

## The Eve of the Minga

When the mists move in and the rain comes it seems bearable at first; interesting even. The clouds make such beautiful shapes across the mountains. The sound of the rain falling on the old tiled roof is soothing, calm, mesmeric. But then as the days pass and it continues cold, wet and sorrowful, it's hard to keep sorrowful feelings away too. The firewood is damp and only hard work and diligence keep it even nearly alight. Night comes early here and by seven it's quite dark. In clear weather the stars fill the dark empty spaces of the sky and the Milky Way shimmers like a luminous veil flung across the heavens. There are planets and shooting stars, and the moon, full or crescent is always magical. Here, halfway up Imbabura, you feel so close you could reach up and touch them. I remember nights like this last year when I sat upon the dark grass and watched the heavens turning, awed by the immensity, by the beauty and the mystery. But I haven't seen the stars for days now, not since the night I arrived.

Now all is silent. The loud music from a neighbour's stereo has stopped and all you can hear is the fire crackling slightly, a dog barking in the distance, and the occasional frog. Frogs enjoy this weather. Whenever it starts to rain they greet it with welcoming croaks. The mirlos here, that pass as distant cousins to our own blackbirds, also welcome the wetness, when worms are so easy to pull from the ground.

The llamas looked soaked and bedraggled when I saw them this morning, like old carpets left out in the rain. Two had begun courting since the night before and were coupling once more, the llama crouched upon the ground covered by the llamingo who had his forelegs around her as though embracing her. It was a very

discreet mating except for his curious continuous mewling and moaning. It was very different, too, to most animals, in that they continue for an hour or more in a long slow and apparently rapturous coupling. But they are also discreet and sensitive animals and as soon as they saw me watching them, armed with camera and camcorder, they looked awkward and immediately separated. So I went away feeling rather awkward myself, as though caught out in some act of gratuitous voyeurism.

Night has closed in and the rain has stopped. A large fat fly occasionally drones around but otherwise silence prevails. The fire still crackles slightly on the hearth and tiny frogs tock tock from their hiding places deep in the damp grass and bushes outside. Normally the darkness of the night would be punctuated by lights from the houses scattered across the mountain side and down in the valley, and by the lights from the city far below, but all is black and quite impenetrable. And of course there are no stars.

Manuel has gone to look for bread, and possibly puntas too. With the onset of this cold and cough and the near constant chill, I have abandoned my determination to remain alcohol free and have decided that a hot toddy would be warming and cheering. As Jerome K Jerome would say, a drop of the stuff that cheers and inebriates if taken in proper quantity. Sometimes it does help. I get tired of feeling cold all the time. Since returning from Spain last December I spent all winter in York feeling cold, and, the two brief weeks in Spain excepted, I have felt cold ever since I arrived. Last year it was hot, bright and sunny, the sun scorching during the day and everywhere parched, so the rain is good for the land at least. But as I am here to write about the annual life of the land, starting with the summer harvest and attendant fiestas, I wonder how it will be should it keep raining like this. Everywhere is soaking

now. Tomorrow is the minga for collecting firewood for the bonfire, but there will be not a dry stick anywhere to be found.

The voice over the loud speaker had started again, and, after a short pause, rain drops are tapping upon the tiles once more. Tomorrow I must arise early to attend the minga, although feeling the way I do now, the thought is not a particularly appealing one. I need warmth and a sense of well being, both vicarious and elusive qualities that occasionally visit me, but are mostly notable by their absence. I talked a bit with Manuel about happiness and sorrow but people here, or more especially people like him, have little idea of the roller coaster ride of emotions and feelings that people like me from 'the West' are such a martyr to. He gets on with whatever life presents him with. He feels sorrowful if someone dies or if someone close leaves the family, occasionally annoyed at discourteous treatment or criticism, but ever steady and philosophical, these feelings quickly pass. He warns me against too much thinking – the Western affliction – which, interestingly, Yoga and other Eastern Philosophies also caution against. Just focus upon the task in hand, watch the ebb and flow of life come and go, and don't get too analytical about it. With them it seems to work. Manuel and his family are calm, contented people and there is much love and laughter in their household. People hereabouts commonly reach great ages, well into their eighties and nineties, even hundreds, still working, having endured hard lives of toil. They eat simple food. They still till their fields with ox plough, still reap by hand, still carry heavy burdens up mountain roads. They enjoy their extended family relationships. They enjoy the annual fiestas. They don't expect too much from life, yet they are generally contented. They seem to have got something right.

Manuel has just arrived with the bread, but no puntas. The powers of the Universe have evidently decided that I should remain alcohol free, at least for the

duration. I shall have to ask for a hot water bottle instead, to wrap my feet around not my mouth I hasten to add. In past times it used to be called my ‘pequeño marido’ – my little husband – always with attendant laughs. When I see Manuel and Laura curled up together, evidently still very much in love after a good twenty years of marriage and two children, I must confess to feeling nostalgia (or do I mean envy?) laced with a little common or garden loneliness. Manuel has said I should get a novio (a boyfriend) and that six years alone is far too long. Perhaps he is right, or perhaps the solitary pathway I tread is still where I need to be going. But certainly it is hard at times.

The folk hereabouts are trying to get into the Inty Raymi mood, rain notwithstanding, hence the occasional loud bursts of festive music. I hope the weather does clear for them, for dancing in the sustained downpours we have seen these last few days is going to be a wash out – literally – and it will be damp squibs all around for the wisperas night of bonfire and fireworks.

So yet another day is over, and now another evening sitting in front of the fire. To date one baby guinea pig has died in the rains and two others have escaped. As if this weren't enough I saw three other adults outside in the long grass, including one pregnant female and the long haired male, apparently father of them all. Something, as they say, is going to have to be done. Tomorrow we are off to collect the wet firewood from the dripping woods. But tomorrow, as they say, is another day.

.....