



The Micronavigator In The Peruvian Highlands

3900 Words

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“Do you often like to make sex standing up in a hammock?” asked the Micronavigator, regarding me with a statesman-like demeanor radiating wisdom and calm.

He seemed strangely conciliatory for a moment, not dyspeptic and argumentative like he normally was.

I looked at him – puzzled. Things the Micronavigator said often made me look at him – puzzled. He returned my stare, silent as the Diablo Mudo, the Mute Devil mountain that towered above us in the Peruvian highlands.

Finally I caved, “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means: Do you often like to do things the most difficult way possible?” he clarified with in the sonorous voice and accent of a British prime minister, but now full of the imperiousness and irritation that was more typical of his tone.

“Not always,” I answered, now that I knew what he was talking about. “It’s just that if the man is going to rob me he should point that rifle at me and say ‘give me all your cash’, and then I’ll turn over my wallet.”

I was referring to The Nose, a roguish looking little man who stood next to us demanding 45 Soles. A large oily nose shaped like the beak of a scavenging bird – a vulture, perhaps – dominated his brown, leather-like face. He had slits for eyes and thin, tightly stretched lips that did not fully cover his teeth. He wore faded, frayed clothing. Over his shoulder hung

an ancient looking rifle whose barrel appeared to be taped to its stock.

He had materialized from no place in particular. We could not see any settlements in the valley when we arrived. But no sooner had we unloaded Julio, Belesario and Alan, our three donkeys (the last apparently named after a Peruvian president), and begun setting up camp than we could see this lone figure descending the foothills across the river and advancing toward us.

He arrived. We called each other Amigo; exchanged greetings, pleasantries, handshakes and personal information: name, age, nationality, marital status and occupation.

I informed him that I was a lawyer. That had been my profession before I commenced my perpetual wanderings. The Nose seemed impressed to meet a lawyer. From that moment on he deferentially called me “El Doctor.”

He introduced himself as a deputy of the regional “peasant community” and demanded 45 Soles from each of us for the right to camp in their valley.

Feeling anomalously uncombative, the Micronavigator, my recently-acquired hiking companion, promptly paid up.

He was a tall, ungainly man in his late 50’s with ski-length shoes, a gaunt face, an unmanicured bushy mustache of different length gray and black hairs poking out in all directions, and pale-blue, bugged-out eyes.

“The Micronavigator” wasn’t really his name. His real name was Nigel. But I rarely called him that, ever since our dinner in the Grand Hotel Huayhuash the night before we started our hike in the cordillera.

It was to be our last proper meal for more than a week, and we were masticating the Lomo de Paris in the best restaurant in Chiquian.

We sat in a spare dining room, decorated with but a single poster that hung near our table. It was an old poster calendar – 2007. In bold letters it proclaimed, “Banco Nacional de Semen.” For each month there was a photo of a different bull. In smaller type italics the bank promised “Toros Jovenes” – Young Bulls – and further down provided telephone numbers to call.

“Does that say what I think it says?” asked Nigel. His Spanish was not very good.

I confirmed his hunch.

“That’s an odd thing to hang in a restaurant,” he mused aloud, “though, on the other hand, people are really into their animals here, aren’t they?” He raised his eyebrows and gave me a knowing smile. “You know, a few weeks back I was hiking in the Alpayayo, and passing through a village there was a sign, with two little Indian women sitting under it, knitting or something. And the sign said, in English, ‘We do donkey service,’ and I thought to myself, ‘Just what do they have in mind?’”

He fumbled around in his backpack and pulled out his digital camera to show me a photo. In front of a corrugated iron shack sat two traditionally dressed indigenous women spinning yarn. In irregularly shaped capital letters on the side of the shack was spray-painted

“SE VENDE CERVEZA GASEOSA” and then “WE DO DONKIES SERVIS ANY TIME AND MAKE FOOD”.

We resumed eating. Nigel made some obscene comments . . . advancing various improbable theories about the Indian women and the donkeys . . . and then, without any transition, he said something

strange.

“You’ll be pleased to know that I’m a licensed micronavigator,” he casually announced, tilting his head slightly back and raising his eyebrows significantly. He often raised his eyebrows. Now he watched, awaiting my reaction.



The Micronavigator navigating his way across the altiplano.

I stared at him blankly, continued chewing, and thought to myself: What the hell does that mean?

I swallowed what I could not chew and said: “What the hell does that mean?”

“Count your paces, lad! Count your paces,” Nigel answered, and then launched into some sort of recital only certain fragments of which I now recall: rain, bearings, soup. Scottish Highlands, fog, turned around. Exact place on the map. “Don’t want to get caught in the soup with your pants down . . . don’t want to get caught in the soup.”

“What?”

It turned out that he had qualified for some sort of certificate in Scotland for knowing how to find his way in the mountains without actually being able to see the landscape, using only a map and a compass –

something like instrument flying, but on the ground . . . and without an airplane.

From then on I called him “The Micronavigator”.

Now we stood on the Pampa, arguing with each other and with The Nose.

“What he’s asking for is eight quid. I mean that’s fifteen dollars or so. Wouldn’t it be EASIER to just pay the bugger and be done with it, instead of wasting time. I mean, you ARE annoying the man. And he IS carrying a rifle.”

“It’s not the 45 Soles,” I protested. “It’s just that that I’m not turning over my cash to a crook unless he

threatens to take it by force.”

“Well . . . alright then,” said the Micronavigator. “I’m going to leave you two here to sort things out while I go drop a squirrel.” He began moving away toward the bushes that grew on the mountainside, but paused after a few paces and turned back to speak.

“How’re you doing with toilet paper?”

I wasn’t prepared for that query. “Fine . . . I suppose. You need some?”



Julio and Belesario contemplate their mortality.

“Well . . . it’s just that my bowels have been working faster than my brain. What I mean is that I’ve run a bit short, you see. I didn’t actually bring any rolls. I’ve got some Sudoku books with me, and all along I’ve

been using the Sudoku puzzles that I’d completed the night before. Problem is, I’m beginning to think that’s not a sustainable strategy.” With those words he turned and lumbered off, leaving me alone with The Nose.

The Nose claimed to be a representative of one of the peasant communities that lived in the Cordillera Huayhuash. Some years ago, after a number of armed robberies and murders in the mountains, the regional government organized the villages to maintain security. In return for their vigilance, the communities were allowed to tax hikers who passed through their territory. We had been told before starting the trek where we would have to pay, and we had already paid what was supposed to have been the last of these taxes.

This, combined with The Nose's shady, shoddy appearance, made me disinclined to fork over the money. He looked like a highway robber.

The fact that he had already asked me to help him fleece a group of Israelis did nothing to bolster his credibility.

It happened not long after The Nose and I first met. We had already been arguing about whether or not I would pay, when the Nose suddenly sought to break the impasse by what, in the business world, might be called "Thinking Outside the Box."

Casting a glance at the pass from which we had recently descended he asked if we had seen any other hikers up there. I informed him that we had seen a group of five Israelis and that they would probably be coming down soon.

At this his eyes momentarily widened with anticipation. "Look," he proposed, "if you help me get money from the Israelis you don't have to pay."

I declined.

Now, more than a half hour later the standoff continued. Like a kid who wants just one thing, The Nose repeated, "45 Soles."

"The Doctor must pay 45 Soles," he carped again.

"Listen," I challenged him, "do you have any identifi-

cation showing that you represent a peasant community and are authorized to collect this tax?"

He seemed taken aback by this unexpected turn of events.

I explained to him that, up to this point, every person who had collected a tax from us had worn an official vest with his community's name printed on the back and had carried a photo ID. This was not true, strictly speaking. Some of the tax collectors had worn some sort of vest and some had flashed some sort of ID. It's possible that not more than one or two had had both.



A peasant hut in the highlands.

He appeared slightly befuddled for a moment but recovered quickly. He leafed through the notebook that he held in his hand and withdrew from among its pages a folded-up sheet of paper – a photocopy of

a handwritten note with some sort of stamp on it.

He passed it to me.

"What is this?" I asked after a quick glance, handing the paper back without bothering to read it. "I could have written that for you. Anybody could have written that for you. Do you have an ID with your photo on it?"

The Nose seemed dumbfounded. He scratched his head, surprised by my dismissiveness, disrespect and abruptness.



First view in the morning.

“But this is a letter from the community president,” he pleaded.

“Anyone can write a letter from the community president. I need to see a photo ID and a vest.”

“Oh, the Doctor is very clever,” he mumbled. Then he offered the explanation that the tax collection program was new and that his community hadn’t had time to prepare photo ID’s yet.

“How old is the program,” I asked.

“Three of four years,” came the reply.

I laughed at this preposterous tale.

The Nose then offered an alternative theory, proposing that since many different villagers worked part time collecting the tax, it was prohibitively expensive to prepare photo ID’s for them all.

“No ID. No money.” I told him.

The Nose looked peeved and offended.

Without waiting for his reply I moved away to set up my tent. He lingered around, but I ignored him

He stood looking dejectedly at the ground, casting occasional anxious glances up at the mountain pass.

I crawled into the tent to unpack my backpack. By the time I had inflated my air mattress, prepared my sleeping bag and emerged back outside The Nose had vanished. I could see him in the distance, skulking away back to the hills.

The Micronavigator had returned by then and had already set up the large tent in which we prepared food and ate our meals. From within came the sound of the camping stove hissing.

I parted the tent flap and entered. He was preparing afternoon tea. The Micronavigator carried with him a proper tea kettle, a large supply of tea bags he had brought from England and a super-size tin of powdered milk. With great relish and a palpable sense of



“The peaks of the Cordillera Huayhuash seen from the San Antonio pass.”

ceremony he brewed tea for us three times a day – for breakfast, tea-time and dinner.

When I interrupted him, the tea pot was about to boil over, while the Micronavigator sat doubled over the can of powdered milk, digging around in it with his dirty fingers and muttering something about bushels and pints.

“Just leave it, you’re only contaminating it more,” I implored him. I had often seen him doing this, rooting around in the powdered milk to extract a few small blades of grass that had somehow fallen in, while all the grass and specks of dirt that clung to the sleeve of his fleece rained down into the can.

The Micronavigator desisted and looked up at me, all the while continuing to chant some strange mantra: “Two pints, one quart; four quarts, one gallon; two gallons, one bushel; four bushels, one peck.”

“What are you muttering?”

“Well, it’s like my old aunt used to say: ‘You’ve got to eat a peck of dirt before you die.’ I’m just doing some conversions, you see.”

“Oh! So what’s one peck worth?”

“Well, I reckon it’s 64 gallons . . . No! . . . 64 pints. That’s 8 gallons.”

“Of dirt?”

“Uhuh.”

“We’re well on our way, aren’t we?”

“Did you pay him?” the Micronavigator inquired.

“Seem to have gotten out of it. He’s bugged off.”

“Well, I’d say you’re fortunate he left peacefully. Not much I could’ve done to help you if there’d been trouble . . . except perhaps sick Woodrow on him.” The Micronavigator was being sarcastic; he often was.



White on White: Alpacas looking for pasture after a snowfall.

Woodrow was a mutt that had appeared out of nowhere that morning, had followed us all day long and, by all appearances, intended to camp with us that night.

It was at Punta Tapuish pass earlier in the day, as we sat resting near an iron cross that marked the murder of two hikers in 2002, that the Micronavigator christened the dog.

I had already been at the pass for a while when the Micronavigator plodded up, the dog trotting beside him, looked around at the magnificent snow-covered mountains that loomed all around us and proclaimed: “Another shit view!” He was being sarcastic – again.

He pulled up next to me and apologized for being

slow. He blamed it on medication. The cancer with which he had been diagnosed two years back was now in remission, but he took lots of pills, and claimed that they left him with less energy than he’d had before. I assured him that I didn’t mind waiting, and that I

could only hope to have the strength to do these hikes at his age – fifty-seven.

We sat silently for a while, admiring the mountains. The dog lay at our feet. That’s when the Micronavigator turned to me and announced: “I’ve named the mutt Woodrow.”

“But it’s a female, Nigel.” Occasionally, in moments

of exasperation, I called him Nigel.

“Of course it’s a female,” he growled, knowingly, “just look at the size of those teats. Why, they nearly drag



Woodrow the she-mutt.



Peasant children playing peek-a-boo.

on the ground, don't they?" He scratched his stubbly beard and grimaced – a look of perturbation and disbelief. Then he shook his head and said, "God help me if my wife ever gives birth to a child."

"You never mentioned you were married."

"Well, not married, properly speaking, but been living with the same woman for 18 years."

"But that's beside the point," he interrupted himself, turning the conversation back to the dog. "Just look at those nipples."

I looked.

"It may still be lactating," he speculated. "We could chuck the milk powder and use Woodrow's milk to make tea. What time does one have to get up in the morning to milk a dog?"

It was a rhetorical question; I tried changing the subject.

"You know what kind of bird that is?" I asked him, pointing up at the sky where a couple of condors soared on the thermals.

Without moving his head, he raised his eyes upward, then rotated them toward me and exclaimed, "It's an Andean Coot! Didn't they teach you any fucking thing at school?"

His breadth of knowledge was humbling.

Back in the tent, we drank tea and prepared our dinner. It was the eighth day of our hike. Any life beyond walking, eating and sleeping had dimmed to a faint memory. A routine had evolved. I made the salad, which involved slicing tomatoes and cucumbers, squeezing a few limes over them and sprinkling some salt and pepper. Moreover, I cooked the soup, which called for boiling a pot of water and emptying into it a mix of soup powder. The Micro navigator's sole responsibility, in addition to brewing the tea, was preparing the pasta sauce. This required him to fry some chilies, garlic and onions, add to that some tomato sauce and heat the whole preparation together with

either sliced salami, pre-cooked tuna steak or sardines. That night it was sardines.

“I still say it’s a funny name for sardines,” he opined, as he mangled the tin trying to open it.

They were Peruvian sardines, from Chimbote – “Fanny” brand.

“Fanny is ass. Isn’t it? Like fanny pack?” I asked him.

“Not in English it isn’t,” he objected, pursing his lips, elongating his face and raising his eyebrows. “It’s something a whole lot more tasty than that.” And with those words he dumped the sardines in the sauce.

We cooked. The sun already sat low in the sky. The wind brought us the sound of explosions in the distance; it was the sound of avalanches. But before we could call the pasta ‘al dente’, two long shadows drifted across our tent. One of them rapped on the tent fly, and a familiar voice petitioned, “Hello. May I have a few words with the Doctor?”

The Nose had returned – with a friend.

The first thing I noticed as I exited the tent was the self-satisfied grin that The Nose now wore. I quickly saw why. From somewhere he had scrounged a vest. It was an orange vest with yellow reflective tape, the kind of vest worn by road construction crews to increase their visibility to passing cars. The Nose looked pleased with himself. His whole bearing had changed, and he stood there erect and dignified, taking pride in his uniform, wearing it with the flair and aplomb of a soldier in some elite guard. His eyes opened wider than usual. His visage radiated confidence, haughtiness and defiance, as if to say: “You wanted a vest? Well, I’m wearing a vest. Now give me 45 Soles!”

“What the hell is this?” I asked him, running my fingers over the reflective tape.

His countenance changed. His eyes drifted to the ground, and he stood silently, like a child being scolded. He looked depressed.

The Nose’s friend witnessed the scene without saying

word. He wore dirty clothes and torn shoes. Long, black, unkempt hair fell over his shoulders. The beard of a Hindu holy-man covered his chin, throat and cheeks and grew as high as his cheekbones, practically into his eye-sockets. A large scar parted the beard, running all the way across his left cheek and right up under his eye.

“And who are you?” I addressed the stranger.

“I am a disciple of Jesus Christ,” came the reply, without any trace of playfulness or irony.

The Nose interrupted. “The Doctor must pay 45 Soles,” he whined.

“Look,” I told him impatiently, “that vest you’re wearing is not what I had in mind. Anyone can get a vest like that from one of the miners working at Matacancha. And besides, do you have a photo ID?”

“No,” admitted The Nose.

“Well, without a photo ID I can’t pay you.”

“Oh, the Doctor is very smart,” he pouted. “What am I going to tell the community president?”

“Tell him that the gringo would only pay if you showed a photo ID and wore an official vest. Without those anyone can pretend to work for the community and come around asking for 45 Soles.”

The Nose and the Disciple exchanged glances. The Nose told me that the community president might not believe him.

So I offered to sign a written statement setting out the reasons I refused to pay.

“Oh, the Doctor is very clever,” sighed The Nose, but, after a little deliberation, he accepted my offer. He turned to a blank page in his notebook and handed it to me with a pen. I bashfully explained that I lacked the language skills to prepare legal documents in Spanish and proposed that he write the statement. The Nose and the Disciple conferred, and then The Nose began scribbling. After a couple minutes he handed over the draft document for my review.

It read something like this: “I, Doctor _____, citizen of the U.S.A., passport number _____, testify that I refuse to pay the community tax. The reason I refuse to pay the community tax is because the community tax collector lacks an official vest and ID. Signed _____”

I told The Nose to amend the document, specifying

“Got it all sorted out, have you?” he queried, taking a swig.

“I think so. I’ve signed a sworn statement in lieu of paying.”

“Well, good. Now you can come and eat, and I’ll give you a beer to celebrate.” He took another swig, and went on speaking “It’s a fine beer, this Cusqueña. Re-



“Another shit view!”: The Micronavigator crossing a pass.

that I objected to his lack of a “photo” ID. Then I filled in the blanks and signed.

The Nose scrawled another line in the notebook and then passed it to the Disciple, who signed a statement testifying that he witnessed me sign my statement. With that, the ceremony came to an end.

“Oh, the Doctor is very clever,” lamented The Nose.

The Micronavigator emerged from the tent, carrying a bottle of beer.

minds me of a beer I used to drink in New Zealand.” He paused and cocked his head, looking sideways a bit, furrowing his brow. Then he said, “ah hell, can’t remember what it was called . . . but you know it’s a good beer if you can’t remember the name. I guess I used to get pretty rat’s assed down there . . . or ‘ruhtaaazzed’, as one should say in polite company.”

The Nose and the Disciple stood there, watching us speak. “Usually people pay,” The Nose interrupted. “But once, some Danish girls flashed me instead of paying,” he bragged.

“Oh, really,” I marveled, “why didn’t I get that offer?”

The Nose didn’t reply.

“Doctor!” He addressed me, putting his hand on his stomach.

“Yes.”

“Can you give me a caramelo?”

“A caramelo?” I repeated incredulously. “Why are you asking me for candy? I mean look at yourself! You’re a grown man, not a child!”

The Nose grew petulant and looked down at the ground.

“Ok! A cigarette?”

“I haven’t got any cigarettes.”

“Do you have any crackers?”

“No, I don’t have any crackers for you,” I told him, turned and began moving away toward the tent where the Micronavigator was already eating pasta with Fanny sauce.

“Oh, Doctor!” The Nose called out, pleadingly.

“What now?” I asked abruptly, turning around.

“The Doctor is a lawyer? Yes?”

“Yes.”

“I have a small problem. Perhaps the Doctor can help me.”

“Perhaps. What’s the problem?”

“Is the Doctor familiar with the Peruvian penal code?”

“Don’t know anything about the Peruvian penal code. Buenas noches!” I called out to him as I entered the tent.

I never saw the Nose again.