?”

Perhaps a hundred yards away, her mother, though barely beyond childhood herself, anxiously watches from an opening in a pile of stones meant to protect the entrance to a cave. Scattered throughout the valley and along the mountain’s exposed ribs, tidy *chozas*, with their triangle rooftops of dried grasses, seem luxurious compared to this shelter. If I had to guess, I would say there is no man to build a better one, to tend a flock, to remove the stones and shape the ground where crops might feed the mother and child. Even in this landscape of abundant

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beauty and shared poverty, there are those who envy their neighbors. They have to wait and watch for small bands of tourists who come down from the *laguna*, like cups of water falling from the sky.

“*¿Regalo? ¿Regalo?*” she pleads again.

I begin searching through my pack. I have not eaten my lunch, and even though I’m not yet hungry, perhaps I will be. “What should I give her?” I ask my daughter. I hesitate over the sandwich. I pull out a pomegranate. As I place it in her hungry hands—in another jarring flash—it is snatched away.

We are both stunned. An older sister has it firmly in her grip. She is about to turn and run when I stop her with an angry command, “*Necesitas compartir. ¡Comparte con tu hermana!*” “You need to share. Share with your sister!”

The younger one looks at once bolstered by my command and fearful that she will never take a bite of my gift. Her eyes dart back and forth between me and her competitor. The older girl hesitates, tells me what I want to hear, “*S-s-sí, Señora,*” and then greedily runs away.

I am incensed. I can’t believe it. How dare she steal from her own sister?

Then it hits me: Hunger cannot compromise. An empty stomach has no room for justice or mercy. The cup never overflows here. I continue on with my sandwich still buried in the bottom of my pack.

The way is steep, so steep that my knees begin to shake. I slip on the loose, volcanic talus. The path is narrow, so narrow that we must press our backs against the rock wall to allow others returning from market to pass, recalling “a camel through the eye of a needle”; only this time it is llamas. Over eight miles and 7,000 feet of elevation loss and gain, families carry

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baskets of potatoes, sacks of quinoa and rice, and, on their backs, vegetables. The leaves of carrots, turnips and other tubulars fan out beyond their ponchos and above their hats like rooster tails. Restless children coax turkeys, hens, and even pigs on leashes up the hillside, while a grandfather follows behind, patiently whispering to his peer; an old ram who occasionally needs his hind legs lifted over a stair step carved in the rock. More than once I find myself face to face with an unfriendly llama, spitting and snorting and in desperate need of a bath.

As we approach a steep drop in the trail, we hear the uneven steps and heavy breathing of someone or something struggling to come up. We look up, not to the usual fruit-basket of color but to a small face, masked with the black and gray of soot and charcoal; brittle, uncovered hair flaring out as if it had been chopped off with a dull kitchen knife. Adrenaline and fear shoot abruptly through my veins as I turn to check the reaction of my more seasoned daughter. Her eyes signal equal alarm. It is a child, yet, a feral-child, like one of the scavenging mongrels in the market near the bus station: kicked, beaten, and skeletal. She climbs what we can barely descend, crushed by a burden meant for a beast. Lashed to her slumped shoulders are branches harvested deeper in the canyon to boil the morning's porridge or perhaps to heat one of the *chozas* that huddle against the mountainside. She does not look down or away. Rather, her eyes, like drill bits, bore into us with searing pain and the desperation of a prey.

Behind her walks a woman in the full color of Sunday mass and market day. *Her mother? Her master?* She has no bundles, no baskets. She carries only knitting sticks and yarn that is quickly becoming a scarf or sweater in her hands as she strolls. She does not look up, does not see us. She does not see the pain she inflicts on the child with her clicking needles and burdenless ascent.

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Horror floods my throat. I want to speak, but I do not. I want to scream, but I do not. I want to lift the load from her back and comb her hair and offer her something to drink...but I do not.

I pause and look up the hill... “I don’t know the culture,” I suggest to myself, “It’s not my business,” I hear my mouth say to my heart. “The woman, she might become enraged, might become violent if I interfere.”

I turn back. In the brief seconds of my whispered denials, they are gone—each one. And I am left full, empty, and ashamed.