

One Pair

This was the easiest and most fun piece I wrote. Bits and pieces of “One Pair,” including the final scene, were written before I began Advanced Composition. I wrote long paragraphs containing only

few minutes, he spoke only to my father, asking where we were from (Philadelphia) and how long we had been in Quito (one week) and had we been to the Virgin of Quito statue on Panecillo Hill (we had).

“All the tourist traps, eh?” he turned to look at my mother, who was squeezed next to me in the back row. She smiled politely.

He told my father about our destination: a hotel founded by a Swiss entrepreneur on the Napo River, which is a tributary to the Amazon River.

“I take groups once a month, twice maybe. After the Galapagos, the rain forest is one of the best places to see,” he said. “You will not see birds like these anywhere else.”

Soon the van left the lined roads of downtown Quito and climbed the steep gravel paths through the Andes. We bounced and swerved around sharp curves, and I leaned my forehead on the foggy window for relief. Through the window I saw buildings and walls and fence posts in ruin. Some were stone, some brick, splintered wood or rusted metal. There were piles of stones and discarded farm equipment—axes, wheelbarrows, containers long empty of pesticide.

But wherever Carlos stopped the van to let us stumble around on wobbly legs, we were in clouds. Not under them—inside their vast wetness, like the air breathed by mountain deer in bottled water commercials. The spectral stillness was a palpable force pushing the clouds down around us, muffling our human noise. Only the occasional sound of slow-moving vans and trucks broke through the thickness.

tBwood e d Tw (Wev)-60.002 (fir-6)-0.001 0.001 Tc -0.003 Twu.3(6)4 Tw rl002 7d(.16)

He looked at me through the rearview mirror.

“But I have not always had good binoculars like I do now. I can see from very far away. Toucans, hummingbirds, tanagers—”

The van bounced out of a pothole, and Carlos braked as we approached a sharp curve. I reminded myself not to look down over the edge and pressed my head against the window again.

The last thing I heard him say until I awoke at the hotel was: “But I still haven’t seen my condor...”

IT’S NOT surprising that Carlos hadn’t seen a condor in his years shepherding tourists through the rain forest. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature considers the Andean Condor to be “near threatened” because humans have encroached on their foraging grounds. Local farmers perceive the birds as a threat to their livestock and hunt them, leaving poisonous carcasses behind. They’re not endangered—yet—but Carlos had still never seen one.

“Well, maybe I have seen one,” he said over a nighttime game of *Lo dudó* (the Spanish version of Bull). “It’s hard to tell because they fly too high to see without binoculars.”

His binoculars—powerful enough to finally see his condor—banged against his chest as he walked. Unless he was holding them to his eyes, they were attached to him at all times with a harness that looked like it should have been holding a handgun.

THE DRIVE back to Quito was worse than the trip into the rain forest.

Determined to survive the rains Tr 1440 1470 Td(ee h)erml1(w)4ty5nl1(w)4ty5ne -3a(.)34

“Stop that, Emily. We’ll be there soon.”

But we weren’t there—as I watched tall grasses and wood huts blur by through the window, I realized we weren’t going to be anywhere soon enough.

“Just let me out here,” I pleaded. “I’ll go outside.”

I slid out of the van and stepped into grass that I thought would cover me—it barely came to my knees. I looked for a tree or a rock or anything I could squat behind, but there was nothing but the short brush. As I shifted from foot to foot, deciding, the van door slammed and Carlos-and-his-binoculars appeared.

“Take your time. I’m going to look for birds,” he said, already looking into the cloudless sky.

I danced for a few more moments, considering my options. But I knew instinctively that no, I would not pee in front of Carlos and my family and mountainous birds looking down on me.

Before I could run back to the van, Carlos gasped.

“Ay,” he said softly. “Look at that.”

I followed the angle of his binoculars and spotted a curved black line the size of my pinky’s fingernail. It looked like the mustache-shape black line that every kid draws to symbolize a faraway bird. The shape banked noiselessly and glided toward the sun, miles above us. For a moment I noticed the clouds back in their proper place with wispy tails so far away I could blot them out with my thumb.

Carlos dropped the binoculars to his chest and looked at me.

“It’s a condor!”

Shit.

What I wanted to do next was ask Carlos for his binoculars and see the bird myself. I wanted to watch it glide and try to imagine how big it would be perched on my shoulder, how fierce it would look pouncing on a rabbit or a small family dog. I wanted to throw open the van door and drag my family out to see the bird, dig my camera from the depths of my backpack and zoom in until the bird was a large smudge of pixels, high-five Carlos and congratulate him on finally, finally spotting an Andean condor.

But I didn’t do any of that.

I opened my eyes at him so wide that they watered, clenched my hands in front of my bladder, and said:

“Carlos. We have to go.”

He looked over at me for a moment and blinked once, not hearing me, or maybe not believing me