



## Anaconda Neck Tie

WE HAD TO BE UP, BAGS PACKED, AND OUT OF THE HOTEL at five the next morning in order to catch our flight from Lima to Puerto Maldonado. Thanks to the miniature alarm clock Sarah had packed, we managed to drag ourselves out of bed and meet the taxi Nellie had arranged for us. It was dark and quiet in the streets of Lima when we threw our bags into the trunk of the aging black sedan, but we were thankful that the cab was there waiting in front of the hotel at such an ungodly hour. Nellie was obviously looking out for us, and for this we were immensely grateful.

By dawn, we were on a small jet flying east over the snow covered Peruvian Andes toward the steamy jungle at its distant foothills. The mountains underneath us stretched endlessly into the distance and were formidable in their rugged barrenness. Climbing to peaks of over 20,000 feet, it seemed like the belly of the jet almost scraped on their icy tops. As I looked down at the jagged, snow-covered terrain, I remembered the story of the soccer team whose plane had crashed in these very mountains. Incredibly, most of the passengers on the plane survived, a miracle in itself, I thought, as I scanned the impossibly vertical landscape. Yet, despite this miracle, their downed plane could not be located by the search and rescue teams, and the survivors had to stay alive by eating dead passengers. As I considered these things, I fervently hoped that Aeroperu had kept up the maintenance schedule on the jet we now occupied.



After a couple hours, the towering mountains gave way to hills, and the sterile white abruptly blended into a fecund green. The Amazon basin stretched out before us to the distant horizon as we began our descent. We landed at an airport that was little more than a patch of concrete carved out of a jungle clearing, with a small cinder block terminal building off to one side. Emerging from the plane into a wall of damp heat, we were greeted with the humid smell of rain and vegetation, which hung heavily in the air. Threatening black clouds sagged low in the sky, and puddles dotted the tarmac.

Outside the terminal building, a dark-skinned Peruvian teenager with Incan features, in a white tee shirt, leaned against the passenger side of a rusty old truck, holding up a sign with “Jenkins” crudely printed in thick black marker. This was apparently the guide Rosa had arranged for us. When he spotted us, he pointed to the wood-sided flatbed, and motioned for us to get onto the back of the truck with our luggage. The four of us looked at each other, shrugged our shoulders, and climbed in. The young man wandered around the parking lot and enlisted additional passengers until the truck was crammed with people standing shoulder to shoulder. Being the first ones on, we were crunched right up front, near the cab.

The last passenger, a wiry German man with a camera around his neck, stood at the back of the truck and gripped the wooden side with both hands for safety. As the truck lurched into gear, a Peruvian boy suddenly jumped out of the crowd, ripped the watch off the man’s arm, and took off running. The truck was moving now and the startled tourist could only yell and watch in frustration as his wristwatch disappeared into the throng. He quickly tucked his camera into his bag. The sage advice of my traveler’s handbook had instructed us to leave our watches and jewelry behind, and to keep all of our money and traveler’s checks in a money belt strapped around our waists and tucked underneath our pants. Now we could see why.

The dilapidated truck bounced from pothole to pothole

on the unpaved road to Puerto Maldonado, its bald tires splashing water out of each pit. We stood in the back of the truck, hanging on for dear life, wind blowing through our hair, absorbing the jungle aromas and the heavy, humid air, while trying to cradle our bags between our legs for safe keeping. A flock of gaudy, noisy parrots swooped low overhead, an enthralling cacophony of sound and confusion — our first sight of tropical bird life. Before long, a small village appeared over the crest of a hill. Tile-roofed huts and pole shanties nestled between papaya and mango trees dotted the landscape. A brown swollen river, the Madre de Dios, wound its way around the village.

The truck came to a jarring halt in the middle of town. Passengers scrambled off the back grateful to have arrived at their destination in one piece. Michael jumped to the ground and was offering Sarah a hand, when the young driver came around the side of the truck and shouted something at them. Michael nodded and climbed back on,



*Annie overlooks Puerto Maldonado  
(Río Madre de Dios in background)*

informing us that the man was going to drive us down to the river's edge. Everyone got off but us.

We remained in the back of the truck, our bags still cradled between our legs, and breathed in the heavy tropical air. We were far from Pennsylvania now, and the strangeness of our surroundings drove the point home. We drove past huge piles of bananas stacked on the edge of the dirt street. Thatched roofed concrete buildings lined the roadway. Peasant women with black pigtails and brightly colored skirts haggled on street corners. A wide, lazy river approached ahead, overhung by lush tropical vegetation on its far bank. In minutes, our truck came to a stop only a few yards from the water's edge.

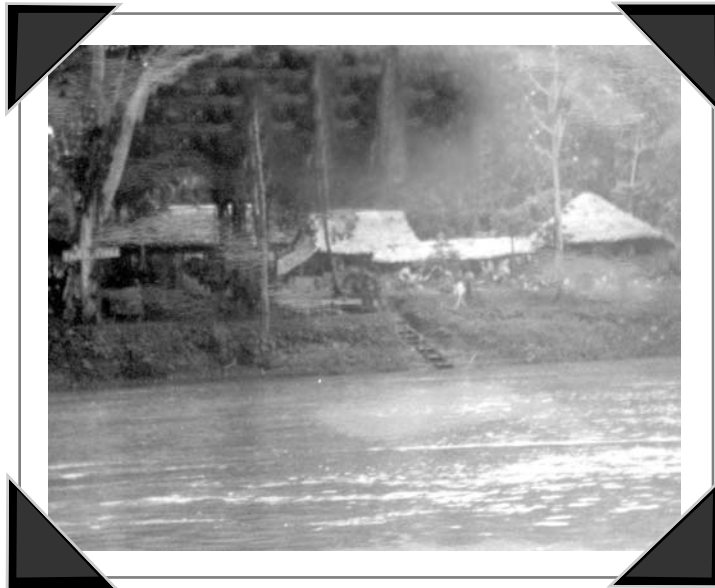
The driver tapped on the cab's back window and pointed to an oversized rowboat with a modest outboard motor, tethered to a clump of bushes. We threw our luggage off the truck and jumped to the ground. Our guide motioned for us to follow as he climbed into the boat. I handed him



*Our river transportation*

our packs and helped the other three aboard, where they took seats on the long wooden planks flanking each side of the boat. Stepping in, I handed Berger's map to our guide. He nodded and grunted something, started up the motor, and untied the rope that anchored us. The boat lurched ahead and the village rapidly disappeared behind us as we churned downstream.

The turbulent river water looked muddy, appearing remarkably like coffee with cream. The side tributaries flowing into the river were black. The abundance of organic matter leaching into the tributaries from the jungle darkened the water, in great contrast to the clear streams of Pennsylvania. Some timbering debris littered the river, mostly stray logs from upstream. Were we to hit one of these obstacles with our little boat we would be swimming to shore without our luggage. The young guide sitting in the back of the boat by the motor deftly steered around each log or stump as it approached. Nevertheless, we kept a close watch down river, yelling whenever we sighted



*Tambo*

something ahead — we all wanted to get where we were going, dry, and intact. Our attention was captivated by the impending disasters floating ahead of us, and time went quickly. Before long, we passed a group of thatched huts on the left bank of the river.

“Tambo,” the guide said, pointing to the huts. He pointed to my shirt pocket where I had tucked the map away. I pulled it out and smoothed the wrinkles while he looked over my shoulder. He tapped on the place marked “Tambo,” and again pointed back to the huts, which were already disappearing behind us.

“Keep your eyes on the river, dammit,” yelled Michael. “There’s a log up ahead!”

The guide was nonplussed; swerving sharply to the right, he narrowly missed a huge floating stump. We hung on for dear life. A mile further down river, we slowed, veered sharply to the left, and entered a narrow tributary almost completely enclosed by a green canopy of vegetation. Our young driver cut the engine and we slowly drifted into the narrow waterway. Large, stork-like birds took flight, while others of all shapes and sizes fluttered in the canopy overhead. Blazing exotic flowers tumbled in breathtaking bouquets of red and orange on the tributary’s banks.

Our progress up the narrow tributary was exceedingly slow. The young Incan man stood on the boat’s bow, hacking away at low hanging vines and branches with his machete while I steered the boat from behind. The waterway twisted and turned in and out of the thick greenery, sometimes doubling back on itself. Eventually, and after much time and effort, the tributary widened and we came to a shady pool. A dugout canoe was tied to a tree there, and a small stream entered the pool from the opposite side, splashing over large rocks to form a tiny waterfall before disappearing into the black water. Large, leafy trees arched over the idyllic scene, and a hundred foot long tree trunk, three feet in diameter, lay across the water ahead of us, blocking any further progress upstream. The pool was deep

enough and wide enough, though, that the boat had little trouble maneuvering.

“I think we’re here,” I announced, looking again at the map and surveying the area. “In paradise.”

“It’s beautiful here!” agreed Annie.

Michael was deep in conversation with the guide, as he had been during most of the river journey. “He’s going to tie the boat to this big tree,” Michael said, “and wait for us. He said he thinks there’s a path over there that will take us into the jungle, if that’s what we want to do. If our map is correct and we only have one mile to walk, he thinks it will take us about a half hour to get there. If we want to go back to Puerto Maldonado today, though, we’ll have to come back and let him know before he leaves. He’ll only wait three hours.”

“Well, we better get moving then,” I decided, trying to find the sun in the sky to determine how late in the day it actually was. The overhead canopy blocked any view of the



*Navigating up the tributary*

sky.

“Can’t we take a swim first?” Sarah asked.

Michael questioned the guide about swimming, then translated for us. “He says the fish are four feet long in this water, and the alligators eat *them*. He says you can swim here if you want, but he wouldn’t.”

“I think I just changed my mind,” Sarah replied with a frown. “Let’s go find that path.”

The four of us climbed off the boat onto the huge horizontal log and walked it to the shore. The jungle looked impenetrable; you couldn’t see beyond fifty feet in any direction. Our guide shouted something to us.

“He says he’ll wait with the boat. We’re on our own now. He’s telling us to not go off the path. It’s very easy to get lost. If we get lost, no one will be able to find us,” Michael translated.

“Ok!” I shouted back to him, waving. “What path?”

“It’s over here,” yelled Sarah. “I see it. Here it is!”

A narrow, well-worn footpath disappeared into the thick jungle.

“Should we take our bags?” asked Sarah.

“I think we should leave them here,” replied Annie. “We have no idea what’s back on this path. We can always come back for the bags if we need them.”

“Yeah, if they’re still here,” I added sarcastically, eyeing the guide with some distrust.

“I have my backpack,” Annie said, unzipping her green satchel. “If you have anything you really want to take along right now, put it in here.”

Michael and the guide yelled back and forth. “He says we can leave our bags. No problem. He says they’ll be safe with him. He’ll wait.”

I led the way through the shady undergrowth, pushing past tall ferns as huge, vine-covered trees towered out of sight above us. The jungle was absolutely quiet. The only sound was the noise we made as we walked. No one dared speak. It was as if we were walking in an immense, silent cathedral. The sounds we were so familiar with — auto-

mobiles, sirens, roaring jets, barking dogs — were gone. Here in the thickest concentration of living beings imaginable — the most diverse population of flora and fauna on Earth — we experienced the most complete silence of our lives.

Sarah and Michael soon passed into the front of the caravan, forging ahead through the path's twists and turns, delighted when a bird would squawk in the upper canopy, or a brightly colored toucan, with its improbably huge beak, would fly past. The footpath wound around huge trees, their smooth, wide, flat trunks like gray walls defiantly standing in the jungle. Ant nests the size of basketballs hung low from tree branches. Fantastically huge fronds, bigger than a person, sprouted in the underbrush, and vines as thick as a man's leg wound themselves around trees as if to strangle them.

Our halting parade continued until Michael and Sarah doubled back to meet Annie and me on the trail. "There's something up there," they whispered, gesturing ahead. "It looks like some sort of dwelling."

"That must be the place," I said assuredly, assuming command with feigned bravado. "Better let me go first."

I walked up the path and stopped where Michael and Sarah had stood, squinting through the lush undergrowth. I could just barely make out the shape of a small thatched hut on stilts in the distance. I didn't see anyone around it, but when I got a little closer I called out "Hello? *Hola!* Hello?"

We all stood together on the footpath and waited in silence. I was beginning to think no one was home. Then, slowly, out of the shadows, stepped a dark-haired, bearded man in a long-sleeved white shirt. He slowly walked onto the path in front of us, turned, and faced us, not saying a word. His face, as best as I could tell from this distance, was expressionless. It looked like he was wearing a necktie, which seemed bizarre under the circumstances. With a feeling of shock that sent a shiver up my spine, I recognized the man as the one I had seen in the dream. Black

hair, full beard, angular features, dark eyes, wiry.

“Hello,” I shouted, still fifty feet away. “We’ve come from the United States. We’re looking for Eduardo.”

Michael repeated my salutation in Spanish.

“I am Eduardo,” the man replied with a heavy accent, walking toward us.

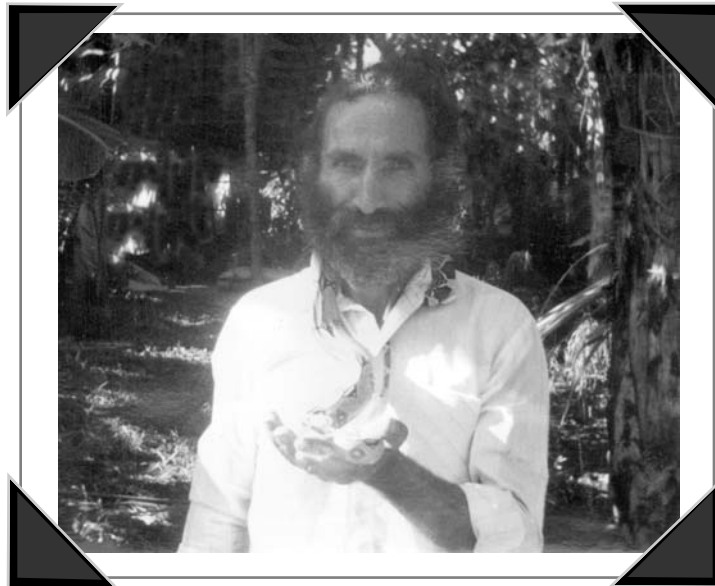
“You speak English?”

“*Si*. You are with Lucita, no?” he cocked his head and continued his slow, purposeful approach.

“We’ve come in behalf of my Aunt Lucille Boggs, if that’s what you mean.”

“What took you so long?” Eduardo stopped in his tracks, only ten paces away from me, unsmiling. I was unnerved to see that his “tie” was actually a live snake coiled around his neck. He held its head out in his left hand, as if to offer it to us. The snake’s forked tongue darted in and out.

“You are afraid of the snake?” Eduardo questioned



*Eduardo with his guardian snake.  
Hut in background*

with a raise of his eyebrows, a hint of a smile on his face.

“Is it poisonous?” asked Annie, recoiling, as Sarah asked, almost simultaneously, “Does it bite?” Michael stood back and stared with wide eyes.

“No. It is an anaconda, a baby. It will not hurt you,” Eduardo assured us, straightfaced. “But you must meet him before you can come into my home. He is the guardian of my door and will tell me if you have come with good will.”

“Well, hello snake,” I said, not knowing what else to say, and trying to get the snake meeting formality out of the way. “Nice to meet you,” I added, feeling like an idiot.

“Yes. Hello . . .” the rest of the gang murmured, equally uncertain about what to do.

“No. You must place him around your neck. That is how you meet a snake.”

“I don’t believe this,” Annie whispered, apparently frightened. “Maybe we should go back.”

“We are *not* going back,” I insisted, whispering through my teeth, and wondering secretly what we had gotten ourselves into. We were far from home, standing in the middle of a deep jungle, and had no idea what to expect in this incredibly foreign land. I certainly didn’t trust this stranger in front of me at this moment. He was creating an awkward situation, not exactly what I would have expected, considering how far we had traveled at his request. But, we *had* come this far and there was no turning back now. “When in Rome, Annie,” I said. “Besides, we have to believe him. If he says the snake won’t hurt us, then it won’t hurt us. What do you want us to do, Eduardo? I’ll be first.”

“Take him by the neck with one hand and hold him firmly.”

I reached for the snake. Eduardo stepped away, stroking the snake and mumbling something to it. “You are moving too fast,” he said to me. “Move slowly.” He carefully stepped forward again. “You must place him around your neck,” he instructed. “That is how you introduce

yourself to a snake. Take him by the neck with one hand and hold him firmly.” I reached very slowly for the snake’s neck, and wrapped my hand around it. It felt like a dry, squirming muscle. The snake twisted its head to look at me. “Now place the body of the snake around your neck. Slowly.”

I held quite firmly onto the snake’s neck with one hand, and, with the other, draped the snake’s body over my shoulders. The snake coiled around me, but didn’t squeeze. I was sweating bullets. Meanwhile, the snake comfortably settled on my shoulders.

Eduardo looked pleased. “It seems that he has found a friend,” he told me. “Now pass him to her.” He gestured toward Annie, whose eyes were as large as silver dollars. All the color had drained from her face. I assured her she would be fine and told her to just relax. Uncoiling the snake from my neck, never letting up on the firm grip I had on it, I handed the snake to Annie. We carefully



*Author meets anaconda*

exchanged grips on its neck. “Hold it firmly and don’t let go,” I recommended. “As long as you have hold of it here, it can’t bite you.”

Annie managed to take the snake and put it over her shoulders, almost tangling it in her net hat. The snake seemed satisfied with its new perch on Annie’s shoulders, and Eduardo was again pleased. Smiling, he instructed Annie to pass the snake on. Sarah was also reluctant to touch the snake at first, but she overcame her fears, first stroking the snake’s back with her fingers, then talking to it in a soothing voice. Finally, she took the snake’s neck in her grip and placed its body over her shoulders. Eduardo watched the snake very closely, smiling as it slithered over Sarah’s back.

“Good. *Bueno!* Now the *señor* with the hair.”

Michael, who had busied himself snapping photos, set his camera down and gingerly took the anaconda in his own hands. With a firm grip on its neck, he lifted the snake over his head and draped it on his shoulders like a scarf. We all wore nervous grins by this time, and Michael looked particularly ridiculous with a snake wrapped around his dreadlocks. We broke out laughing.

“Cut it out, you guys!” Michael pleaded. “You don’t want to get the snake riled up. *Dammit!*”

At this remark, we all doubled over in laughter. Michael continued to look uncomfortably impatient and refused to crack a smile. The snake seemed, if anything, to be bored by the whole event. Eduardo, smiling, examined the snake closely.

“He tells me that you all may pass into my home,” he finally announced. At this declaration, Michael didn’t waste another second returning the anaconda back to Eduardo. We all breathed a huge sigh of relief, hoping that this would be our first, and last, snake initiation.

“Come,” Eduardo said, bending to the ground to release the snake. It quickly slithered off into the undergrowth. “Follow me. The snake tells me that you are friends. Come.”

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